

**Stand-Up Comedy and Everyday Life:  
Post-war British Comedy and the  
Subversive Strain.**

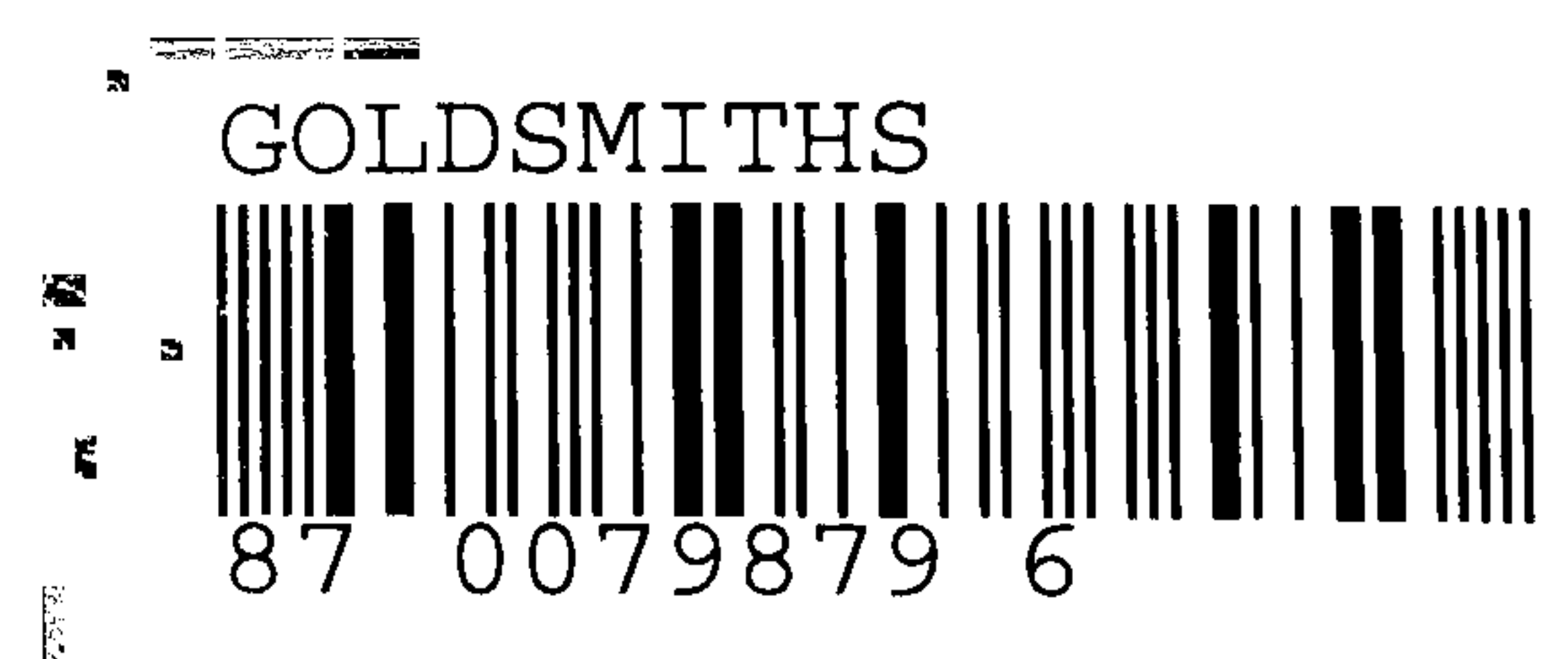
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## Abstract.

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(write)*

This thesis examines stand-up comedy and its relation to everyday life and presents a model of everyday life in the commodity society. It seeks to define stand up comedy and how it works as a performance mode and will offer a definition of the stand-up comedian. It will examine how jokes reflect opinions and attitudes within everyday life and how they can communicate negative cultural myths, stereotypes and ideologies but also reach beyond the merely absurd and comical to present authentic moments that enable us to locate the truth about ourselves. The thesis seeks to locate a stand-up comedy that enables us to understand ourselves in relation to life in the commodity society.

The thesis traces a subversive lineage through post-Second World War comedy from The Goon Show through the satirists of the 1960s and Monty Python's Flying Circus to Alternative Comedy and stand-up comedians in the present day.

The 'Alternative Comedy moment' between 1979 and 1981 is central to the thesis as is the relation to American stand-up comedy, Punk and the rise of reactionary humour in Britain. Alternative Comedy is identified and placed in a social, political and counter-cultural context. The achievements and failures of this comedy will be discussed with particular focus on the redefinition of the role of women and sexual politics in stand-up comedy and the creation of a thriving London cabaret and comedy scene. An argument against televised stand-up comedy and for live comedy will be put forward, as will an argument for a National Comedy Archive that will reflect the richness and continual changes within stand-up comedy in the last fifty years.

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## Introduction.

Stand-up comedy is theatre in its purest sense. It is a stripped down theatre, devoid of prop and set, the barest of light and sound and only the distorted ego of the comedians to convince us to spend time with them. It is an arrogant theatre, a human theatre, a poor theatre. It has its own codes, rules and tricks, cons and clap traps.

Everyone knows what it is but one of the many difficulties is that no one has yet to define it. There is very little we have to bring to stand-up comedy, in the way of cultural baggage, in order to relate to it. It is a very direct mode of communication, sometimes, painfully direct; other times, willfully obscure, dated, dross and pointlessly reiterated. Most of us have our favourite comedians who speak the way that we speak, about the things we experience, about the often bizarre everyday life in which we live.

Often, the closer the comedian gets to the way we feel, the way we live, the way we relate to each other, the funnier it gets. In some ways, comedy is closer to reportage than theatre. Reportage aims to represent the human experience. Theatre's job is to represent the human experience imaginatively. Reportage relates the facts. Theatre relates the truth of experience in relation to those facts. Reportage tells us how it is. Theatre tells us how we may feel about it. Sometimes, what the comedian is saying is not a joke, but the truth. Sometimes, laughter is the only option.

It is comedy's relation to everyday life, the way it can take a spin on an everyday event and make the mundane marvellous, the quotidian bizarre, which is also fascinating. But, of course, not all comedians deal with commentaries on our daily lives: some comedians we employ to look at the dark side, perhaps to say the things we dare not say or uncover the things we or others would prefer to remain hidden. The taboo busters, verbal hooligans, sharp edged satirists and slightly twisted nihilists all have their place in the subterranea of comedy land. We select our favoured performers and employ the stand-up comedian to variously scare us, cheer

us, entertain us or inform us of where we may err. Multifunctional for something so simplistic, the comedian with a microphone.

And stand-up comedy often works best when it is at its most simplistic, when it does not push to discover hidden agendas, disparate behaviour and alienated relations. Reeves and Mortimer, Harry Hill and Lee Evans, brilliant comedians all and less serious they could not be. Like Morecambe and Wise, Tommy Cooper and Frankie Howerd before them, they are there to make us laugh not think. But sometimes, stand-up moves beyond just entertainment and it tells us something we know but may refuse to recognise and it can investigate the gap between how we see ourselves and how we actually are. This restless probing renders everyday life into a theatre of the absurd. But it need not just reduce us to being the butt of our own joke. It can begin to dismantle the mystification of everyday life, the alienation we feel in a complex, commodity driven world, tele-mediated, consumer hungry and strange. Stand-up comedy can show us as people, with deep feelings and with more in common than we may sometimes think. Comedy works on shared reference and relation to experience. By uncovering the confusion of that experience, we can begin to know ourselves and develop strategies to combat the confusion. Comedy can show us as human beings alive in a social world not as just faceless consumer/producer models, like black holes endlessly filled with tedious work and leisure pursuits, constantly changing comestibles and labour saving devices. Stand-up comedy is an act of pure communication, people relating to other people in a world often dispensed through a screen or from a psychic distance. Stand-up comedy can present moments of genuine, authentic communication within our everyday lives.

This thesis begins by offering a model of everyday life in the commodity world. This is a world driven by market forces, a strange place, desperately uneven and bizarre. It is an everyday life where we find ourselves alienated. The cornerstone of this was laid by Henri Lefebvre, the French Marxist, beginning in the late 1940s and

developing the ideas throughout his life. The society that Lefebvre applied his model to has changed radically, accelerating its participants into constantly changing roles of producer and consumer. What Lefebvre would have called bureaucratically controlled consumption is now pre-Twenty <sup>(1900)</sup> first century consumer capitalism moving at breakneck speed to recolonise and deregulate the global market place to propagate the prime ideological construct - the commodity. Fashion, leisure, art, entertainment and stand-up comedy, amongst so many other things, have been reduced to commodities, separated from everyday life activity and sold back to us as relief from working. But despite this acceleration, there remains a desire for authentic experience and it is achievable: the commodity is not a totality, yet. This authenticity can often be realised many times throughout the day in moments where we realise ourselves in relation to ourselves and others. It is this function that stand-up comedy can perform, to show us as we really are.

The thesis then falls into two parts, the first of which attempts to define stand-up comedy, locate who the comedian is and find out how it works and what it does. An excursion through the history of philosophy in relation to comedy is necessary. Much has been written on the causes of laughter, the structure of jokes and comedy and the psychology behind it all. The successive theories of comedy are examined - Superiority, Incongruity and Relief from Restraint - and filleted for usefulness in locating the essence of stand-up comedy. A 'magpie' approach is employed to sift what is relevant to stand-up in particular: Plato and the sadistic and subversive capabilities of comedy and laughter; Aristotle, the perpetual categorist, and his ideas of ridicule; and Kant and the nature of surprise. Bergson and his exploration of the comic character gives us something to define the stand-up *comedian* against. Schopenhauer and the incongruous, Freud's relief and Orwell and satire are visited. The disparate nature of theories deal with differing aspects of humour, and much is found irrelevant to our definition. <sup>(comma)</sup>

After dealing with the general, we move to the specific and attempt to define this chimerical comedian. A difference between stand-up comic and stand-up comedian is established, narrowing the field somewhat, through an exploration of character and persona. The mechanics of performance are examined and the process of stand-up comedy is dismantled. How does the comedian work? It is the establishment of a relation between performer and audience and this is a complex, shifting relationship absolutely dependent on confidence: the confidence of the audience in the confidence of the performer. The performer/audience relation is not so singular however, and the idea of 'liking' is developed. This liking and exchange of confidence becomes a contract of consent. The performer/audience relation is fundamentally a power relation. Foucault's concept of power as a social relation dependent on context is employed and the power relation in comedy begins to appear frail. The audience themselves are shown to be crucial to the process, for without their consent the comedian cannot possibly continue and no one audience is the same as another. This shifting, often unpredictable audience has the spotlight momentarily turned upon itself for its involvement makes stand-up comedy so different from 'conventional' theatre. Heckling, this intrusion, often welcomed, often not, gives stand-up comedy an added dynamism not found elsewhere. It is this that renders power relations frail, tests the stamina of the act and often provides spontaneous joy in an otherwise well rehearsed performance. When they have fulfilled the obligations in the contract of consent to occupy the achieved space, the comedian can then begin to represent the micro-world, a personal construct, the way in which he or she see things. The micro-world is a personal space, unique to the comedian and it is a crucial centre to the performance process and this thesis. It is a personal geography mapped by each subsequent revelation. The strangeness of the micro-world and the reference points between which it is structured determine our relation to it: a micro-world of mothers-in law, racist stereotypes and social anachronisms may alienate us. For the working comedian, the micro-world can continue to grow and develop through imagination and it may become a place to which we would wish to return.



The micro-world is presented to the audience in a public space and it is this that makes stand-up comedy theatre. But it is also a minimal theatre that could be enacted at Speakers Corner, the back of the pub, at a private party or in a lavish West End theatre. A portable theatre, perhaps, a poor theatre certainly, but not so stringent as Grotowski's. Stand-up comedy and Grotowski's theatre can both represent authentic experiences and uncover truths lurking behind the social mask but stand-up comedy is less exclusive, more available than The Poor Theatre. It is these truths and fears that stand-up comedy can conjure or dispel.

It is not a catharsis we seek here, that suggesting and draining of the emotions, that too easy motor of Hollywood interest and sentiment. Following Brecht, the representation can produce not empathy but questions, a chance to think and move from passive to active modes of thought and to look at our situation within this commodity society. It is in the location of authentic moments within the performance from which stand-up comedy can draw its power: moments that we remember, where we learn, where we live that bit more than usual. These moments stand out from everyday life, that reiteration of necessary mundanity and insanely time-tabled social interactions called leisure. We value these moments. Stand-up comedy can present these and throw new light on everyday life. It is these ephemeral moments that give stand-up comedy its uniqueness. These moments may be technically replicated but are never repeated.

The micro-world is structured from jokes and within these jokes lie possibilities. The stand-up comedian can move beyond physical and temporal parameters to explore situations and although fictional the joke can present truths about that situation, be it sexual, social, political or plain absurd. It is here that the skilled stand-up comedian can transcend the position as narrator talking about personal experience. Stand-up comedy is at its most powerful when the comedian stops talking about the things that have happened to him or her and starts talking about what has happened to us. They

reverse the focus and talk about the general not the strictly personal. These are truly moments.

The final chapter of the first section discusses the joke itself. Jokes have both positive and negative functions: they move information around in convenient forms and in this they contain myths. Myths become the vehicle of ideology, propagating stereotypes and misinformation; they also document reaction to current phenomena. The mother-in-law joke as social institution is used as a paradigm to explore the dynamism of these positives and negatives. Jokes also document changes in culture, attitudes and opinions. Jokes help us negotiate that which we may find difficult or socially awkward in everyday life. We contain disparate energies in the form of jokes, we pass things off as not serious. Nowhere is this more true than in sexual politics. The jokes that deal with sex and sexuality are examined and appear to fall into three categories: smut, filth and a third, more honest approach. Smut, that joyous post-music hall mainstay much beloved of Max Miller, Benny Hill and the Carry On films, so deliciously English and repressed, continues to thrive post-alternative comedy. It is that which deals with innuendo, evasion and euphemism, slight rudery and toilet bound. A short trip back to Orwell and a quick shuffle through his collection of dirty postcards sheds light on the unchallenging nature of smut. As does an examination of the King of smut, Max Miller. Filth, the dirty old man to Max's old maid, is embodied within the dirty joke and an argument against the bad faith that drive these is offered. The dirty joke can be full of ideological myths, exclusive and often hostile. The comedy of Chubby Brown, self proclaimed 'fat bastard' and purveyor of filth, is a prime example of this. Both smut and the dirty joke are viewed as reactionary, keeping sex a naughty secret and therefore repressing it. The third category treats sexuality and sexual politics in a more open, non repressive way without taking the humour away from it. Post-alternative comedy, ideas about sexual repression have become slightly more widespread, more so in contemporary stand-up comedy. Frank Skinner's compulsive comedy reflects this. Although near the knuckle, Skinner uses no targets and is always involved in the action. He discusses

sexual behaviour from a personal perspective, discussing his own experiences. His affable persona and tales of everyday life are not exclusive.

Jokes become like viruses, passing on ideology and myths, infecting viewpoints without substantial experience. Nowhere is this more true than in the racist joke. These virus jokes exist in closed environments and spread ideas like disease and confirm prejudicial action. This attests to the power of jokes and their ability to transfer information in seemingly harmless ways.

The second part of this thesis locates the alternative comedy moment, situating it in a social and political context and examining its effects on stand-up comedy. The first task is to trace the 'subversive' comedy that has developed in Britain since the Second World War and which fed directly into alternative comedy. The chapter suggests a line - from The Goon Show and Hancock's Half Hour, through That Was The Week That Was, Peter Cook and Dudley Moore, Monty Python, Billy Connolly and Dave Allen - that preceded the alternative comedy moment at the start of the 1980s. The early alternative comedians combined strands apparent in these antecedents, namely satire and surrealism, into a stand-up comedy format. The main practitioners of stand-up had become tired and repetitive, reactionary and alienated from an up and coming generation about to be schooled in the dubious delights of Thatcherite ideology, Regan-omics and post-Punk culture. These new, young comedians may be connected only through the desire for change and experiment, a mix of the surreal and quotidian and the ability to provide substance and intelligence in comedy that does not sell the audience short. It is a rich heritage for British comedy, a unique cultural history that deserves more acknowledgment and documentation than it has received so far.

Alternative comedy is then situated in a cultural, social and political context. It is suggested that much of the energy, politics and ideas were developed in Punk and various connecting factors are located. Both alternative comedy and Punk were

iconoclastic, aggressive and used large amounts of 'street language'. Alternative comedians, like Punk, utilised a Do It Yourself ethic, organising their own performance environments, writing their own material and formulating their own political agenda. In the same way the Punks attacked the staid format of pop music so too did the alternative comedians attack the staid format of stand-up comedy and the ideology prevailing within it. Alternative comedy's attack on flaccid dad comedians, trading in dated racist and sexist material reflected Punk's despoliation of 'fat corporate hippies' and their vile, self indulgent outpourings. Alternative comedy appears almost as a necessity to revitalise a form grown flabby, lazy and hackneyed, to reinvest it with energy and make it valid as an idea, not just as a reason to wear a tuxedo and hate your wife.

The politics of alternative comedy reflected the politics of the counter culture, chiefly the development of an anti-racist consciousness following Punk's link with Rock Against Racism and the electoral successes of the far right National Front. Alternative comedy will forever be linked with its anti racist/sexist stance. Comedy, particularly television comedy had been dwelling in suburban sit-com land for too long and stand-up comedy was dominated by the Royal Command performers (Forsyth, Tarbuck and their bulging ilk) and the working men's club comedy style (Bernard Manning, Frank Carson, Jim Davidson). Much of this comedy did trade on racial and mother-in-law stereotypes and several key sit-com programmes are looked at, particularly the ambiguity expressed by the Alf Garnett character in 'Til Death Do Us Part. The chapter ends with a brief look at Trevor Griffiths' play Comedians from 1976 which almost predicts the nature of alternative comedy and explores some of the reactionary ideas within stand-up at the time.

The stand-up style of alternative comedy was not just conjured out of a day-glo mix of Punk spittle, conjectured comedy heritage and disgruntlement with fat comedians from the North of England. In America, several comedians had been developing a strain of comedy similar in aggression, iconoclasm and political angst from the

1950s onwards. The work of Lenny Bruce and Richard Pryor was not unknown to some of the key protagonists and their work, amongst others, are examined in relation to alternative comedy. They moved away from 'gags' and developed a more open, rambling style of comedy, referencing the contemporary concerns that went otherwise undocumented in stand-up. These comedians reflected a younger audience's concerns with cold war politics, drugs, pop music and the nuclear TV age of consumer culture. America has had a strong history of 'oppositional' stand-up comedians and they deserve a separate thesis. However, the seeds of some of their achievements and performance ideas are explored.

The thesis then takes a closer look at some of the principle movers in alternative comedy and at some of the events that led to its formulation as a genre. The Comedy Store, opened in London in 1979, is seen as the catalyst for this 'moment', offering an autonomous space with few pre-requisites for the performers other than enthusiasm and a chance for self humiliation. The idea of autonomous space for performance is looked at, as is the accidental nature of the events; there was no game plan to revolutionise stand-up comedy, a sequence of events happened to develop into a 'moment'. Several of the Comedy Store's principle comedians are analysed, using interviews and recordings of early performances. Common to many of the early comedians was a background in fringe theatre, whose funding was gradually eroded by the Conservative government, a left based politics and a willingness to experiment with form. Starting with Alexei Sayle, the original M.C. at the Comedy Store, some of the early performances are examined with a focus on language and performance techniques. Sayle is seen by many as the definitive alternative comedian but this is erroneous, the closer one looks at him, the less like the others he appears. Tony Allen, one of the most important, and less well known, protagonists is also interviewed and an assessment of his move back into the Punk gig arena is made. It was, perhaps, the writers of The Young Ones television series that reached across the broad tastes of the post teen populace and put alternative comedy in the map, albeit in a televisual format. A selection of these programmes is looked at in all their

juvenile joy and adolescent aggression. With Lise Mayer, Ben Elton and Rik Mayall wrote the scripts and both of their work in stand-up comedy is examined. A defence of so-called 'political correctness' is ventured, particularly in relation to Elton, who stands accused of such a heinous misdemeanour. The antithesis of political correctness, Gerry Sadowitz, and his turbo-charged bilious assault on the reasonable is investigated. Sadowitz indicated a sea-change in attitudes and what was possible within the constricting bounds of correct alternative comedy. A stale breathed blast of Glaswegian hostility, the nihilist in comedy was given full voice as stand-up began to change shape and content in the mid to late 1980s.

The iconoclastic alternative comedians inevitably faced criticism by those who would defend the comedy establishment from such foul mouthed oiks. The chief criticisms, over the short circuiting of the board treading post-music hall comedy route and the use of language and political savagery, were endlessly leveled. But did alternative comedy achieve anything? Most notable is the creation of space in stand-up for women performers who until recently had to adhere to a male formulated existence on stage. The maintenance of difference is key to this argument. After alternative comedy it became possible for dissenting voices - those other than the white, middle class university boys - to be heard and it is this that is a significant achievement. A look at the concept of difference in autonomous performance space follows. In creating space for women's voices to be heard, not just on male terms but on their own, language, subject matter and modes of representation could all be redefined by several key players in this milieu. It is still space fought for in the fiercely competitive world of stand-up, but many good women comedians are up and coming and provide a refreshing alternative to the dominant point of view. In light of these ideas, the work of Jo Brand and Jenny Eclair are examined. Both choose to represent and communicate in radically different ways: Brand's hard line feminist dispenses violent fantasy in one line throwaways choking on acidic humour; Eclair's outrageous 'super-slapper' revels in decadence, deviance and depression, her jokes blasted out with frightening velocity.

The endless expansion of comedy spaces is also one of alternative comedy's finest legacies. In London, and in many principle cities, a thriving sub-culture of comedy spaces has emerged. This is a constantly shifting, frustratingly erratic and informal network of venues where a variety of comedy styles can be developed and heard. It is posited that alternative comedy created a change in attitudes in stand-up comedy and that this continues to this day. Several key post-alternative performers who operate in different areas of stand-up are analysed - Sean Hughes, Mark Thomas and Eddie Izzard. Sean Hughes's loafer comedian, basking in long term unemployment and an inability to relate to the rest of the world, was just one of the markers that post-alternative comedy was dragging its slow way out of the sea of polemics that threatened to deaden the energy of alternative comedy in the 1980s. Hughes's laid back, careless delivery and quotidian reference points proved to appeal to a broader section of the younger populace than before, culminating in his Sean's Show series that attracted a similar teen crowd to The Young Ones. Mark Thomas's more street wise politico was the polar opposite to Hughes. Thomas, affable rather than didactic, developed his material on sex and sexual politics, linking it to the wider world of party politics. Unlike Ben Elton's green politics, Thomas's hard line was as rude as he was radical. Eddie Izzard is the final example: Izzard's intriguing, ambiguous and bizarre stage presence and comedy are unique. There is simply no one better at the time of writing. His command of the form, his skewed view and control of stage and audience has been rarely paralleled. Izzard's transvestism is used as a paradigm for the sexual ambiguity of many comedians and his surrealism is placed firmly in a very British context.

These are just a minuscule selection from the hundreds of stand-up comedians who have come from this alternative influenced cabaret scene but they are some of the better known. The choice of comedians in this thesis is not exhaustive. The principle characters have been selected through their availability. It would be easy to select obscurely to make a point. All the comedians have been on television regularly, with their own series at best, appearing regularly in comedy programmes at least. It would

be too easy to hang all manner of theory on the obscure so a criteria has been introduced: with the exceptions of Tony Allen and Jenny Leacock (who were too important to leave out), the comedians discussed are all accessible through video hire, library service or through flicking on the television.

In conclusion, an argument for seeing stand-up comedy live, as opposed to televised or video versions, is put forward and the failure of film to capture the moment is examined. An argument for a stand-up comedy archive is also put forward for the purpose of monitoring sea changes in attitudes in everyday life as reflected through jokes which comment upon events that affect us all.



## Everyday Life.

Stand-up comedy deals with everyday life. It also deals with fantasy, but it roots itself within everyday life activity and shared cultural references. Jokes are full of current events, ideologies, myths and prejudice; they are records of everyday activity and can show us how everyday life evolves. What is everyday life? It is a framework of structures, conventions and social relations through which we operate. The framework involves structures of culture, commodities, leisure, labour and entertainment. Henri Lefebvre, the French Marxist writer, began to develop the concept of everyday life as a method of understanding alienation from the mid to late 1940s. His theory was that to understand the human condition under capitalism the application of a broader Marxist-based sociology would gain a fuller picture of this alienation. Lefebvre's first book, Critique of Everyday Life,<sup>1</sup> began to develop this theory in 1947; many others have subsequently expanded the theory.<sup>2</sup>

Everyday life is the mass of information through which we motor day after day. It is that which we reproduce through our actions, the seemingly endless cycle of reiterated moments, dictated by economic survival, in which we become enclosed. These actions increase and decrease in value and this value informs social relations; that is, the price put upon our actions dictates the quality of everyday life.

Everyday life is the activities we repeat from getting up in the morning to going to bed at night: work and leisure; school and college; shopping and watching television. Labour and leisure, family activity and private moments, all these elements structure

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<sup>1</sup>. Henri Lefebvre, (1901-1990) was a key player in the post-second world war French Communist Party and developed Marxism in a more contemporary sociological context, linking it with the idea of everyday life. Although Lefebvre's reference points are often anachronistic there is a freshness and vigour of style lacking in many of the dour, cack-handed Marxist theoreticians. Lefebvre, progressively shunned by the CP, developed links with the Situationists in the 1950s. Debord, that tireless propagandist for 'detournement' (plagiarism) accused Lefebvre of plagiarising his ideas and probably vice versa. Lefebvre further developed the theory of 'moments' as the Situationists developed their ideas of Situations. Lefebvre, in the 1960s and beyond, began to work on ideas of urbanism and architecture. He was a prolific writer but much remains untranslated in Britain.

<sup>2</sup> See Alan Read, Theatre and Everyday Life, Routledge: London, 1994.

daily living. Everyday life is life in the consumer society with social relations geared to a cycle of production and consumption; that produced and consumed is a commodity.

For most of us, everyday life reduces us to spectators; life appears to be happening elsewhere. We see new events on television and the world 'out there' but we are watching events pass us by rather than creating or participating in them. Television reduces the world whilst simultaneously offering the bigger picture. Irrespective of the medium, we put on our 3D glasses and watch life, that Technicolor extravaganza, spool by. Fragmented representations of experience replace real experience. Surrounded by information technology and communication networks, information and communications target us not as participants but as consumers, limitless sponges. Everyday life clouds with contradictions between what we see represented (much experience is representation - we watch rather than interact) and the very lived. Advertising illustrates this. Everyday life becomes subject to a tension, a struggle between the lived and the observed. Stand-up comedy can explain that tension.

### **Commodities.**

"A commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another." Karl Marx, Capital.<sup>3</sup>

Kurt: A commodity is an article of trade, a product in the purest sense. You're a product,

Sophia: I am?

Kurt: You're a commodity. Thomas tendered your body in exchange for money.

Sophia: So I'm an article of trade?

Karl: Yes a useful thing in terms of classic capitalism

from Amateur.<sup>4</sup>

Everyday life involves interaction with the commodity form. A commodity is an item of exchange, an object involved in a transaction. A tree is not a commodity as it

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<sup>3</sup> Karl Marx, Capital, Volume 1, London: Penguin 1989, p. 43.

<sup>4</sup> Amateur, directed by Hal Hartley, Tartan Video, 1994.

stands in the park although its wood has a use value - a quality that satisfies a need; use values differ from commodity to commodity. Once cut down and transformed into a table - through labour - it becomes a commodity, subject to a complex of exchange; it develops a value form, the worth it has in everyday life, a social value. All commodities have a purpose, no matter how ridiculous, and their 'physical bodies' restrict use value; a washing machine serves little other purpose than to wash clothes. External decisions dictate exchange value and rarity, quality and the labour gone into production are elements within this decision. Meaning imposed upon objects is almost arbitrary: an old washing machine is of little use to us - it may leak, not work properly and so on - though may have more use-value than an old chair. Old chairs are antiques and have become desirable because they symbolise a certain lifestyle, or aspirations to that lifestyle, and social standing. The antique chair has a rarity, like original paintings, and an aesthetic value. An old chair would indicate a pleasing social standard, an old washing machine would indicate poverty. The old chair indicates surplus spending power that can reach beyond practicalities. So the value of an antique chair is a social value.

Both tangible and intangible, the commodity is whatever we produce or buy into; consumer goods and spectacles from microwave ovens and cinema to drugs and refrigerators, the commodity stretches into all corners of everyday life. Everyday life is life within commodity relations, the consumer society. Social relations correspond to a cycle of production and consumption. Much that we interact with on a daily basis we must first buy into - getting on the bus, going to the laundrette, eating in a restaurant amongst other things. To become involved in consumption we must first be involved in production. We work and reproduce our actions to reproduce product; our actions perpetuate the material conditions of everyday life. The products of labour, consumed by others, enable us through the acquisition of wages to become re-involved in the cycle as a consumer. There are separate modes of protocol for the role of consumer and the role of producer. The commodity is that which we

produce and that which we reproduce, that which separates and that which we consume.

### **Alienation.**

Commodity relations begin to supplant human relations, we become alienated by being the sole focus for the commodities opium pipe, its subjective experience. The denial of group identities (unions, the classless society myth), the social and economic erosion of communities and the changing populations of cities and large towns contribute to the alienation within everyday life. Alienation partially resides in the designation of people to individual consumer units and groups to niche markets. Social relations dominated by the commodity, such as in the workplace, threaten to be based on 'use value' rather than mutuality.

We also become alienated through work. The difference between digging an allotment and digging a trench on a building site illustrate such alienation: with the former, we are part of an achievement of purpose, an intrinsic part of something beneficial to us; the latter we do it in exchange for money, we have no stake in the ground, so to speak. Time is exchanged for money and we feel a distance between time spent and that achieved. There is nothing erroneous about work that utilises skill, imagination and ability but the work that is drudge depends not on the individual themselves but on 'replaceable work-units', disenfranchised. The allotment, this thesis, being in control of one's labour and production stand polarised to the building site, the unwelcome critical evaluation at work and the meaningless reproduction of daily life in the factory, supermarket and office block.

A gap becomes visible between production and its consumption. A product is distanced from the relations and conditions through which it was produced, like meat in the supermarket. Packaged and neatly chopped, meat in the supermarket is as alien a thing to the cow strung up by its heels as is the training shoe produced by sweat shops in east Asia or the anonymous ranks of data that constitute a simple video

game. The commodity encroaches into all corners of everyday life; from breakfast to work or school, to leisure or sitting watching television. It leaves relatively few areas untouched and appears everywhere; it structures the material world. The commodity operates thus: I need to eat, food costs money therefore I have to work, to compensate for the boredom of working I have to fill my spare time so I pay my way into leisure.

There are areas relatively untouched by the commodity; time with our families and friends, being in love. Love represents itself as achievable with the right purchase; it is fetishised but never explained in pop music, film and advertising but often operates as a means to shift units. Although commodity relations inform or dictate social relations, our personal relations cannot be commodified.

The commodity is a form and within this form there can be a genuine communication beyond exchange value that we value for ourselves, a truth perhaps. Stand-up comedy is marketed as a commodity but what we get from the experience is difficult to quantify. It is hard to say what we get out of each experience and why; each joke bears a relation to our personal experience. We could not market comedy as laughs per minute, only as jokes per minute.

The meaning or experience extracted from the commodity, this item of exchange, is not inherent within the commodity itself. Commodities are used as a starting point for experience, a possibility: a car does not have its destinations built in, it merely allows us to realise the possibility of those destinations. In the stand-up comedy experience we pay our way in as the event is commodified, hung with a market value, but it can transcend its intended market value. Stand-up comedy can offer more than a method of just passing time in an amusing fashion.

Stand-up comedy is available within a commodified form but most commodities are dumb and lack consciousness. They can 'talk' but it is babble and they cannot

understand the sense they make - like a computer grammar check can inspect the structure of a sentence but cannot argue the meaning of the sentence, or admit it may be wrong and that rules are not immutable. By being able to comment on its status as a commodity and the condition of everyday life, stand-up comedy can transcend commodity relations and gives more than its use value (passing time in an amusing fashion) and its value form (four comedians for a fiver - bargain!). It can give us something that is not quantifiable as a commodity - it can tell us about ourselves and our situation within everyday life which most commodified forms cannot do. Commodities fulfil a specific function but when something transcends mere function then it becomes a qualitatively different experience. What we bring to a bought for situation with the commodity qualifies as experience, the commodity is a conduit to the experience, not the experience itself.

Commodity society has reinvented need as desire and desire as need. Need as desire works by disguising the reality (or mundanity) of a product or through juxtaposition of product and fantasies of luxury. Advertisements transform “I need to eat” to “I desire this chocolate bar”: it is luxury inferred; buying this chocolate bar immediately brings suggestions of fantasy realised. Desire as need masquerades luxury as necessity: it sells that which is surfeit as that which is essential. The way in which the commodity society achieves this is through publicity, advertising. Advertising creates a tension through enticement and hints at inadequacy without such products (inventing social needs); purchase brings relief. Commodities, however, have an in-built obsolescence that leads us to an inevitable conclusion - I must buy more.

“Shopping, traffic and advertising as world-historical insults [are] integrated into life as seductions.” Greil Marcus, Lipstick Traces.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Greil Marcus, Lipstick Traces (On A Cigarette), London: Penguin, 1989, p. 70. Greil Marcus, Californian academic and critic, has never recovered from seeing the Sex Pistols and discovering Punk. He is a passionate fan. Lipstick Traces is a ‘secret history of the twentieth century’ and traces the development of Debord and the Situationists from the inception of the Lettrist International in Paris in 1952 and connects it with the Sex Pistols, Dadaists and a spurious host of historical heretics,

“It proposes to each of us that we transform ourselves, our lives, by buying something more. This more, it proposes, will make us in some way richer - even though we will be poorer by having spent our money.” John Berger, Ways of Seeing.<sup>6</sup>

Publicity, advertising, dominates the public arena: images wallpaper the front rooms of our lives. On the tube, on television, on hoardings, on the back of products there is a constant presence of advertising. There are even adverts for products within products - product placement down Coronation Street, selling real beer at the Rover's. Some publicity slogans have become firmly entrenched within our memories and we can find ourselves using advertising slogans in everyday conversations and joking. The catch phrases are as instant as playground jokes (and capture memories in the way childhood jokes do). Songs that sell the product are as familiar as those they juxtapose on the radio. The songs on the radio often become shackled to product in adverts, making each inseparable and, therefore, binding product into memory with the songs. Hearing the songs in a separate context triggers memories like free advertising; the Levi's jeans advert uses classic soul songs that tie the advert to a song we may hear in the pub. Similarly, the commodity can absorb a critique of itself in order to further itself, through the placing of personalities within advertising. The product continues to subliminally advertise each time we see the personality in a separate context, like the songs in the jeans' advertisements. We will always associate Jack Dee, John Smith and any amount of daft penguins and ladybirds, despite the fact that some of Dee's best material has dealt with the reality

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cranks and dissenters. It is a lucky bag and often refuses to hang together but his research cannot be faulted, only some of his conclusions. The strength is its variety and readability. Stewart Home, in SMILE 11, criticises the Punk connection, the idea of the spectacle and Marcus's subjectivity (and also offers the blueprint of his own Assault On Culture book - Sterling: AK Press, 1994). Home criticises Marcus for practically ignoring the artist Asger Jorn, who occasionally funded some of the Situationists projects. Marcus does provide a starting point for further reading into this milieu, already over-academicised and assimilated, and discusses fringe players like Lefebvre and Isidore Isou of the Lettrist movement.

<sup>6</sup> John Berger, Ways of Seeing, London: Penguin, 1972, p. 133. Berger is forever the 'Marxist art critic' for some. Ways Of Seeing, despite its faults and criticisms, is a most accessible and even enjoyable look into the mire of introspective art historicising. Although rarely approaching the twentieth century, Berger looks at past painting with a more contemporary eye. He deals with the commodification of art, feminism, nudes, advertising, property and ideology. His precision and style are effective. Many have since criticised Berger (Peter Fuller especially, Brian Sewell occasionally) but the fact remains that the book is a good insight and offers the chance to develop the reader's own obsessions and arguments. Berger works more in fiction these days but still retains a minimalist style and a compassionate edge at odds with the cynicism and short termism of the late 1990s.

of the consumer experience. This is not to reclaim Dee for some radical espousal nor to criticise a personal decision, but he has had the insight to dismantle a dozen cute baby talking supermarket adverts by describing the general unpleasantness of shopping on a busy afternoon: the queuing, trolley bashing, children crying reality of the weekly experience is brought sharply into focus with a line like “Why do parents take their children to supermarkets to smack them.” He almost papers over the cracks he creates by appearing in a commercial for beer whilst ‘acknowledging’ that he is only doing it for the money. It blunts the credibility of the issue to criticise and then embrace. The commodity buys the critique and its status, recontextualises it and makes it safe through consumption. Publicity, advertising, is the front line soldier of the commodity war.

### **Possible Images.**

The principal vehicle of the commodity is the advert utilising images of glamour. An image in the service of the commodity is either a construct drawn to seduce or a representation recontextualised and removed from its original source and, therefore, its original meaning or intention. Images seem to float through the space of commerce. Possible images, they await an attachment, an assimilation, into the advertising process and come to symbolise, or be incorporated by, a product. What once was evocative is now inextricable. This does not solely apply to images but also to personalities and music as mentioned above. Dvorak’s New World Symphony sells bread accompanying fake televised representations of the North of England, it helps glamorise pre-commodity poverty as nostalgia. As good today as it’s always been?

The attachment of the image in the milieu of mass media representations replaces original intentions: possible images become sponges that absorb or become absorbed by the methods and ideologies within advertising. The mass media offer a proliferation of images but they are images recontextualised and at the service of the



commodity. They become reduced in value and meaning, becoming vehicles rather than entities in themselves.

The increasing encroachment of advertising hoardings in previously public space indicates a predominant presence of the image. There are adverts in all electronic media, on the side of freight, on clothing and on other products; they increasingly become part of the everyday environment and begin to exist on an almost subliminal level. We increasingly live within a world of representations although once forced or opted out of this world of consumerism, these images seldom seem to contain meaning. The images gear towards those with means of economy and those who can engage with commodity culture, for those who cannot, everyday experience renders the image absurd. In the main we have become reduced to the role of passive consumer/spectator and much of what we experience is a representation. A representation is not a thing or a copy of a thing but that masquerading as a thing in itself. Representations allow us to see things at one remove, via another's interpretation, maintaining a distance between ourselves and the thing occurred or represented, like a camera lens or a television screen. The way we absorb information, with what it juxtaposes and why, structures our view of things and, ultimately, the world. The bomb explodes; the bomb exploding is photographed; the bomb exploding is watched endlessly on television where we experience it first. There is the event, the reproduction and the representation. That is, things we do not experience firsthand but experience as representations change the reality and therefore the meaning of the event. The image becomes recontextualised. We look at things from a different perspective and see things in a different way.

A representation can give us false information. The world is not as it seems but as it is shown. There is a difference, however, between the representation passed off as the real thing (spectacle) and the representation being seen as representation. To point out that that observed is merely a representation gives the observer a different point of viewing, a technique utilised by Brecht with the 'Verfremdungseffekt'.

Briefly, this was created in order to distance the audience member from the performance, to take them from the flow of action, and be made “to look critically ... at what he has so far taken for granted.”<sup>7</sup> Rather than being subjectively involved with the characters we acquire an objectivity that can give us the opportunity to see things in a different light. Distance dissolves the control of the writer and performers over the formulation of opinions. Once we see things objectively we can draw our own conclusions and, in Brecht at least, hopefully see the possibility of change.

“No commodity ever lives up to its buyer’s expectations or desire.” Susan Willis, A Primer for Daily Life.<sup>8</sup>

“The state of being envied is what constitutes glamour. And publicity is the process of manufacturing glamour.” John Berger, Ways of Seeing.<sup>9</sup>

Advertisements help the transition of desire as need and need as desire: what was necessary has become luxurious, beyond necessity; what is luxury becomes necessity. Soap, a basic necessity, is shown as the height of luxury to differentiate it from competitors. Consuming this product will somehow elevate us to a luxury status even though the soap will perform exactly the same function as any other, that is, leave a gummy mound on the edge of the sink and attract hair. Advertising always offers a better standard of life that consumption of the product does not achieve; it transforms only the moment. Publicity offers the future and that future is ours so that others may envy. Previous luxuries are now the norm; televisions are common, as are refrigerators. The availability of consumer goods, and the ability to consume them has improved the standard of life: we no longer need to feed the clothes through the mangle or gather round the piano and sing “Roll out the Barrel.” What has been substituted for drudge is more time on our hands in which there is little else to do but consume more and be involved with leisure. Can we gauge life by quality and quantity of product? Consuming time saving devices saves time to consume more. The commodity society must run out of invented needs and desires sooner or

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<sup>7</sup> John Willett, The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht, London: Methuen, 1993, p. 177.

<sup>8</sup> Susan Willis, A Primer For Daily Life, New York: Routledge, 1991, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Berger, 1972, p. 133.

later; obsolescence can only clear the decks for so long. We begin to see the increase of variety over choice, a brand over brand battle pretending choice: the ever rapid vortex of commodity world hurls out the up-dated, the modified and the new improved. A micro-wave, although considered a luxury, is fast becoming an essential as changes in the pattern and style of food consumption and manufacture rapidly shift towards the instantaneous.

The creation of a turn-over of desire as need is fashion. Fashion works by saying that you will not be part of new things unless you have this product, unless engaged in this mode of consumption. It plays on the feelings of alienation within everyday life; desire as need. The influence of fashion at certain moments in our lives is something out of which many of us do not grow. We will always listen to a certain kind of music, affect a certain kind of clothing and hairstyle. There will always be a market for that static fashion moment, decreasing as we age and die, although often being reinvented as new fashion, e.g., 1970s' nostalgia in flared trousers and beige colours - the fetishised era. By having these things we become normalised, or more often, somehow special. We absorb the glamour of the new. The advertisement's proposition is that we need better quality sound systems, air bags, cosmetics and cat foods in order to be a part of things.

“Publicity is the culture of the consumer society.” John Berger, Ways of Seeing.<sup>10</sup>

Publicity, advertising, uses glamour as its main tool, either the possible glamour on purchase (glamour as envy of others) or assimilated glamour from juxtaposing product with glamorous things (or people, models, etc.). Advertising also utilises a nostalgia for the future. Advertising uses images based on that with which we are familiar. The product, with the image, catapults forward promising the pleasures of the past (that which we know, nostalgically structured) available as future purchases. Nostalgia is a main fuel for advertising, as are dreams, and they are both connected. All dreams are previous experiences and the recurrence of dreams and favoured

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

fantasy is a nostalgia for the pleasure produced. All dreams become shared. We desire similar things; luxury, sex, money, pleasure.. Advertising draws on shared desires, common pleasurable experiences (inventing a few by itself, like a mini Hollywood) or on past culture. It may present products like art, thereby selling pretend 'high culture' overtones. The use of super-models (the Western male concept of hi-beauty manufactured, the perfection of person commodified) in car advertisements sells attendant glamour to a basic need. The consumption of glamour is a supposed elevation of status, a move above the ordinary. Publicity uses glamour as a method of social mobility and its fuel of envy.

“Being envied is a solitary form of reassurance. It depends precisely upon not sharing your experience with others.” John Berger, Ways of Seeing.<sup>11</sup>

The presentation of products as glamour produces envy twice: the envy of the potential consumer to glamorous product (I want that thing but do not have it); and the envy gained from others due to the conspicuous consumption of glamorous product (I/ you have that thing, I/you do not). Glamorous things connect with our day dreams of beaches, fame, social popularity, success; our private moments writ large on screens, hoardings, associated with products. Even if these products did realise these dreams, we always know they will not last and we must go back to work.

### **Leisure.**

“Leisure is the freedom from the necessity of being occupied.” Sebastian De Grazia, Of Time, Work and Leisure.<sup>12</sup>

In the post-industrial revolution era, the increased urbanisation of the work force led to a tightening of control over the means of production and the synchronisation of entire social classes. The unified common time in which we all wake up on the same Monday morning is a method of social organisation. Time has become cyclic and deals with the constant reiteration of labour time, leisure time and private moments, with the family unit or alone. Time has become a thing in order to take its place in

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 133.

<sup>12</sup> Sebastian DeGrazia, Of Time, Work and Leisure, New York: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fund, 1962, p. 14.

the market place; it is commodified by its objectification. The commodity society has finalised the compartmentalisation of time and encased it within clocks. The organisation of a time system is traceable to the increased mechanisation of production: although clocks appeared around mid-thirteenth century, co-ordinated time emerged mid-eighteenth century. The calendar, rewritten during the seventeenth century reformation by Protestants (days celebrating the Saints had been effectively removed, including Christmas) ensured the enshrining of Sunday as the day of rest to spend with family, reading the bible and “any distraction from the seriousness of prayer, worship and other sombre enterprises was [considered] evil.”<sup>13</sup>

“From the time the 10 hour Bill was enacted in 1847 ... the modern problem of leisure was born with it.” Sebastian De Grazia, Of Time, Work and Leisure.<sup>14</sup>

The mass unsettling and eventual urbanisation of agrarian workers, following increased enclosure of agricultural land and the rise in scale of farming, meant a significant change in the shape of work and ‘free time’. The activities formerly engaged in were not feasible in cities denying the open space and social structures of rural living. From the middle of the nineteenth century the rise of spectator sports and the need for leisure facilities became apparent.

“Measured by money, leisure has become a leading industry.” John. R. Kelly, Leisure.<sup>15</sup>

Everyday life is a set menu that offers variety over choice. Variety is brand over brand, choice is qualitatively different: the set menu offers variety as the illusion of choice; leisure, recreation, free time, play. The concept of leisure formulated by Aristotle saw a reversal of twentieth century emphasis, leisure and non-leisure as opposed to work and non-work. Leisure was to be a time for philosophical contemplation and Plato .”..took the view that leisure was essential to wisdom, which will therefore not be found amongst those who have to work for a living.” Leisure is time spent away from working, time concerned, perhaps, with an activity

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<sup>13</sup> John. R. Kelly, Leisure, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990, p.120.

<sup>14</sup> DeGrazia, 1962, p. 193.

<sup>15</sup> Kelly, 1990, p. 2.

that is “performed for its own sake or as its own end”<sup>16</sup> or that “.. chosen in relative freedom for its qualities.”<sup>17</sup> Leisure is consumption; it is not an area free from the totality of the commodity but is a commodity itself. Leisure involves a changing of roles, from that of producer to consumer and at the end we revert back to the former role. Leisure sustains the commodity society; it becomes a product, bought into, and gained by labour. Free time, De Grazia differentiates, is time spent neither working nor active in leisure (nor inactive, as in watching television nor movies, passive consumption). ‘Free time’ is not work related activity (such as that spent going to and from work) but anything else that does not fall into the two categories of leisure as active or passive consumption and labour as what we do to pay the bills, which leaves very little.

“So we work to earn our leisure, and leisure has only one meaning: to get away from work. A vicious circle.” Henri Lefebvre, Preface to Critique of Everyday Life.<sup>18</sup>

We exchange time for money to engage with the commodity society, with consumption, and we have a normal life. Time divides into units, exchanged and realised with things. Time fragments. There is time working, time for leisure and time spent in essential activity - shopping and banking. There is also non-time, time not accounted for, unnoticed time, time slipped away. It is negative space in everyday life. In the same way garage forecourts and car parks are empty much of the time, so too does unrealised space occupy everyday life.<sup>19</sup> What do we do between five and seven in the evenings? We may eat. We may watch a little television that we are not interested in. And what of time spent waiting to go to work? In shift work, non-time becomes more apparent. The normal activities of those in the nine to five cycle cannot be realised, are not available, and much time reverts to non-time. Traffic jams are specific non-time zones. We are held up for an uncertain period of

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<sup>16</sup> DeGrazia, 1962, p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> Kelly, 1990, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Lefebvre, 1994, p. 36.

<sup>19</sup> See also Marc Auge, Non Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Super-Modernity, London: Verso, 1996. Auge deals with the concept of non-space, the areas within everyday life that could be and are replicated the world over. The supermarkets, banks, forecourts, car parks and so on that give no clues to location or context, except that of the super-modern world.

time and then, when we finally move forward, we pass a distinct place where nothing seems to have happened. Non-time is time spent suspended from everyday life despite being an intrinsic part of it. It furthers the desire for consumption and encourages us back to the hi-tech nest. Non-time is the gap between commodities and illustrates their obsolescence. Commodities also create non-time with labour saving devices: satisfaction is hard to gauge but perhaps access to the instant is not as gratifying as we think. Non-time becomes apparent in time spent unemployed: it is neither leisure time nor 'free time'. To engage in leisure we need to be part of the commodity cycle of production and consumption. Those unemployed exist at the periphery of this. Although time spent unemployed approximates leisure time, alienation from the ability to earn and consolidate leisure time means that time is not leisure time at all.<sup>20</sup> It is non-time. Alienated into marginal consumption (criminal activity apart) we may find ourselves alive in the dull wasteland of daytime TV land. Cheap time entertainment for non-time consumers.

"Recreation has purposes and is organised for social ends. It is not just for its own sake." John. R. Kelly. Leisure.<sup>21</sup>

Recreation is just that, the recreation of set moments, controlled and enacted within certain parameters. It is the same destination reached through variations in the time table. Recreational activities involve rules and rules limit exploration, possibilities, play. The rules contain the situation not the other way round; they are guidelines applied to each situation although each situation may have its own value as an individual moment. Within recreation, we play games of competition.

"Football, once the game of former public schoolboys, horse racing, the sport of princes, boxing - recall that the rules were established by Marquis of Queensbury - golf, a game played by Scottish kings - these all became, as the saying goes, money making propositions." Sebastian DeGrazia, Of Time, Work and Leisure.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Re: Lefebvre. If we cannot 'earn' our leisure then we have no leisure at all.

<sup>21</sup> Kelly, 1990, p. 26.

<sup>22</sup> DeGrazia, 1962, p. 204.

The convergence of commercial interest and social necessity has resulted in the consolidation of rules, conditions and spaces that formulated the grounding of sport as mass recreation, both played and observed. In order for competition to succeed, conventions adhered to by all became necessary. Traditional bourgeois pastimes introduced to the cities and the masses, complete with in-built etiquettes (and, therefore, ideologies) became viable financial investments; the traditional pastimes of one social class had become replaced by those of another.

### **Questioning Entertainment.**

Our passivity as spectator makes entertainment what it is - a method of passing time more conveniently; it is commodified leisure time. Entertainment claims the moment and passes it off as satisfied. When we say "What shall we do?" we mean, "What shall we see?." We engage on given terms and there is no interactivity; the proposed interactive television is still television. At the time of writing, Sky Television was running a publicity campaign using the slogan "Watch what you want, when you want"; what it really means is watch what you want, when we give it to you, pre-set choices. Variety masquerades as choice.

Entertainment is what we buy into when we do not really need to, when we want to; it is a choice but from one set menu or another. It is not so bleak, however and this is not to dismiss entertainment. It is fine for what it is when understood for what it is. Entertainment becomes of particular interest when it moves beyond its imposed limits (limits of language and form accepted by the medium; limits of commercial returns; accessibility, etc.) and when it becomes a lever towards further possibilities. Entertainment can become a vehicle to travel beyond its boundaries and subvert the acceptable and accessible forms. It can engage in a process of questioning.

Things can be entertaining and still tell us things - as stand-up comedy shows - but there are degrees, ranging from the banal to the opposite extreme; what we gain from it depends on personal value systems. The move beyond straight entertainment is a



desire to question and to locate a truth about a situation; questions help us locate that truth and can side-step convenience. Why are things so convenient? Questions and their subsequent answers (if we find them) make us make sense of things and move us to new positions. Lack of questions presents a fixity, we stay in the moment or move back from it instead of moving on; this fixity is a social fact of everyday life.

Everyday life structures itself from conventions that arise through repeated activities; we reproduce ourselves and our lives each day by our actions. To question conventions (why do we do this?) is to question the structure from which these conventions rose, from that which makes everyday life as it is. We can therefore move to question further and a process becomes evident; a single answer does not sum everything up and each answer can lead to a further question. In the negation of the need to question convenience there is the maintenance of the status quo, pacification. Stand-up comedy can illuminate absurdities and make us question ourselves and everyday life; it can present possibilities.

### **Authenticity.**

Stand-up comedy is important because it can be an authentic act of communication, despite its often commodification and sometime spectacular nature. In everyday life, amongst the representations that we absorb, an authentic act is that which engages emotionally and empathetically, not that which manipulates sentimentally. We can see a clear difference in certain film and theatre. The final scene of Brecht's Mother Courage, pulling her burden behind, can be emotionally (and politically) engaging: a film like Forrest Gump motivates through sentimentality. With the first example we may be angry as well as thoughtful or sad, with the latter our tears may result from the right emotional triggers being activated from Hollywood afar.

In everyday life, it is clear that we do not live as authentically as we possibly could: advertisements, labour, the media and representational experience contribute to deny authentic experience. But this is not an argument of what is 'real' and 'not-real';

reality is the consensus of experience within everyday life, which we generally acknowledge to be 'there'- the bus, the pub, a conversation at work. There is a concrete reality to an advertisement hoarding, for example, although that which it depicts may never have existed. These representations converge on the real, are part of everyday life but pollute it with fictions. We become absorbed into roles, mainly the role of consumer and producer. When at the supermarket, we play the role of the consumer, or the role of consumer takes us over. When we are at work, the role of the gear cutter, typist or psychologist takes us over: we are not that role, we merely play it.<sup>23</sup> It is not authentically us. Fear, guilt, love, extremes all define how we feel and brush aside the placated security of dwelling in the commodity society roles of producer or consumer; we feel the want of more than this, however temporarily. An authentic act leads us to define ourselves in relation to that experienced. It connects with a sense of self. In everyday life, social relations are authenticated by integrity. We develop and authenticate ourselves through honesty by degrees, by being 'who we are': being in love, being with friends, families and being in the pub just talking. We are defined by others (lover, brother, friend) and define ourselves in relation to others (and identity is not fixed: I feel a worm before god but a god before worms). In human relations, an integrity can be the definition of authenticity, but not always. Authentic acts, like so much else, are both positive and negative: a car crash is negative for many. Similarly, there is a duality: Manchester United defeating Arsenal 2:1 is positive for me, but not for him.

The value of stand-up comedy is in giving us the possibility to discover elements of our everyday life, our authentic selves, and, suspended from the quotidian shuffle, we can examine behaviour. It can locate the difference between the way we see ourselves and the way we are. The authentic self is closer to 'how we really are'- the stumbling, bumbling man apes lost in the supermarket - than 'how we think we are'- Bogarts and Bacalls all. Stand-up comedy may animalise us, but it can be a genuine

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<sup>23</sup> Jean Paul Sartre's Being and Nothingness discusses the various aspects of role and authentic self in some detail.

revelation and so lead to an understanding of ourselves. This is not just an 'educational' role for comedy, it can be coincidental and many comedians do not even come near an authentic location of our selves, nor do they need to. Like products in a supermarket, we choose to listen to the comedians we want to and unlike products in the supermarket they have the consciousness to achieve the possibility of locating authenticity.

Although the quasi-mythical 'post-modern project' may discredit the search for 'the authentic self' and celebrate the death of everyone and everything, stand-up comedy remains a very live thing. It is important to not lose sight or devalue authenticity, especially in the face of the commodity's threat of becoming a totality and experience becoming reduced to representation; if anything, we should be more aware of the need. The commodity is not yet a totality, however: there are elements of life that remain just out of reach. Although it operates and maintains specific social relations, it is not a twenty four hour, all four corners of the world thing; it just wants to be.

Similarly, we do not need to plough the fusty acres of Heidegger or the weed strewn allotments of Kierkegaard to know when we experience moments of authenticity; we recognise these moments, as much as we recognise guilt and fear, if only through their relative paucity. This is not to suggest that we can strive back towards a former condition - a peach coloured Adam and Eve world - but to engage with the possibility of the realisation of an authentic self constructed from the residues of those previous moments. We are born empty, but to attempt a semi-synthesis of Marx and Sartre, consciousness is determined by social being *to a large degree* but we also have the capacity for self invention.

Heidegger had previously discussed authenticity in Being and Time and attempted to locate 'being', the authentic self and how they are defined.<sup>24</sup> Sartre later defines authenticity through the use of the negative 'bad faith' in Being and Nothingness, following Heidegger.<sup>25</sup> Heidegger also locates authenticity in relation to guilt. When we carry out an action we may feel it is 'wrong' somehow and this feeling of guilt exists in contrary to the authentic feeling - that of what we should have done. If I am cruel and feel guilty, my authentic self lies in the belief of a cruelty free existence, as far as that is believably possible. The part of 'me' that feels guilty, is the authentic self. It is the same with jokes, we laugh out of recognition at some jokes and that recognition locates an authentic element of our behaviour. Laughter is an involuntary response, if it is not, it is not laughter but mouth noise. We can be surprised into laughter by the truth contained in a joke. If this is involuntary then what we laugh can be, at times, genuine. What we laugh at is, therefore, relevant to an authentic part of our self. Our humour develops in correspondence to ourselves and our modes of thinking, and is unique. In this, laughter is like a test for locating our authentic feelings about something. If we recognise the truth in what we laugh at, it defines our sense of self - how we relate to a statement we 'know' to be true. We laugh at a surprising truth and it makes us aware of that truth and our relation to it. We feel it is true: we laugh and recognise a truth about ourselves that is authentic as it defines that sense of self. Laughter is the physical manifestation of an emotional response to a certain set of stimuli. Even when we laugh from nerves it is still an authentic response.

Similarly, football can be an authentic experience, although still of a spectacular nature. It defines the sense of self. We connect wider, personal meanings to our association with a team: Manchester United defines my sense of Northern-ness and there is an attachment involved. The team are representing us on the field. Real

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<sup>24</sup> Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, London: Routledge 1993, sections 54-60. Briefly, Heidegger believed that the individual is born into a culture relatively clean and that the elements pre-exist to shape us. He did not view the individual as the central reference point of the world; the world is there first. Sartre believed that individuals were more responsible for the choices they make.

<sup>25</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness, London: Routledge, 1993, part 1, chapter 2, p. 46.

emotion is invested. It can be just a spectacle but the meaning of that game of events is very real and the passion that football inspires is an authentic one. Many would-be experts are at their most articulate when discussing the game. Football is not like film, which is fixed: the result is always the same; it can never change. Football is not fixed and excitement is drawn from this live-ness. In football, elements of chance and risk, uncertainties, come into play. We cannot pre-determine the outcome no matter how much we hope. Football is a spectacle when we do not have a real emotional investment. Its intention as a spectacle is usurped or retained by the commitment and the passion of the supporters. It is doubtful if Lefebvre would have agreed, although he had obviously never witnessed Manchester United romp home to win the double.

### **Conclusion.**

We have seen a model of everyday life as a cycle of moments reiterated daily. From work to leisure much of everyday life involves interaction with the commodity form. Adverts invent need as desire and perpetuate the commodity and thus the production/consumption cycle. We can glimpse the possibility of subverting the commodity form that gives us more than just a way of passing time more easily. Stand-up comedy cannot hope to change the world but it can give us cause to question conventions and the structure of everyday life. It can shine light upon or through the absurdity of commodity relations, the banality of adverts and much entertainment to show us the truth of our situations within everyday life.

Stand-up comedy can show us how it is, not how it wishes to be seen through adverts and can correspond truth to experience by investing substance into leisure and entertainment, transcending its exchange value. Within an everyday life involved with mainly meaningless consumption stand-up comedy can show us how we are as ourselves, the possibilities of change and the location of authentic moments.

## Towards A Definition.

“Laughter frees the villein from fear of the Devil, because in the feast of fools the Devil also appears foolish and therefore controllable.” Umberto Eco, The Name of the Rose.<sup>1</sup>

“The classic conception of comedy ... holds that it is primarily concerned with man as a social being rather than as a private person and that its function is frankly corrective.” The New Encyclopaedia Britannica.<sup>2</sup>

To define stand-up comedy is as complex a task as defining any other form of comedy. Although many would recognise a stand-up comedian as such, through exposure to television and other media, any definition would appear to overlap into other areas of performance and public speech. A description of stand-up comedy could be ‘someone stood telling jokes to an audience who acknowledge the situation as such’. It involves the acknowledgement, by the audience, that what they hear should be funny and that there may be some sort of resolution or punchline at regular intervals. This is still a simplification as stand-up comedy regularly involves double acts, mimetic clowning, musical interludes and impersonation, as well as performances that do not seem to have any punchline or purpose whatsoever. Frances Gray, in Women and Laughter, writes of “the comedian, the figure who stands apart in a public place and invites our laughter”,<sup>3</sup> which also brings to mind humorous poets, after dinner speakers, game show hosts and self styled television wits. David Marc, in Comic Visions, acknowledges that “the lack of a workable definition of stand-up comedy is a serious problem that undermines what little criticism of the art form that has been written.”<sup>4</sup> Marc stresses the relationship between the audience and performer or “the absolute directness of artist/audience communication”<sup>5</sup> but does not define any specific context. He also stresses the importance of the performance being a “free-standing presentation rather than a part

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<sup>1</sup> Umberto Eco, The Name of The Rose, London: Picador, 1984, p.474.

<sup>2</sup> The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, 18<sup>th</sup> Ed, Vol. 23, p. 150.

<sup>3</sup> Frances Gray, Women and Laughter, London: MacMillan, 1994, p. 117.

<sup>4</sup> David Marc, Comic Visions, London: Unwin Hyman, 1989, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

of a narrative drama.”<sup>6</sup> The definition is dependent on context, defined by the relationship between audience and performer. Stand-up comedy is the presentation of a character, persona or personae delivering a series of jokes or a comic monologue perceived as a separate entity to any performance preceding or following, from a separate area to an audience who recognise the purpose of the situation. Which is far from snappy. The difficulty in defining the stand-up comedian lies, perhaps, in the complex history of comedic performance - the clowns and minstrels, the fools, jesters, wits, wags and comic songsters - that all clearly precede what we are trying to define and which, themselves, have splintered into their own sub-forms of comedic performance. It would be fair to say, however, that the stand-up comedian has become more recognisable as a solo performer (or duo) in an individual context with the rise and decline of the music hall and vaudeville through the last century and into this. It is through this historical process that contemporary audiences would recognise the specific form and purpose of the stand-up comedian.

It appears that comedy theory, from Plato and Aristotle, through Kant, Freud and up to the present - has tended to divide into three generally acknowledged schools of thought: Superiority theory, Incongruity theory and Relief from Restraint theory. Testing each theory has found them wanting by those arguing their own academic corners; holes plugged or expanded with each successive examination. What becomes apparent is that comedy is a slippery subject indeed and there is no super theory of comedy that covers all angles and stops all gaps. This could be for a variety of reasons: the process of everyday life where things are funny one day and not the next; the cultural subjectivity of comedy - although what we laugh at has many shared references and meanings (and these are getting more globally common with the span of multimedia); the changing style of and development of comedy; and the way in which social systems of belief change and marginalise attitudes that are implicit within certain jokes and instances of comedy. Little theory has dealt

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

specifically with stand-up comedy.<sup>7</sup> The comedy theory discussed touches on everything from Aristophanes to after dinner speaking, Cervantes and Shakespeare to Jewish jokes and beyond. The following offers a brief outline of some of the theories and attempts to pick out points that may be relevant to a discussion of contemporary stand-up comedy (and some of the theories are theories of laughter not necessarily of comedy in any dramatic form). Rather than attempt to construct a ‘super-theory’ to analyse stand-up comedy a ‘magpie’ approach may be more fruitful; we can take what we feel are useful ideas and leave what may not.

The Superiority Theory is anchored in Hobbes’s statement in Leviathan in 1652 that “Sudden glory is the passion which maketh these grimaces called LAUGHTER.”<sup>8</sup> This is the ‘glory’ of one’s own advancements or the feelings of comparative well being to another, the “imperfections of other men.”<sup>9</sup> Plato’s idea that laughter is usually at someone else’s vices is the root of this. Aristotle, in these scant lines in On The Art of Poetry<sup>10</sup> saw, in Greek comedy of the time, amusement growing from that which is full of “error or ugliness that is not necessarily painful or injurious”,<sup>11</sup> an idea claimed by both Superiority theorists and Incongruists alike. The basis of the theory is the ‘sudden’ feeling of superiority over another, be it moral or situational, and that we enjoy comedy at others’ expense, consciously or not. We can also laugh at the elevation of our own situation or our failings once surpassed, which, again, is a superiority to others. A comic moment can be the enjoyment of the loss of control or dignity by others; the behaviour that contradicts an explanation, that becomes absurd. Of course, a loss of dignity in others can also evoke pity or disgust, so there is a context and a morality involved. The Superiority theory does apply to much comedy but certainly not all and, as is discussed later, it is the stand-up comedy that does not rely on the production of an ‘other’ that is of primary interest here. The

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<sup>7</sup> Wilmot and Cook deal with stand-up comedy specifically but do not overtly theorise. Gray, Marc and Banks & Swift comment in passing.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, London: Collins, 1961.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle, On The Art of Poetry, London: Penguin, 1965.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 37.



Superiority theory does not apply to certain kinds of wit, word play and the comedy that takes absurdity to the extreme: comedians Eddie Izzard and Harry Hill in the present both have an emphasis on their knowingness within the comic situation that negates their becoming 'comic characters'. Similarly, Bergson's theory of 'mechanical inelasticity' could be claimed as an overall Superiority theory. The lack of an individual's adaptability to a current situation creates a character in whom we take pleasure at their inability to control themselves and the absurdity of the situation in which they find themselves.

Kant began to explore, more fully, the Incongruity Theory within comedy. He considered that jokes set up expectations within us that are subsequently thwarted by a seemingly incongruous conclusion, though one that makes its own 'comic sense'. In his Critique of Judgement, Kant says that laughter occurs "if a tense expectation is transformed into nothing."<sup>12</sup> Kant did relate his theory to jokes rather than comedy in the dramatic sense - expect one thing and get another with the punchline. As we shall see, not all comic situations require the unpredictable or evaporate into nothing. Schopenhauer developed (and dismissed) some of Kant's theory and argued that laughter arises from perceiving two disparate elements, thought through a single concept. We laugh at the seeming incongruity between two objects and the surprising connection between them; the absurdity of the juxtaposition is clarified by a single meaning that makes 'comic sense'. As Morreal points out, it is possible to argue that the Incongruous and the Superiority theories are complementary,<sup>13</sup> that the humour from Bergson's comic character stems from both the absurdity/incongruity of the inflexible person in a situation unfamiliar and from the feelings of superiority that arise from witnessing that inflexibility. Overspills occur, as ever.

Invariably associated with the Freudian school of thinking, the Relief from Restraint Theory relates to Kant's 'transformation into nothing' idea and the work of Herbert

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<sup>12</sup> Immanuel Kant, Critique of Judgement, Indiana: Hackett, 1987.

<sup>13</sup> Morreal links the two into a semi-dialectical process.

Spencer (1820-1903). The cause of laughter, in the Relief theory, is a build-up of nervous (or psychic) energy, created by a tension of expectation, released at the conclusion of the situation (laughing out of danger) or the punchline of the joke. We have an apprehension of a 'dramatic' conclusion when the narrative builds tension. Like the other theories, however, it seems that although much laughter at jokes does come from a release of such energy, it appears somewhat inadequate when applied to the absurdist comedy of contemporary comedians like Izzard, Hill, Paul Merton, Dylan Moran and the older style Tommy Cooper (his predictable 'bad' jokes rather than his buffoonery). Freud expanded the Relief theory in his book Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious.<sup>14</sup> It is difficult to sum up his theory in a microwaveable bitelet as, although he only deals with one element of the humorous wit (or jokes in some translations) he divides and sub-divides and is only too aware of strict definition. Broadly, he sees joking in terms of psychic energy economy and expenditure; summoned energies repress inhibitions and then, not needed, are expelled as laughter. Joking, for Freud (amongst many others), can also contain much that is hostile and sexual and a joke can be an attack and serve as an outlet for frustrated desires.

### **Plato: The Malice of Amusement.**

"SOCRATES: And do you actually know the disposition of our souls in comedies, that there is also a mixture of pain and pleasure?" Plato, Philebus.<sup>15</sup>

In Plato's Philebus, Socrates believes that comedy stems from a lack of self knowledge and from vice. Self knowledge, according to Bernadette in The Tragedy and Comedy of Life "... is an exact knowledge of one's own goods" and lack of self knowledge "...is to not know one's own good."<sup>16</sup> This lack of self knowledge of our 'goods' or qualities, Plato believed, left us open to ridicule: we are often at our most ridiculous when we believe ourselves unobserved. We laugh at comic characters and their lack of self knowledge as we look in on them, at their situation

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<sup>14</sup> Sigmund Freud, Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious, Kegan Paul Trench, 1911.

<sup>15</sup> Plato, Philebus (trans. A.E. Taylor), London: Thomas Nelson, 1956, p. 57.

<sup>16</sup> Seth Bernadette, The Tragedy and Comedy of Life, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 202

and enjoy their being unaware. Lack of virtue, vice, is also a cause for humour at others' expense. The vices for Socrates included pretence to affluence, vanity of appearance and believing oneself to be more virtuous than one really is. For Plato, laughter is a mixture of pleasure and pain, as included in laughter are elements of malice. Laughing at our enemies, he says, is right but to take pleasure in the misfortunes of friends is wrong. If a friend succumbs to the aforementioned vices it could be construed as comic, as long as it did not harm to others. The social function of laughter at friend's folly is a corrective one and, therefore, good. Although, when we laugh we take pleasure in it, the pleasure is "in the misfortune of a friend [which] is in effect malice", and, therefore, when we smile we take pleasure "at a friend's absurdities, once more we are blending pleasure with malice, or in other words, with pain."<sup>17</sup>

Plato further considers the power of laughter in The Republic<sup>18</sup> and he touches on the subversive power inherent within comedy, that "we must not allow any poet to represent men of repute as overcome by laughter, much less to represent gods in such a case."<sup>19</sup> When we laugh at others, 'men of repute', we reduce them from lofty stature and the seriousness of position, taking away their assumed superiority. To laugh *with* others is to share a commonality and, although we may often laugh at the expense of others - bringing them down a level, perhaps, or excluding them and 'rising' above them - we also laugh at shared misfortunes; feeble excuses offered for late trains show us that we are all subject to the same quotidian frustration, pensioner and politician alike on the platform. Laughter levels us, however temporarily. Stand-up comedy does not always rely on lack of self knowledge on the performer's part; it is exactly the self-knowledge and degree of control exacted by the stand-up comedian that often compels us to listen and laugh. Stand-up comedians do not always invite us to laugh at them, although some clearly do: they point to the comic within everyday life; it is the audience's lack of self knowledge that is in question

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<sup>17</sup> Plato, Philebus, p. 170

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Plato, The Republic, London: JM Dent, 1958, p. 69.

and it is the laughter of empathy. In the mass of shared references that stand-up comedy represents, we can laugh at the observations that we recognise to be true, or more specifically, what we believe to be true. We laugh at our lack of self knowledge when surprised by the accuracy of a joke; we know that pointed out but did not know we knew. There is a mixture of pleasure and pain within this observational comedy: it is pleasurable to learn a truth, even a sordid one, and laugh at the way in which it is represented. It is also painful to realise our own follies or ill adjustment to everyday life as it is. The relief of laughter tempers the tension of truth.

### **Aristotle.**

“The ridiculous side is not far to seek.” Aristotle, The Nichomachean Ethics.<sup>20</sup>

“Comedy represents the worse types of men; worse however, not in the sense that it embraces any and every kind of badness but in the sense that the ridiculous is a species of ugliness or badness. For the ridiculous consists in some form of error or ugliness that is not painful or injurious.” Aristotle, On the Art of Poetry.<sup>21</sup>

“Comedy represents the worse types of men” is a very elastic phrase: although Aristotle was referring to the Greek comedies of the day, it could include everyone from the post-war Tommy Cooper’s comedian as clumsy oaf, with the audience on his side; Max Miller’s comedian as cheeky joker with risqué gags; Eric Morecambe’s relentlessly comic character, edged with pathos; and the more contemporary Mark Lamarr, sharp but hostile, and Alexei Sayle, manic, dangerous. Gerry Sadowitz, Bernard Manning and Chubby Brown could all represent the worst of the worst. In stand-up comedy we do see Aristotle’s “worse type of men” but also those who we can admire for skill, wit and intelligence. Eddie Izzard’s ability to weave a bizarre narrative full of strange observation is admirable, as are Paul Merton’s monologues, Jack Dee’s sharper observations and Victoria Wood’s ability to fascinate with the apparently mundane. Aristotle would seem to indicate that comedy looks at the seamier side of life, the performer letting the mask slip, being

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<sup>20</sup> Aristotle, The Nichomachean Ethics, New Jersey: Princeton, 1984, IV, 8, 1.13.

<sup>21</sup> Aristotle, On The Art of Poetry, p. 37.

prepared to go out on a limb and explore some of the things we may not discuss but are subject to in everyday life. We are subject to much that, when represented, show us as ridiculous, helpless in the play of events.

“For the ridiculous consists in some form of error or ugliness that is not painful or injurious.”  
Aristotle.<sup>22</sup>

In one way this is certainly true: we do not laugh at beauty unless it is beauty undone; but there is a beauty in wit. If something concerns us, we may often make a joke about it in order to contain it, to imagine that it may not be as bad as we fear. But ridicule means to be painful or injurious. Racist jokes are a method of belittling a, perhaps, perceived threat, the fear reduced through humiliation. We can apply the same to sexist jokes; the work of Bernard Manning and Roy ‘Chubby’ Brown would fall into this category, although both maintain they mean no hostility. It is these jokes that are also painful and injurious to others. Jokes like these are certainly not correctives to behaviour but insults to a person’s being, however skilful and funny the jokes are (and both Manning and Brown are exceptionally skilful and funny). Malicious jokes, especially children’s jokes in the playground, intend to be destructive. As we will see not all jokes are based on abuse, there<sup>are</sup> jokes that are pleasurable in themselves, nonsense, word play and non-sequiturs.

### **Kant.**

“Whatever is to arouse lively convulsive laughter must contain something absurd (hence something that the understanding cannot like for its own sake). Laughter is an affect that arises if a tense expectation is transformed into nothing.” Kant, Critique of Judgement.<sup>23</sup>

“I had to have one of my testicles brought down - from Derby.” Harry Hill..<sup>24</sup>

Kant believed that jokes, and that which causes us to laugh, created a tension of expectation; we follow the narrative drive, expecting it to lead us to an apparently indicated place (if expecting anything at all, except some kind of conclusion) but which, in the final moment, snaps out of the expected and lands us elsewhere. The

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>23</sup> Immanuel Kant, Critique of Judgement, p. 203.

<sup>24</sup> William Cook, Ha Bloody Ha Comedians Talking, London, Fourth Estate, 1994, p. 46.

tension dissipates into a relief of laughter on the punchline. The phrase Kant uses, “transformed into nothing”, gives cause for closer examination. It is true that most jokes are harmless, trivial and without much point, but it is the jokes that leave behind a residue of meaning, that knock our predisposition to established and, perhaps, incorrect concepts, that calls into question Kant’s latter idea.

“[My] marriage was broken up by my mother-in-law ... my wife come home early from work and found us in bed together.” Lenny Bruce.<sup>25</sup>

Jokes can deal with ideas and challenge our concepts of ideas. The Lenny Bruce joke does not transform into nothing: it leaves behind a challenged myth - the myth that all mothers-in-law are, in some way or another, grotesque. Contrary to the usual mother-in-law joke, it says that mothers-in-law can be attractive and sexually active: it foils our expectation by subverting the standard form of the mother-in-law joke and the myth. Furthermore, there is an aesthetic appreciation of the wit, the cleverness of the joke. It does not dissolve into thin air but leaves us with some interesting residues and implications for established concepts. Dealing with other people’s reactions to jokes is always difficult to gauge but there is the possibility of people thinking about this joke in a different way to, for example, a classic Les Dawson that would appear to further the stereotype. We do not laugh purely at our preconceived ideas being challenged, of course; we laugh at, amongst other things, the shock of surprise, the predictable usurped by the seemingly absurd. The Lenny Bruce joke deceives us but, unlike the typical mother-in-law gag (stereotype unchallenged) and the earlier Harry Hill gag (moment dissolves, onto the next) something different remains. It is not nothing: it is the presentation of a new idea that attempts to disqualify preconceived ideas. There is also, perhaps, a mental image of post-coital Bruce being caught by his wife and her imagined horror. Again this is difficult to quantify. Post-joke images may arouse laughter at a later date and can linger, being a block of solid information easier to memorise.

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<sup>25</sup> Lenny Bruce, How To Talk Dirty and Influence People, St. Albans: Panther, 1975, p. 138.

“It is noteworthy that in all such cases the joke must contain something that can deceive us for a moment.” Immanuel Kant.<sup>26</sup>

Jokes do depend on deception but we can find amusement even when we know exactly how the situation will turn out, as in the appreciation of corny jokes. Sometimes the predictable, the inevitable, is no less enjoyable than the clever and deceptive. It is the context in which the inevitable is presented that drives the joke. A knowingness, an irony, can often pass off the worse jokes in the best possible taste.

Kant gives us an example of a joke: an Indian watches an Englishman open a bottle of beer which foams out over the table; when asked why he is so surprised, the Indian replies “I am not amazed at its coming out but how you managed to get it in in the first place.”<sup>27</sup> Kant then, refuting the Superiority theory, states that we do not laugh at the Indian’s ignorance rather than that “we had a tense expectation that suddenly vanished [transformed] into nothing.”<sup>28</sup> He then goes on to say “it must be transformed into nothing, not into the positive opposite of an expected object for that is always something and may frequently grieve us. For if someone tells us a story that arouses great expectation in us but at the close we immediately see that it is untrue, this arouses our dislike.”<sup>29</sup> In the beer bottle joke the ‘ignorance’ of the Indian rings untrue: in the context of the joke the Indian is the object of laughter not the Englishman or the beer bottle (things are only amusing in relation to human properties); the Indian man has shown his ignorance and, therefore, illuminates our superiority. Historically, this joke is somewhat antiquated and possibly a bad example but it does prove his other point that laughter depends on how favourably disposed one is toward the object of laughter. The joke is not transformed into nothing but asserts the idea that the Indian is in some way inferior. For some it is a reaffirmation of belief, for others it “arouses our dislike.”

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<sup>26</sup> Immanuel Kant, Critique of Judgement, p. 204.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 203.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 204.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

Kant asserts that the one thing that appears almost immutable in comedy is the necessity of the absurd element, that “whatever is to arouse lively and convulsive laughter must contain something absurd.”<sup>30</sup> It is certainly difficult to argue against this in stand-up comedy: much evolves around the absurd juxtapositions of situation and concept. Not everything that makes us laugh is absurd and not everything absurd makes us laugh. Sometimes laughter is the only expression. Drugs, tickling, or the sheer joy of Manchester United winning a decisive football game do not depend on elements of absurdity. It is the way in which we look at things that determines absurdity and subsequent, subjective comic pleasure. The Oxford Compact English Dictionary defines absurd as “wildly unreasonable, illogical or ludicrous”<sup>31</sup> that defines a significant percentage of comedy. Although dealing with a quite separate concept Martin Esslin, in the context of The Theatre of the Absurd, quotes Eugene Ionesco that the “absurd is that which is devoid of purpose ... cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become absurd, senseless, useless.”<sup>32</sup> This latter definition of absurdity has interesting parallels with the stand-up comedy that deals with our relation to everyday life. Cut off from authentic life, besieged by the commodity, people become reduced to the polarised status of consumer or producer, black holes in which to empty cartons of products as variety replaces choice. The stand-up comedy of everyday life can explore this absurdity, explain or dissolve the false consumer consciousness in which we appear to dwell and make clear the gap between what is and what appears to be and thus move us to action in an attempt to salvage the authentic experience. Camus defines the absurd as the feeling of a gap between man and his life, what Marx had previously defined as alienation. In The Myth of Sisyphus, Camus writes that “that denseness and that strangeness of the world is absurd”<sup>33</sup> and then, “at certain moments of lucidity, the mechanical aspects of [man’s] gestures, their meaningless pantomime makes silly everything around

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 203.

<sup>31</sup> Oxford Compact English Dictionary, Oxford: University Press 1996, p. 5.

<sup>32</sup> Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, London: Penguin, 1968, p. 23.

<sup>33</sup> Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, New York: Vintage, 1955, p. 11.



them.”<sup>34</sup> Stand-up comedy produces this lucidity, taking our behaviour out of context, laying it bare and making us question “why do we do such a thing” or “why is this thing just funny?” The absurd explored in stand-up comedy can explain the cause for unreasonable behaviour and explore taboos. Camus further points out that the “divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity.”<sup>35</sup>

We can apply ideas - from both Kant and Camus - to stand-up comedy that can probe the gaps between what is and what should be, what appears and what actually exists. Stand-up comedy, following Camus, can give moments of lucidity where everything does become silly, absurd; what we believe to be and what actually is becomes apparent in the work of Dave Allen, Jack Dee and Billy Connolly. They expose the absurdity of everyday life and make us look at our actions again.

Not everything absurd causes laughter: certain members of the British government approving the sale of arms to a foreign country and then declaring war on that country is absurd, but not very amusing. Similarly, the behaviour of dogs greeting each other is simply the behaviour of dogs: to some it may seem absurdly amusing; to veterinarians and animal psychologists it is entirely normal. Amusement in the absurd depends upon the lens through which we view things. This lens is coloured by degrees of personal attachment but ground on previous experience.

### **Bergson.**

Bergson, in his essay Laughter, stated that comedy must conform to three primary points. Briefly, that “the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human.”<sup>36</sup> We laugh at the human elements, or what we perceive to be the human elements or characteristics in the animal or the inanimate, not at them in themselves. A dog is only funny to us when we perceive its behaviour in relation to human

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>36</sup> Henri Bergson, Laughter, Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1965, p. 63.

behaviour, its 'facial expressions' to ours. Comedy deals with human reaction to experience, the comic to the helplessness in the situation. The comic requires "an absence of feeling."<sup>37</sup> We must feel little emotional relation between the object of humour and ourselves in order to find it amusing (although we laugh at ourselves we laugh at ourselves through an abstraction). We must not feel pity for example, the emotional connection must be absent, as in "that's all very well, but you wouldn't laugh if it was your wife." Comedy must have a "social signification."<sup>38</sup> For the comic to operate effectively we must have shared social and cultural references and experiences with the joke in order to understand it; hence lost in translation. Bergson goes on to say that "...our laughter is always the laughter of a group."<sup>39</sup> This is true in relation to the comedy that Bergson was referring to, in the theatre or literature although not strictly true for all causes of laughter; we may sometimes laugh at our mistakes, made in private or otherwise, on our own or as they occur and we may also laugh due to the influence of drugs, a purely subjective experience. However, it is in the relation of the object of comedy to the group that we can detect a divide in approaches to stand-up comedy, although the usual overlaps occur: those who laugh at the shared characteristics of the group in which they themselves are included; those who laugh at the people outside the group identity or demographic. The former is of primary interest here although the latter warrants some examination. The so-called 'working men's club comedians', as defined by the ITV programme, The Comedians,<sup>40</sup> speak, or deal with, a limited perspective - that of the white, generally lower class male. The other group, the alternative comedians could similarly be accused of speaking from the perspective of the white, college educated, middle class male. Many of The Comedians jokes depend on an antipathy towards those who do not share the perspective, the laughter drawn from perceived inflexibility or behaviour, reducing to types and using elements of misconstrued characteristics.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> The Comedians was <sup>first</sup> broadcast between 1971 and 1973 throughout the ITV regions and showcased the 'Northern working men's club' comedians such as Bernard Manning, Frank Carson and Stan Boardman.

This is the creation of the 'other' in relation to the audience and comedians 'knowing'. This area, well documented, presents a polar opposite to the comedy discussed here, the comedy that examines the shared experiences of the group. The divide is a political divide and a choice made explicitly or implicitly, but a choice nonetheless.

"A comic character is generally comic in proportion to his ignorance of himself." Henri Bergson.

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Bergson goes on to discuss the 'comic character' in relation to late nineteenth century drama and literature and before (from Shakespeare and Cervantes amongst others). He developed a theory that the comic evolves through 'mechanical inelasticity', <sup>42</sup> an inflexibility of the object to the events in which they have become embroiled. Comedy evolves from the dogged persistence to continue in the way s/he would when not under duress or subject to less affective events. It is an unawareness of the need to yield, despite indications of which the audience is only too aware. Bergson, like Aristotle, saw that comedy could represent characters in a negative light so that we may recognise that which may be undesirable, or absurd or inflexible, in ourselves and that, through laughter, we could see the error of our ways.

Bergson, like Aristotle, also saw comedy as a method of 'purging' anti-social elements of our characters or behaviour in order to maintain the equilibrium of society. Of course, not all stand-up comedy can serve such a specific purpose and perhaps the best does not. Certainly, it is hard to describe Max Miller, Morecambe and Wise and Tommy Cooper, some of the widely acknowledged greats of British stand-up, as the vehicles for this (although maybe Miller could be described as subversive, but for a different reason) or of siphoning off anti-establishment tendencies. It is the comedy that goes beyond entertainment, taking us elsewhere,

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<sup>41</sup> Henri Bergson, Laughter, p. 76.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

that causes us to examine our attitudes and behaviour within everyday life - which is of interest here.

The comic character that Bergson speaks of is different from the contemporary stand-up comedian in several ways. For Bergson, there is a significant difference in the relation between audience and performer; the character is, perhaps, part of a play and not apparently aware of the audience's presence. The comic character is externalised from the 'group' because we are laughing at him/her: s/he has become an 'other', an outside object of our pleasure. The emotional detachment on the audience's behalf brings comedy into being. The comic character portrays helplessness in the play of events. What separates the stand-up comedian from this is the degree of consciousness, a knowledge of circumstance in which the comedian is involved (and stand-up comedy relates what has happened, comic characters are involved in what is happening). Stand-up comedy has the opportunity to analyse at leisure whilst the comic character is of the moment. The stand-up comedian talks 'with' the audience, shares similar experiences and s/he can explain so we may become aware of erroneous behaviour (amongst other things).

“When the humorist laughs at himself he is really acting a double part; the self who laughs is indeed conscious, but not the self who is laughed at.” Henri Bergson.<sup>43</sup>

The stand-up comedian can reveal common, shared experiences and uncover what Aristotle called 'universal truths', the kind of things we would “probably or necessarily say or do in a given situation.”<sup>44</sup> These are the kind of things we have all said and done in previous experiences. Universals are truths that transcend context, that are recognisable to many, acknowledged or not. In stand-up comedy, we can retain an emotional distance from that related. We do not become embarrassed or involved because the personal narrative frames that represented and the stand-up comedian represents two different selves - the self speaking and the self of whom s/he speaks. It is as if we are laughing at someone outside the group but still part of

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>44</sup> Aristotle, *On The Art of Poetry*, p. 44.

that wider social relationship (they are not an 'other' but a similar). The stand-up comedian's other self becomes the comic character, the convenient grotesque whom we use a model to re-enact mistakes or mishap that we may avoid or correct, 'the third person represented'.

The stand-up comedy that deals with everyday life may often appear to invite laughter at the comedian's expense but the comedian is in control of the situation and the meanings and shared references at which we laugh could well be ourselves. It is possible to construct comedy from examining the futility and exasperation of the quotidian: both Billy Connolly and Dave Allen have refined their examinations of such frustration and absurdity. Connolly and Allen trawl through the seeming trivia - the haemorrhoids, flatulence and authoritarian inflexibility - without creating an 'other'. The laughter is based on the knowledge that the tiny things can serve to undermine our sense of dignity or self-respect.

Stand-up comedy, by rejecting the role of comic character (though still using it as a tool, as described above) and maintaining control of the narrative, reverses the situation that Bergson described, the inflexibility of the character in a 'fluid' society. Stand-up comedy can illuminate the inflexibility of everyday life towards those who live in it; it can demonstrate the inelasticity of, for example, bureaucracy where the situation must apply to the rules and not the other way round. The comic character does not bend and, therefore, shows him/herself to be absurd but stand-up comedy can show society itself, particularly a commodity based society, as absurd and at fault. Rather than comedy serving a corrective purpose toward the character, it can serve as a tool, a social corrective to raise questions or help illustrate the absurdity and institutions of that society. Alternative comedy, in the late 1970s and 1980s attacked the stand-up comedy agenda by presenting arguments against institutionalised racist and sexist jokes, raising awareness of the issues at stake. More recently, Billy Connolly's BBC films of his Scottish and Australian tours in 1996/7 have questioned and pushed the limits of what is 'acceptable language' on television

and illustrated the controlling of certain kinds of language limits expression of ideas and denies some a voice.

### **Schopenhauer and Incongruity.**

“In every case, laughter results from nothing but the suddenly perceived incongruity between a concept and the real objects that had been thought through it in some relation; and laughter itself is just the expression of that incongruity.” Arthur Schopenhauer.<sup>45</sup>

As with absurdity, which is closely aligned, not all that is incongruous causes laughter and not all that causes laughter is incongruous. Schopenhauer thought that comedy, or the comic (as distinct from laughter), grew from the incongruity between concept and object; a thing viewed out of place or transposed. It is the way, and the reason why, it is transposed, and the degree of subsequent enjoyment, that defines it as comedy. That is, finding a head in the fridge would be no laughing matter although it may be possible to extract comedy from it in a trash horror film. Comedy from the incongruous depends on the context of the situation and the consequent degree of pleasure drawn from that situation. Incongruity presents us with a new image - the bringing together of two separate or disparate elements - and the successful joke clarifies the confusion of meanings or relationship; it defies the expected. Although the two elements may be incongruous, to make ‘comic sense’ there must be a family resemblance between them that fuses a connection. That is, the connection of the foolish drunk is the shared red nose of the clown. A second level of comedy meaning is the inappropriateness of the sordid and the humorous. Things have a family resemblance, a genus, that identifies them from and with other things. A cigarette shares characteristics of cigars and pipes but they also belong to another ‘family’ - the family of things that are not very good for you - like guns, radiation and the advice in national newspaper columns. It is the overflow of these that can create the incongruity of comedy: overflows of meanings.

“I tried to hang myself - with a bungee rope. Didn’t kill myself but raised 150 quid for charity.”  
Anonymous comedian.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>Arnold Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Representation, New York: Dover, 1968, p. 59.

In this joke the rope is central to the comedy; its use as a method of suicide and (polar opposite) its use as a way of raising money for charity. Its dual purpose is brought together into one situation. The secondary (post-joke) image remains, perhaps, of the protagonist bouncing up and down beneath a bridge, still alive and frustrated, feet touching the ground. Comedy can also be found in the inappropriateness of the incongruous. Accidental phallic representations provoke comedy at the perceived new situation. An unseemly bulge upon a representation of a respected and sombre figure, whilst also lewd and undermining of authority (in which there is always much joy) is also an incongruity of the seemingly respectable and the base.

### **Freud and Relief Theory.**

Relief from Restraint theory was much expanded by Freud after Herbert Spencer. Sigmund Freud's Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious<sup>47</sup> provides an interesting breakdown of various types of jokes although it is more of a psychological/physiological explanation of laughter than a theory of comedy. It is certainly not the intention here to add to the varied and voluminous critiques of Freud - or to add to the do they/don't they arguments over the sub-text of jokes - but to sift through the theories for anything relevant to stand-up comedy. Freud linked his theories to an economy of energies and saw comedy as a conduit of tensions siphoned off through laughter. In Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious he breaks comedy down into three fundamental groups - the comic, humour and jokes - and then further develops sub genres of jokes. Freud says the comic is found within a situation by the subject, like when we view things as absurd. Beckett's characters are comic however remorselessly grim their surroundings; Laurel and Hardy and Tommy Cooper are also comic: they are involved in comic situations. Des O' Connor could be seen as comic, not because what he is saying is particularly funny but the way in which we see him as a ridiculous figure. In regard to the economy of

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<sup>46</sup> Unknown comedian seen at Nottingham 'Club Cabaret', 1994.

<sup>47</sup> Sigmund Freud, Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1911.

energy, it brings an economy of energy in thought says Freud and “we are spared some cognitive processing we have summoned the energy to perform.”<sup>48</sup> The surplus energy raised to analyse the situation is then drained as laughter, for we would not need to analyse what we see as plain daft. In humour, Freud saw the involvement of energies summoned through the witnessing of events or situations that invoke tension, fear or ‘negative emotions’, which are then released, with relief, through laughter. It offers a pressure valve and - as when we laugh out of danger after a narrow escape - the energy is dispersed. That is, humour brings the audience close to a conclusion but veers at the final moment and creates a joke: the obvious outcome is thwarted. Freud saw certain jokes as a way of encapsulating and dealing with taboos and inhibitions. Jokes expressing such inhibitions released the energies or pressure used to repress them. Joking about sex can be a way of dealing with something that may be first on our personal agenda but has no way of realisation, although certainly not all jokes express inhibitions and taboo. He went on to break down jokes into sub-categories and explored these in relation to his theories of psychoanalysis and divided jokes into harmless and tendency categories. Harmless wit deals with word play, puns and nonsense that are pleasurable in themselves. Tendency wit Freud saw as motivated primarily by the hostile or obscene by varying degrees and these broke down further into word wit - double entendres and word condensation, i.e., these theories are completely “Freudent” - and thought wit: indirect expression with allusions, as in, “My wife looks a million dollars ....”

Freud saw jokes as licit expressions of the taboo that is, perhaps, more applicable to the social function of the joke as opposed to performed comedy. Freud’s theory of taboos in jokes is clearly rooted in his time: nowadays many taboos have been broken, boundaries of taste assaulted and, given the increasing amount of comedians now known to the populace, comedy is able to develop and experiment. In a changing culture, the taboos of Freud may well have been replaced: substitute sex in

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<sup>48</sup> John Morreal, The Philosophy of Laughter and Humour, New York: State University Press, 1987, p. 111.



Freud's time for drugs today. Drug use in Freud's time occupied a different social space and created less furore: compare Sherlock Holmes to the Trainspotting movie.

Freud, and the other relief theorists, decode the functioning of jokes and their psychological/physiological mechanisms. It is not the psychological that is of import here, but the social, the way in which jokes deal with everyday life, document attitudes and cultural phenomena and how it works as a specific piece of theatre. Again, rather than just promoting one theory over another as a 'total theory', it is preferable to develop theories around the specific jokes in context of performance using elements of these theories discussed. Like any rule, theory is best applied to each situation individually, rather than the situation being applied to the theory, in order to analyse the specifics of comedy. It seems absurd now to attempt to construct, or promote, a single theory that covers comedy that is ephemeral and ever changing. Finally, however, in The Philosophy of Laughter and Humour<sup>49</sup> Morreall, in illustrating the inadequacies of each of the three theories, defines a general feature of comedy that seems fairly watertight. He points out that to necessitate comedy there must be a change in the mental state and that, furthermore, the change should be of a positive nature for "laughter results from a pleasant psychological shift."<sup>50</sup>

### **Corruption, Hypocrisy and Bad News.**

"The softer sex, and all nervous persons, are much disposed to laugh and cry profusely and to pass quickly <sup>from</sup> one state to another." David Hartley.<sup>51</sup>

"And that persons who give themselves much to mirth, wit and humour, must thereby greatly disqualify their understandings for the search after truth." David Hartley.<sup>52</sup>

In his essay "Of Wit and Humour",<sup>53</sup> the eighteenth century philosopher David Hartley considered excessive laughter an obscuration of the truth and that those who made light of circumstance would somehow fail to understand the essence of such experience. Looking at the humorous aspects often helps us deal with such

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p. 133.

<sup>51</sup> David Hartley, Of Wit and Humour, pt. 1, chapter 4, 1. In Morreall, p. 41.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

experience; we may pass things off as a joke, thereby containing the situation. In relating it as such, we distance ourselves from our misfortunes through the third person (the self in the story not 'really' the self relating it) in the same way we have seen the stand-up comedian in the third person represented. In relating experience, we can maintain a semi-objectivity and, perhaps, learn from it. It is incorrect, however, to say that laughter obscures the truth of experience: this is further demonstrated in the context of the playground where childhood taunts and jokes can often be devastating and hurtful because of their basis in truth. The same applies to satirical caricature (Spitting Image), impersonations (Rory Bremner) and the more politically focused stand-up comedians (Mark Steel, Mark Thomas) where the object of humour is ridiculed for its absurdity or inefficiency.

Ridicule, according to Hazlitt "fastens on the vulnerable points of a cause and finds out the weak sides of an argument."<sup>54</sup> The power in the humour of such ridicule lies in the accuracy of that portrayed and the elements of truth in the grotesque. Ridicule can represent exaggerations and it is the truths within these exaggerations that remain with us as a residue: that which we may have known but not expressed. Hazlitt thought of ridicule as a test of "what is truth, according to public opinion and common sense."<sup>55</sup> This is true when things are represented as we perceive them, not as they actually are: Rory Bremner's clumsy and meek John Major corresponded with a popular belief, as does his unpopular William Hague. In ridicule, we gain a moral superiority from the exposure to truths that, if presented in a newspaper would be inconsolably depressing: corruption, hypocrisy and bad news. Knowledge may be power but the power may be limited to the power of observation. In a socio-political context, however, and unlike dentistry, it is perhaps preferable to know what is going on around us, even if there is little we can do about it. In the case of the stand-up comedy that explores everyday life, we recognise the truth of shared experience as we have experienced it. It is the recognition of these truths, or elements of truth,

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

from which we may learn. The stand-up comedy based on impersonation and political examination can benefit us in three ways: we enjoy the joke; we learn or assimilate a viewpoint or truth; and we afford ourselves a level or moral (or political) superiority. This idea of superiority in comedy has been found to be wanting but it may still be relevant in this kind of stand-up comedy when it attacks hypocrisy and the abuse of power: it confirms our beliefs and may encourage the desire for change.

### **Satire.**

“Satire, artistic form, chiefly literary and dramatic in which human or individual vices, follies, abuses or shortcomings are held up to censure by means of ridicule, derision, burlesque, irony or other methods, sometimes with an intent to bring about improvement.” Encyclopaedia Britannica.<sup>56</sup>

Although satire is one of the most evident of qualities, both in literature and in life, there has never been agreement with regard to its precise definition.” C.E. Vulliamy, Anatomy of Satire.<sup>57</sup>

Although, as Vulliamy points out, satire suffers from a, by no means unique, lack of definition, the idea that it, in some way, repudiates vice or folly would also seem to relate to some of the ideas previously discussed. Stand-up comedy uses satire as a tool, but there is a difference between the stand-up comedian and the satirist. Satire’s intention is not that of stand-up comedy’s: satire aims to make a point; stand-up comedy’s aim is to make a joke, and although the joke can make a serious point, it must be a joke first and foremost. Stand-up comedy uses satire as a means to an end. Although much satire is humorous or amusing “it can also be sombre, deeply probing and prophetic.”<sup>58</sup> Satire is not just comedy, it is a point made that is usually funny.: it can be extended beyond the scope of a line joke into a novel or play. The stand-up comedy that is referred to in this context is linked with the misnamed ‘satire boom’ of the 1960 (Beyond The Fringe, That Was The Week That Was, Private Eye) and the connection reaches through Monty Python’s Flying Circus into alternative comedy, as will be discussed later. Of course, not all satire has manifested itself in stand-up comedy. It is fair to say that satire is an attack on the perceived misdeeds of others, through a variety of forms. Griffin, in his Satire: A Critical

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<sup>56</sup>Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol. 10, 15<sup>th</sup> Ed., p. 173.

<sup>57</sup> C. E. Vulliamy, Anatomy of Satire, London: Michael Joseph, 1950, p. 2.

<sup>58</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica, p. 173.

Reintroduction <sup>59</sup> prefers to see satire as an almost parasitic entity that invades any literary form available and as “a mode or procedure rather than a literary kind.”<sup>60</sup> Griffin’s idea would appear to correspond with Paulson in his Fictions of Satire that “an object of satire is best attacked through a generally understood form that is penetrated to carry the satirist’s message.” <sup>61</sup> The Encyclopaedia Britannica Macropedia says “satiric comedy dramatises the discrepancy between the ideal and the reality and condemns the pretension that would mark reality’s hollowness and viciousness.” <sup>62</sup> Stand-up comedy is a form which satire can inhabit and use to explore the gap between how we would wish to see ourselves and the world around us and how it actually is. Like some of the comedy to be discussed, satire focuses on truth and, according to Vulliamy “lacking this groundwork of truth, no satire is permanent or vital.” <sup>63</sup> This is a strange phrase as satire depends on topicality and topicality is usually antithetical to permanence. The social and the political are both continuing processes, as are, unfortunately, the faults and abuses within them. Satire can be exclusive when it depends on too much previous knowledge of that being satirised, as does any form of comedy. The satire in Private Eye is lost on many people, as is parody without familiarity of subject matter. Unfamiliarity dilutes comic effect immediately. Stand-up comedy tends to deal with the general experience whereas satire tends towards the particular. Stand-up comedy can reveal a particular absurdity within everyday life, but it often chooses to wallow in its complicity rather than condemn it as would satire. The dissatisfaction with the Macmillan government (and much else) in the 1960s was voiced for the first time in the newly developing medium of television, as well as in the theatre and through the magazine, Private Eye. This confirms the Everyman Encyclopaedia’s claim that “satire appears to best advantage when there is an undertow of general dissatisfaction with the ‘establishment’ and its mores.” <sup>64</sup> How much influence the

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<sup>59</sup> Dustin Griffin, Satire: A Critical Reintroduction, Lexington: University Press, 1994, p. 3.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>61</sup> Ronald Paulson, Fictions of Satire, Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1968, p. 5.

<sup>62</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica Macropedia, Vol. 23, 15<sup>th</sup> Ed., p. 152.

<sup>63</sup> C. E. Vulliamy, The Anatomy of Satire, p. 2.

<sup>64</sup> Everyman Encyclopaedia, Vol. 10, 6<sup>th</sup> Ed., p. 620.

'satire boom' actually had over social and political affairs of the day is open to question (and personal opinion): influence is hard to quantify.

"I dwelt on the beneficial effects of iconoclasm in destroying hardened and meaningless social conventions." John Wells, *Not Filth But Satire*.<sup>65</sup>

John Wells, in his essay "Not Filth But Satire"<sup>66</sup> gives a relatively downbeat reappraisal of the 'satire boom' in the 1960s and its effectiveness. He says that the satirist "mimics his victim, sticks verbal pins in him, the crowd, he hopes, roar with laughter, but somehow the victim fails to drop dead, on the contrary, the crowd, by the end of the performance, seem to find the victim more endearing than they did at the beginning."<sup>67</sup> He continues to inspect the politically muscle-wasted physique of satire: he tells of Fleet Street celebrations at the tenth anniversary of Private Eye and of its then editor, Richard Ingrams being invited to Downing Street. He paints a picture of the crowd at Beyond The Fringe as "bird brained intellectuals [who] strode proudly out [of] the theatre to attack the lobster thermidore."<sup>68</sup> Wells is critical of the effect on the audience, and the audience in particular, in the way only an insider could be. He subsequently goes on to dismiss the 'satire boom' as a myth. According to Wells, Beyond The Fringe, the opening of the Establishment Club and the publication of Private Eye emerged relatively coincidentally and they were connected, not as a deliberate three pronged assault on contemporary society, but by Peter Cook's cash. These three became the centre of a satire myth and, for Wells, That Was The Week That Was "was quite clearly created by the myth, and they suffered equally from an inorganic rootlessness and a weakness for following the current fashion."<sup>69</sup> For those not involved in the cliquey London scene, however (although, again, influence is impossible to quantify), those in other cities and towns, what That Was The Week That Was said undoubtedly had some effect. Wells admits: "the impact on viewers who had not seen manifestations of this kind before

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<sup>65</sup> John Wells, "Not Filth But Satire", Masterpieces, London: NEL, 1982, p. 7.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 8-9.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

was clearly very great: the fact that they appeared on BBC made them stronger [because] people were talking in the same way when the cameras were on them as they did when the cameras were not.”<sup>70</sup> In his reappraisal of the mythical 1960s satire period, Robert Hewison writes that, if anything “satire did offer a way around the difficulties of registering effective social protest”<sup>71</sup> and although Beyond The Fringe, That Was The Week That Was and Private Eye “had a cosy relationship with the institutions it criticised”<sup>72</sup> like some naughty child “it was intelligent, literate comedy that made people think as well as laugh.”<sup>73</sup> Any effect That Was The Week That Was had was not only because of what it said but because what it said reflected how many others thought or felt. It was also said in the relatively new medium of television.

“Satire has some effect ...it tends to reinforce what we already think.” Suzanne Moore.<sup>74</sup>

That Was The Week That Was temporarily created a space in a media through which we are constantly told what others think - those in power, those who control the media who support them - and voiced an opposition to the dominant line. As Hewison puts it “most of the means of expressing dissatisfaction with the status quo ... were in the hands of those most interested in preserving it.”<sup>75</sup> Was it ever thus? Whatever its social and political effect, real or imagined Beyond The Fringe and That Was The Week That Was indicated a significant push forward and an opening up of further possibilities within a strand of comedy that had started with The Goon Show and continues through various manifestations to the present.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>73</sup> Robert Hewison, Too Much, London: Methuen, 1987, p. 27.

<sup>74</sup> BBC2, Late Review, 16/5/96.

<sup>75</sup> Robert Hewison, Too Much, p. 27.

Is this  
a  
question  
Punish

## Orwell.

In his 1946 critique of Gulliver's Travels, "Politics and Literature" George Orwell sees Jonathan Swift as a "disbeliever in the possibility of happiness"<sup>76</sup> and that his misanthropic satire serves to remind man that he is "weak and ridiculous, and above all that he stinks."<sup>77</sup> This kind of satire Orwell sees as "either reactionary or nihilistic, because the person who holds [these beliefs] will want to preserve society from developing in some direction in which his pessimism may be cheated."<sup>78</sup> The methods s/he would thus have at his/her disposal would be either to "blow everything to pieces" or "avert social change."<sup>79</sup> Orwell thought that satirists select targets from their own moral stance and that Swift had little to offer to rectify the situation. This, it can be argued, is satire's weak point, a lack of alternative point of view, destructive rather than constructive, a 'morally nihilist' position. This is an argument that can be made relevant to recent satire and stand-up comedy.

Throughout the 1960s, and despite his reputation of being purely iconoclastic, Lenny Bruce developed a pattern of social and moral (and judicial) convictions that backed his satirical points, often at the expense of his comedy. Although Bruce was iconoclastic, he also had a fairly strong system of belief and attempted to present an ideal that he took great pains to expound. With regard to Orwell's "reactionary or nihilist" critique, Lenny Bruce illustrated the possibility of a morally fuelled satire that presented an alternative viewpoint: satire can also be radical. He also worked outside of the establishment that he criticised unlike That Was The Week That Was and Private Eye who showed that satire almost has a need to coexist with that which it criticises in order to survive. Private Eye's satire, for example, could be seen as too cynical and appears to offer little but criticism, which may be the point it can be argued. This may be to do with the diverse selection of opinions and beliefs between writers; Wells points out that for ten years both Paul Foot ("a Trotskyite") and

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<sup>76</sup> George Orwell, Politics and Literature in In Front Of Your Nose, London: Secker & Warburg, 1968, p. 217.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 220.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

Richard Ingrams (“a patrician Christian Tory”) worked for the magazine and that it was “...perhaps an object lesson in English tolerance.”<sup>80</sup> Hewison writes that Private Eye “...was a means of ventilating ideas rather than challenging society with some complete new blueprint.”<sup>81</sup>

Satire can make a choice between being radical, reactionary or simply nihilist and frequently (and, perhaps, at its best) it can be all three. Of course, not all satire may be as (arguably) effective as That Was The Week That Was and others: much satire is indeed a bleak affair. In a more contemporary context, Denis Leary’s No Cure For Cancer<sup>82</sup> - an hour long stand-up/satire performance - attacks American values and attitudes with deeply submerged and murky irony. So submerged is this irony that part of the audience cheer at Leary’s portrayal of the ‘All American Asshole.’ Are they cheering at the satirical portrayal or from identifying with the attitudes he is attacking? This calls into question the ‘open text’ of comedy, how it is received or interpreted by the audience. Leary’s satire can be read both ways at first glance despite the performance being preceded by a song entitled “I’m an Asshole”, just to make it clear; it seems to offer little contextualisation for the ‘jock culture’ boys who cheered without irony nonetheless at the apparently (to them) anti ‘politically correct’ attitudes on display. It is satire with an interesting ambiguity: it allows us to laugh with the attitudes despite not adhering to them and it also offers us a critique we can apply as a ‘moral escape route’. Leary’s grotesque depiction of selfishness, bleak or not, is powerful because of its comedic power and its truth.

## **Conclusion.**

“Most people are drawn into an argument, I think, if you actually make it in a way which engages them on a number of different levels and not only engages them on an intellectual level but engages them on a humorous level as well.” Rory Bremner. J’ Accuse: Comedy.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> John Wells, Masterpieces, p. 10.

<sup>81</sup> Robert Hewison, Too Much, p. 34.

<sup>82</sup> Denis Leary. No Cure For Cancer, Channel 4, 1992.

<sup>83</sup> Rory Bremner, J’ Accuse: Comedy, Channel 4, 5/96.



It is difficult to demonstrate whether satire has actually changed anything and it is dubious in the utmost to suggest that it can change anything on its own. However, when linked with the “undertow of general dissatisfaction” it can ‘voice’ dissent from a dominant line. What stand-up comedy can do, using satire as a tool, is keep up a dissenting voice and broaden argument, making it accessible and relevant. In recent years, there has been a noticeable decline in political satire and politically engaged stand-up comedy. This may be in reaction to the polemical 1980s. For all alternative comedy’s ranting against Margaret Thatcher’s right wing government throughout the 1980s, stand-up comedy affected little material change (neither did much political and social opposition) except getting potential voters in to Labour’s Red Wedge tour, which was by no means radical. It did maintain a media presence and made oppositional ideas available to its audience rather than reiterating the prevailing ideology. Whether satire is conformist or not - and if the majority of these examples show it is that it conforms to a single voice, white, college educated, middle class males - the voices may be limited but the possibilities not.

## Stand-up Comedian, Stand-up Comic.

Stand-up comedy can be an authentic act of communication, an act that engages emotionally, not that which massages or manipulates, sentimentally or otherwise. A Bill Hicks diatribe against government hypocrisy on drugs and drinking may engage us more than, say, Les Dawson unleashing another lambaste against his wife's mother. (This, of course, is entirely subjective.) With the former we may laugh and be angry as well as thoughtful; the latter engages us on a more fundamental level. The stand-up comedian can present an authentic self and engages us through use of their material and we relate to each different comedian in separate ways, if at all. Relationships can be fleeting but we do build a temporary relationship with comedians, although this relationship may be with a specific persona presented. Laughter here is a shared experience and the relationship built on small histories of experience. Being in a comedy club can serve as a kind of social glue and comedy can build on this to disalienate us, to show us as subject to pettiness, bureaucracy and failure: it can act as a humanisation process within everyday life. These moments may be fleeting but they are authentic. Jokes that we believe to be authentic seem to move us closer to the comedian and his/her world view, which is a different relationship to a comedian talking about things we have never experienced or those generating comedy at the boundaries of the absurd.

### **Comic/Comedian**

“That's what I didn't like about any of these other acts because none of them would go on as themselves. I would always go on as Keith Allen.” Keith Allen. <sup>1</sup>

“Character is then the set of signs which denote and identify an object.” Edward Burns. <sup>2</sup>

Stand-up comedy is communication and communication involves not just what is being said, but how and why it is being said. It can take only a few seconds to decide whether or not we want to hear something and whom we hear it from plays a

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<sup>1</sup> Keith Allen quoted in Roger Wilmut, Didn't You Kill My Mother-In-Law, London: Methuen, 1989, p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Burns, Character: Acting and Being on the Pre-Modern Stage, London: MacMillan, 1990, p. 41.

significant part within that decision. Stand-up comedy is an act, presented by a performer, which requires a structure, however loose, for it to make sense, to make a space where the jokes can exist. Jokes live in the context of a comedians' performance: certain comedians can only get away with, or convince, with certain jokes, due to individual personae and style; confidence drives this persona or character. What they do is structure a 'micro-world' in which these jokes make sense; we begin to recognise their persona through this construction and vice versa.

It appears there is a mixture of interpretations, or meanings, when discussing stand-up comedy: some performers refer to being stand-up comics, some refer to being stand-up comedians. No theory or differentiation has been advanced at the time of writing, perhaps it may be too trivial a matter. This thesis proposes a definition: the difference between comic and comedian is the difference between character and persona.

Comedy is the dramatic or literary (or social) form of the comic. The comic is the element of something that makes us laugh or means to amuse or undermine in some way. Stand-up *comics* are representations of comic characters - not wholly fictional - and the comedy focuses as much on them as what they say or do. Stand-up *comedians* present personae, more 'believable' perhaps than 'invented' characters and they create comic effect through jokes and monologue. Stand-up comics are comic characters in a stand-up context, with varying degrees of consciousness of the situation - they 'invite' laughter: stand-up comedians control the flow of comedy, they direct laughter.

"The term characteristic ... implies some consistency in behaviour that people have tendencies to act or think in certain ways regardless of the situation." Hilgard, Atkinson & Atkinson. <sup>3</sup>

A stand-up comic presents a character that does not exist outside the context of a performance, even though it may be based on the all too real. The construction of a

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<sup>3</sup> Hilgard, Atkinson & Atkinson, Introduction to Psychology, New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 7<sup>th</sup> Ed. P. 377.

comic character is to achieve a purpose - principally, making a point through comic effect - and does not exist without that purpose. Character builds from the self based on facets of personal identity, but it is always an invention, a conscious manifestation whose purpose underlines its definition. Within the character, however absurd, we recognise certain characteristics. Characteristics are recognisable signs, usually in groups, that inform our subjective responses to those embodying them. We recognise through characteristics and use them as “transparent templets [sic] which we create and then attempt to put over the realities of which the world is composed.”

<sup>4</sup> We can present ourselves, in a social context, in character. We adhere to a convention of signs and recognisable behaviour to impress a sense of deliberate identity on those with whom we mix, to ‘blend in’ with the flow of social relations. Character, according to Burns, is an “identifying style.” <sup>5</sup> We share characteristics but the way we construct them is unique, our identities.

“Impression management refers to all the strategies and techniques that individuals use to control the image and impressions of the “self”, that they project to other people.” Wright & Deaux. <sup>6</sup>

In everyday life, we present personae structured from characteristics and facets of our personalities. The way in which we act with our lovers is not the same way we act at the supermarket check-out desk, or at work; what we present are elements of the same figure. Personae displayed, however, is not entirely a matter of choice, deciding what to project and what to suppress: social relations demand an adherence to codes of convention. In stand-up comedy pressure can dictate and influence, to a certain extent, how the persona evolves from its inception to a satisfactory and workable ‘comedy identity’. This formation magnifies in light of public scrutiny: if something does not ‘work’ (i.e., being too aggressive) it has to go; if it stays it may jeopardise the comedian’s success with the audience. Bad articulation can also distract from the joke itself and unconvincing or nervous delivery distracts from the overall performance.

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<sup>4</sup> George Kelly in Wright & Deaux, Social Psychology in the 80s, Monterey: Brooks/Cole, 1981, p. 71.

<sup>5</sup> Burns, 1990, p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> Wright & Deaux, 1981, p. 95.

“One reason behind the delay in redressing the balance is that despite their anti-sexist pretensions, alt-com audiences give female stand-ups a far rougher ride.” William Cook.<sup>7</sup>

“The most apparently obvious way for a woman comic to cope with the club style and audiences is to behave as if she were male.” Frances Gray.<sup>8</sup>

Gray points out the problem of pressure and the formation of persona in relation to women stand-up comedians. On starting out the audience sees not a stand-up comedian who happens to be a woman but a woman who happens to be doing stand up-comedy. The focus is, inevitably, not on that being said but who is saying it: the performer will also be subject to the ‘male gaze’, the appraisal of sexual desirability and/or availability. The persona in development is indeed malleable (and this is not an exclusive problem for women by any means). Again, for women, acting as men can curry favour but a ‘hardening’ and loss of subtlety is at risk. What the comedian presents can be out of necessity rather than choice. If this is the case then the persona can start to lose authenticity and become a more, personally protective, character (although not all comic characters start like this, obviously). The establishing of territory for the jokes to work becomes a struggle and a concession. Central traits, or stronger characteristics that tend to carry more weight, overshadow subtler ones. Giving as good as you get becomes a problem of force and having to play the male game harder. A way around this problem is to deflect potential hostility through self deprecation. To pre-empt comment removes the compunction for another to do so, but it is still self deprecation. Jo Brand gets around this by pointing out the fact she is overweight but shows why she is not the one who has a problem with it (“I look like this so blokes like you won’t fancy me,” etc.). William Cook wrote:

“Brand is large, and her most basic jokes second guess the abuse the small minded men shower on bigger women ... they shout back at all those diets undertaken in pursuit of sexual desirability.”<sup>9</sup>

She clears the ground early to say what she has to say, not to apologise for what she looks like. In this way she makes the reversal an empowerment that gives her space and, as Gray points out “once the persona is established the comedian is free to

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<sup>7</sup> William Cook, *The Guardian*, 7/10/94.

<sup>8</sup> Gray, 1994, p. 135.

<sup>9</sup> Cook, *The Guardian*, 7/10/94.

examine all aspects of women's lives and change our perception of them.”<sup>10</sup> Jenny Eclair is another case in point. Her live show has a relentlessness, the force of her persona and the strength of her material negating any outright opposition or hostility. Her shock tactic attitude clears territory that gives her plenty of space to talk about the things she wants to talk about, to which many men might not care to listen. Eclair says “I haven’t had any heckling hard times for several years because I go on as if I’m the boss. I’m loud and raucous and it’s basically all bluff.”<sup>11</sup>

“I like Paul Calf. I think a lot of the things he says are funny because a lot of people think the same way but won’t admit it.” Steve Coogan.<sup>12</sup>

“Although my characters are pathetic, sort of ugly, I don’t think they’re unsympathetic, no matter how obnoxious they may be ... I really like Alan Partridge.” Steve Coogan.<sup>13</sup>

In stand-up comedy, performing as a character can explore territory that may be difficult to negotiate in persona. Character can uncover a profitable and uncharted seam of comedy denied the stand-up comedian. Steve Coogan’s Paul Calf character talks from a Northern, working class ‘bloke’ point of view and presents a certain attitude and lifestyle - not necessarily derisory - that may be difficult in a straight stand-up context. The Paul Calf character is at loggerheads with the white, middle class, usually liberal male point of view that tends to dominate much of the ‘new’ comedy circuit. Paul Calf’s loutishness, sexism and lack of manners and affectations give an almost forbidden pleasure on witnessing him bad mouth present liberal norms, although his naiveté and social failings are somehow touching. Coogan’s skill in representing apparently awful people, whilst allowing them to be sympathetic and all too human, makes his characters, although grotesque, seem ‘true’. It would be difficult for Coogan to present Calf’s opinions in straight stand-up without a large degree of irony. Tony Hancock presented a comic character at whose pretensions and disappointments people laughed (often recognising elements of their own

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<sup>10</sup> Gray, 1994, p. 150..

<sup>11</sup> Jenny Eclair, in William Cook, *Ha Bloody Ha: Comedians Talking*, London: Fourth Estate, 1995, p. 223.

<sup>12</sup> Steve Coogan on character Paul Calf. *New Musical Express*, 25/12/93.

<sup>13</sup> Steve Coogan interview, *The Face*, Vol. 2, no. 64, January 1994.

aspirations), particularly at the 'truth' portrayed in the situations. Tommy Cooper was a stand-up comic; he presented a comic character. We knew he was not really like that and that he gave a comic portrayal of an oafish magician. More contemporary examples of stand-up comics can include Matt Lucas (Sir Bernard Chumley), John Thompson (Bernard Right-on) and Charlie Chuck. Frank Skinner is a stand-up comedian: he presents a comic persona - a chatty, amiable lad - that we believe is close to the 'real' Frank Skinner. Mark Thomas and Mark Steel both present amiable personae, as does Jack Dee (although more sharp than the others). Obviously, the usual overflows occur. Rather than presenting an immutable model we can clarify in relation to each performer subsequently discussed, if necessary.

### **Performer/ Audience.**

Stand-up comedy's successful communication depends on the establishing of a performer/audience relationship. For the audience, it is a contract of consent and the ability to withdraw this consent renders the relationship frail but can also make it dynamic - through heckling, for example. The contract on the audience's behalf is a contract of tolerance and pre-conditions apply - they are there for amusement, they are there because they want to be - and lend the contract an elasticity. The initial clause in this contract is a belief in the confidence of the performer, which depends on how the persona/character projects. How we relate to the persona/character being projected is the basis of the contract. There has to be an element of 'liking': we may like Frank Skinner because he appears friendly; we may like hating Gerry Sadowitz because he likes hating us. This element of liking is particularly crucial for the role of the M.C. in comedy clubs. S/he acts as a go-between for audience and comedians and guides the audience's favour. S/he appears to be a friend, someone with whom we may want to have a drink. Lee Hurst is a perfect choice for M.C. because of these qualities, as is Andy Smart. The stand-up performer needs shared references as well as this element of character/persona with which we can identify. If the comedian appears too smug (Bob Monkhouse), too safe (Bob Monkhouse) or just too obvious (etc.,) then they may fail to connect with the audience. We must enjoy them before

we appreciate the comedy fully as character/persona is an integral part of the performance. Like when we are at ease with our friends, we become more open to humour. The performer/audience relationship is a power relationship and not honouring the contract tips the balance. In practically the only form of performance the power relationship can be reversed and the audience can feel itself in control. If the audience does not laugh, the performance finishes. Stand-up comedy needs the response of laughter to qualify the continuation of the performance: failure to elicit this response renders the contract null and void.

The persona or character needs to project convincingly in order for the comedy to be successful and the fuel for this projection is confidence. The absolute confidence of Jenny Eclair (which is like being kicked in the face, with fluffy slippers) drives her performance and she immediately seizes control. We can only accept this control in stand-up comedy when we have a belief in the performer's confidence. Confidence is a given, or acquired through knowledge and experience, and it is a power of belief in the potential utilisation of these. Lack of it can promote insecurity and/or arrogance in a performer (amongst others) which can lead to embarrassment on the audience's behalf. A feeling that all is not well can manifest itself in their collective conscience and create discomfort. The worst thing a comedian can do is embarrass their audience. There is an arrogance assumed with bad performance pretending to be one of quality. Arrogance's purpose, within a performance, is clearly defensive, to deflect hostility, real or imagined, but it fails to promote any degree of tolerance through its alienating effect. Arrogance is a contrivance, but confidence is the basis for stand-up comedy: the confidence it takes to say "listen to me - I am funny."

### **Power/Possibility.**

The relation between the audience and performer is, of course, a power relation. Power is the ability to assert or influence from a superior position - inherent or taken - acquired through knowledge and/or strength. Knowledge, experience, brings the ability to contrast and utilise previous experience and holds the possibility to



manoeuvre towards an advantageous position. Though facts, truths and information are not power themselves, they can become a tool of power. Power is not objectified, it needs a set of intentions and a medium to achieve itself. It could be said that money is power but money is only a representative, a medium, of power. Money is not power, it is coins and it only becomes powerful when in a context that lends it meaning; power without use is superstition. For Foucault, power is defined through social relations; the complex of relations between subject and object. As everything exists in relation to everything else, then the power relation is a constantly shifting thing and power is never fixed but remains a constant flow between differing social and political relations. If power is seen as an energy flowing through the matrix of complexities that constitute everyday life - "the myriad of power relations at the micro-level of society."<sup>14</sup> - then the possibilities of it being channelled, as opposed to being grasped or seized (as in some ideological rhetoric) like some political or social Grail, become clear.

Power need not be seen as a method of force: the power of stand-up comedy is positive, in creating modes of communication for the otherwise disenfranchised. The power of the comedian is granted by the audience initially but s/he must consolidate this through power of performance: losing grip on the performance can reverse the initial power agreement (the contract of consent). The audience rescinds and the performer takes control, power. The performer is in a temporary zone where the power might be reversed through heckling or apathy. It is a shifting power relationship. Stand-up comedy can contain knowledge and the dissemination of this becomes an empowerment for the audience when the knowledge is used to alter the perception of everyday life and move towards an authenticity. When we learn something we can become more adjusted and able to deal with a proposed environment and this is an empowerment. Information coming from a comedian can be information differing from that of the 'dominant discourse' and can have more to do with us and our lives than, perhaps, other modes of information, like television

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<sup>14</sup> Jara Sawicki, Disciplining Foucault, London: Routledge, 1991, p. 20.

and other commodity dominated media. Stand-up comedy can be an empower the audience, but who is the audience?

## **Audience.**

“1 a. the assembled listeners or spectators at an event b the people addressed by a film, play etc..”

OCED, 1996. <sup>15</sup>

“The spectator is a beast.” London Graffiti. <sup>16</sup>

The establishment of the stand-up comedy process is a relatively straightforward one, tracing lines from the comedians themselves to how they communicate the jokes; but who are they talking to? That the audience is essential to the continuation of the performance cannot be over-stressed. Without the feedback of laughter it becomes, not stand-up comedy, but ridiculous, a non-event practically devoid of meaning. Stand-up comedy's success is defined by the audience's reaction. A visit to any comedy club will confound any fixing of type (although the early alternative comedy audience threatened to become homogenised as the comedy did “A Time Out audience, a sort of lefty audience.” <sup>17</sup>). Audiences vary as much as they resemble each other but they must be able to relate to the comedian's reference points, must be able to share language and experience and must oblige the contract of consent or reject it.

Questions accumulate: who is the audience and how much have they (or the performer) had to drink? Alcohol can significantly affect the audience's appreciation of subtlety and wit. As the night goes on and more drink is consumed the audience can get mellower or more hostile, they may get laughed out or remain unsatisfied. What is the audience make-up? Is it predominantly male or mixed? Are they rowdy? Hostile? Do the comedians have sufficient experience to cope with them? Even factors such as what day is it affect the moment: a Saturday night crowd is different to Wednesday's crowds, and due to work next morning, the amount of drink being

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<sup>15</sup> Oxford Compact English Dictionary, Oxford: University Press, 1996, p. 58.

<sup>16</sup> Jac Charoux, London Graffiti, London: WH Allen, 1980, p. 17.

<sup>17</sup> Tony Allen interview with writer, 15/5/97.

consumed alters. Variables can be strictly geographic: London has many clubs - almost to saturation point, although there is more variety - and Manchester relatively few. All these questions shape the demographic of the audience and all these factors contribute in some way to make every joke a unique situation that exists in the context of the stand-up comedy performance. Audiences may not have travelled, the venue may be their local pub or they may have caught the bus from across town. In many stand-up venues, unless coming specifically to see a certain performer at a definite venue, the audience often does not know exactly what it is going to get. In London especially, listings may say one thing yet we see another.

An audience is in a malleable state and consists of spectators, witnessing an event, passive even. The stand-up comedy moment can transform that spectator role - detached, watching - into a participant, a meaningful element of the course of events. The spectator is a beast, but a mute one. The audience can be intrinsic to the performance, as Grotowski wanted to show.<sup>18</sup> The audience, present within a moment can begin to locate an authentic sense of self and has the opportunity to make authentic choices.

We are alienated within everyday life, even when in the same room, and remain so in the stand-up comedy audience. Herbert Blau's fear of the dispersed and fragmented audiences is confirmed: "the theatre ... brings us together *as alienated*."<sup>19</sup> However much we laugh together, the laughter is transient. We subsequently communicate little beyond the bar, the circle of table or friends. In the stand-up comedy audience we do not relate to each other, although we maybe acknowledge the shared experiences sub-consciously, we relate to the comedian. Stand-up comedy does not unify the audience in everyday life but only offers a clarification of that life, an

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<sup>18</sup> "We are concerned with the spectator who has genuine spiritual needs and who really wishes, through confrontation with the performance, to analyse himself ... whose unrest is not general but directed towards a search for the truth about himself and his mission in life." Jerzy Grotowski quoted in Eugenio Barba's "The Theatre's New Testament." Jerzy Grotowski, Towards a Poor Theatre, London: Methuen, 1993, p. 40.

<sup>19</sup> Herbert Blau, The Audience, London: John Hopkins, 1990, p. 124.

understanding however temporary. Perhaps it is the illusion of unification we enjoy. Cook argues that “laughter unites an audience, transforming an untidy hotchpotch of strangers into a single entity.”<sup>20</sup> He is wrong. It does not. It only consolidates a relationship with the comedian but not with each other outside of the group of friends. It is not like ‘unmet friends’ having a laugh. It is laughing at the same time as other strangers and any bond thus created is fragile and disappears much after the comedian, that magician, has gone. Stand-up comedy is a group experience that perhaps theatre’s psycho-geographical arrangement in lines denies. But the fact that the audience has a specific function to play within the performance - to laugh, to perpetuate the performance - involves the audience on a more active level than the passivity required for much theatre and ‘entertainment’. But whoever the audience are, they have a say in the continuation of the performance by their very presence, and if they are dissatisfied, they can resort to heckling.

### **Heckling.**

“I’m not being sexist but [Jo Brand] was as good as the blokes and that’s the big difference. Nobody ever says that but that’s the truth - a lot of the girls ain’t. They suffer, they get heckled and then they go to pieces.” Addison Cresswell, comedy promoter.<sup>21</sup>

An audience may have different preferences but the main reason is always the same - to enjoy laughter. It is possible for the audience to transform into a ‘crowd’ however, a group of people who through dissatisfaction with the turn of events register dissent, through heckling or even outright animosity. There is an instant when the dissent of the heckler suddenly ceases to be one person shouting and voices the sentiment of the audience, which invariably ends in the termination of the performance whether the comedian stays on stage or not. The contract of consent is torn up when the audience has had enough. The audience transforms into a crowd. There is a whole sociology of crowds and little has to do with stand-up comedy but it is an occasion worth commenting on. An audience is a participant, the spectator is passive, but here, a crowd is neither and becomes the centre of its own attention,

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<sup>20</sup> Cook, 1995, p. 248.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p. 263.

determined to reverse the roles and express itself, either by the members resuming conversation between themselves or reverting to a more hostile and abusive means. An audience relates to the performers and not to each other, a crowd relates to each other and not the performer. It is a reversal of role and focus. The crowd is a selfish thing that is defined by shared purpose and identity. They unite through the desire for placation or expression of such a desire but can be quickly dissipated once soothed. At the Meccano Club, Islington in London, (December, 1996), an obviously upper-class woman comedian was booed off the open mike spot. Her manner was nervous, her jokes were poor and the reference points obscure to many (horses, public school boarding, dinner parties and money). The heckling was justified and not abusive: she should not perform stand-up comedy, especially with a superior attitude (humility is a feed in for much comedy). She eventually left the stage saying “at least I’ve got more money than you!” It was a cold night, the room damp and the evening was not going well. The audience had also booed the M.C. off and as he struggled with obviously weak material, he suffered cries of “Put her back on!” as he introduced the next act. The audience transformed into a crowd, and a hostile one, soothed by some of the other, better acts.

Heckling is the registration of displeasure and the insertion of the collective audience ego into the performance (or often just an alcohol triggered Turet’s obnoxiousness). Heckling can be just joining in good naturedly, which becomes part of the performance, making it more of a live thing than an ‘act’. Comedians have varying feelings on the issue but it seems it will remain as an integral part of the form. It serves a positive and negative function; it can empower or destabilise, be funny or tedious beyond restraint. Heckling is a disruption but also a test of a comedian. There appears to be an amount of antipathy to prepared put-downs by many comedians; a spontaneity is preferred.<sup>22</sup> Much depends on the quality of the heckle[r] and much heckling is abuse, as boring and unjustified as any malformed intrusion. Some heckling is genuinely witty or surreal and can be involved in the

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215 - 232.

spirit of the performance and this can be built on by the comedian. Heckling can also be justified and bring the truly awful crashing to ground, cutting through projected arrogance. Confidence and arrogance feed the heckle. Confidence - the power of belief in one's abilities - can deal with the heckle easily, as one would parry insults in pub banter, and involve the heckle in the performance, like Skinner and Mark Lamarr. Arrogance - the assumption of an imagined superiority - can be deflated or highlighted by the heckler. Arrogance can inspire radical heckling; no audience likes being spoken down to (unless arrogance is part of persona/character, i.e., Dame Edna Everage). The heckler in this latter instance can speak for the audience, asserting their dissent, reversing the contract of consent.

There is no fourth wall in stand-up comedy, we can reach in and affect the performance. Theatre is the interaction between a set of actors and the audience's relation to that interaction; stand-up comedy is the performer speaking directly to the audience, a much more direct discourse. However, comedians perform a prepared act, and without heckling much potential spontaneity can drain away and it can almost erect this fourth wall; the interaction is as absent as in any conventional theatre. The heckler can shatter this potential wall and maintain the consciousness of the audience, that they are involved but not in a fixed situation, they can have a say in the way it is going, unlike theatre. Heckling should not be censored, like at London's Jongleurs: it maintains a dynamic in stand-up comedy lacking anywhere else. Comedians should be able to deal with hecklers, it is part of performance risk and tension. The idea of censoring heckling in one performance space creates an artificial space at odds with the rest of the circuit; it deals with 'what should be' instead of 'what is'. However, premature heckling can be disruptive and not give the comedian a chance to set out their wares, to establish the context their character/persona exists in: the micro-world.

## **Micro-worlds.**

Once the initial clauses have been honoured - the identification and relation of character/persona, the confidence of the performer inspiring the confidence of the audience - the stand-up comedian can begin to represent his/her 'micro-world'. The micro-world is a personal construct mapped by jokes. It is a system of belief constructed and informed by ideas and experiences. Drawing the audience in, each joke gradually reveals the structure of the micro-world, "the way in which I see things." The micro-world interprets the world at large, the world as subjectively perceived: commonalities and overlaps of agreed information construct the shared 'real' world.

Each joke is a situation in the context of the micro-world. A situation always occurs in a context. A context can, similarly, become a situation. Situations develop in increasing or decreasing circles. A tobacconist's can be a context, a person going into the shop for some cigarettes is a situation. A context is the canvas upon which something is depicted or acted on. The context becomes a situation in itself, in a wider context. The tobacconist's on a high street can be a situation in the context of the tobacco industry and the tobacco industry can be the situation in the context of international commerce. Things move out. This thesis set itself within the context of everyday life. A joke is always a situation in context, the context of a performance and those peopling the joke's action become a situation within the context of a joke. Situations are a way of exploring context by setting up questions within them. Although each joke becomes a situation in the context of a comedian's micro-world, to isolate a joke from that context - and, therefore, the time, the moment it lived in - often fails to make, or loses, sense, hence, it was funnier when s/he said it. Remembering a joke from an Eddie Izzard performance may prove difficult even though the performance may have been hilarious. Of course, not all jokes fail to live outside the context of a performance: some develop a life of their own and move through everyday life, work, pubs, school and so on. Other jokes are less independent. It is the relationship to the overall performance, the construction of the

micro-world and where it sits within the audiences' own micro-world that helps the joke succeed,. A joke is not just funny by its structure but also by "the way we tell them."<sup>23</sup>

Each exposition of the micro-world gives detail to a map, revealing a geography that begins to be more recognisable. Each time Billy Connolly performs he has given more information about the way he sees the world and, when we see him, we begin to locate ourselves in familiar territory (or we may become bored by returning to the same resort and not visit again). This world appears absurd, unfair and usually seedy, it reduces people to embarrassment by bodily functions. We may also like Connolly because his experience of the world often relates to our own; his opinions and viewpoints cohere with ours. Connolly's world is a unique world and it becomes known to us as we see things from his perspective. The difficulty of stand-up comedy is finding uncharted territory that is both unusual and interesting, or finding common territory and viewing it from a different angle. The success of a comedian relies on this uniqueness: Eddie Izzard, Jo Brand and Jenny Eclair all occupy their own individual space, driven there by power of persona, ability and originality; except for conscious imitators there is no one like them.

With each performance, each revelation of the micro-world is a different situation in a different context, no matter that the rehearsed performance may be exactly the same script. The reception of each joke is a new experience because, even though it is the same joke, it takes place in a different context. What may have been hilarious the night before may get little more than rudimentary appreciation the next night. The comedy moment is subject to innumerable variables; it is absolutely dependent on influences within the situation. A performance in a large theatre - like Eddie Izzard at The London Ambassadors - is a qualitatively different experience to a comedy club in the basement of a pub, materially and otherwise. A theatre is more formal with fixed seating and no drinks in the auditorium whereas a comedy club is

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Frank Carson.



less so, people move around, get drinks and smoke, often talk. There may be a number of comedians at the latter, they may only do twenty minutes of material and they may be an unknown quantity to the audience. Izzard does well over an hour and a half on his own and people come specifically to see him perform, he need win few over; the audience are likely to be converts (this may also true for smaller venues, of course). We step into an already established micro-world with Izzard, we are familiar with his vision and style; in the smaller venue we may know none of the performers but we can embark on new territory. We want to see things in a new way or new things in a known way.

### **A Poor Theatre?**

“The Arts Council subsidies stopped when Thatcher got in and a lot of actors were out of work and then, presumably, a whole generation of people who had gone through drama school and stuff looked at being a comedian, I suppose.” Tony Allen.<sup>24</sup>

Stand-up comedy is theatre in its most basic sense - if theatre is a public space where dramatic reconstruction takes place to an audience. It is a poor theatre, a form inhabited by ideas communicated through comedy, devoid of much physical excess - lighting, scenery and supporting cast (in most cases). The crop of stand-up performers in the first and second wave of alternative comedy in the early 1980s had, in many cases, come from fringe theatre groups whose grants from the Arts Council were steadily eroded beneath Margaret Thatcher’s ideological stipulations. Jim Barclay and Pauline Melville had both been in 7:84; Alexei Sayle was in Threepenny Theatre; and Andy de la Tour worked with Belt and Braces. They would perform at fringe venues, arts centres, political benefits, festivals and the streets. Many groups found the logistics of performing becoming harder and harder or they simply could not continue, dependent on income as they were from these sources. Tony Allen, who had been in Rough Theatre, was unhappy with this kind of support because “you ended up subsidising administrators to administer the groups and in the end the administrator would get the grant and employ the actors and it gets lost.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Tony Allen interview, 15/5/97.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

The move into stand-up comedy became a means to continue performing, but in a stripped down new style. Stand-up comedy is, then, poor theatre in two senses, initially under-funded but also a theatre stripped to basics - one person communicating. It is not suggested that many stand-up comedians have the intensity of training that Grotowski's poor theatre acolytes benefited from. Nor is it suggested that the majority of comedians have been through some kind of strict drama training: some of the best have not, Jack Dee, Jo Brand and Gerry Sadowitz to name but a few. Most comedians here are above average stage performers, relying on ease of persona to concentrate communication, but the context of a stripped down theatre is a valid one.

At its best, stand-up comedy can be a theatre of the imagination, a place where images and ideas can come to life and the journey from seat to fantasy can be an exhilarating one. Eddie Izzard's surreal trips via anthropomorphism to flights of weirdness are a prime example. It is the entering of a micro-world for the audience but a micro-world whose boundaries are seemingly limitless, where anything becomes possible and much is realised: cats drill for oil behind the sofa; God instructs animals on their sexual positions; and groups of clothes pursue their owner down the street, jazzed by static electricity. Izzard is poor theatre, he fills the performance space with ideas, his body and his persona. There is little else involved. More than actorly discipline it is imagination and spontaneity that pulls the audience in, that is the fascination. Harry Hill's micro-world is populated by geese and members of a tiny or invisible family; Paul Merton represents mundanity slightly skewed, escalating absurdity from the merest pretext; Reeves and Mortimer's fantasy land is full of exhausted sit-com character types and repetitively absurd catch phrases. Obversely, many prefer to ground their comedy within everyday life, but the vivid imagery or graphic detail of some uncover surprising truths like Frank Skinner's observations on sex or Ben Elton's trivial worrying. This is pure theatre whose limited tools can liberate the imagination to build scenery and lighting within the confines of one's skull.

Despite the religious/ecstatic fervour and high priest fetishisation that Grotowski holds the actor in, the poor theatre - according to James Roose-Evans, a theatre stripped to the essence “without make-up, costume, decor, a stage, lighting and sound effects” - is still of interest for “the actor-spectator relationship.”<sup>26</sup> Stand-up comedy is centred on the successful maintenance of that relationship between audience and performer. Grotowski’s aim, briefly, is for the actor to “study what is hidden behind our everyday mask - the innermost core of our personality - in order to sacrifice it, expose it.”<sup>27</sup>

There are similarities with what the stand-up comedian is doing.. Without the intensity of such self exploration, as in Grotowski, the comedian can locate the truth within the every day: the truth of human existence, how we really behave, how we really are. The communication is done through the imagination and the words capturing that imagination, rather than the muscular contortion of the Grotowski-ite. There is no need for the comedian to go and live in a Grotowskian forest and eat bark to discover truth. They are everyday truths, not necessarily truths for a ‘specialised audience’. The comedian is not some shaman to exorcise or discover the urban spooks and Jungian devils and malaise inherent within the audience, nor is s/he to conjure demons and fire, s/he is there to make us laugh - first. This laughter cements the contract of consent and it is then that the comedian can perform any kind of magic. Without this the performance will fail to communicate. The audience is thus introduced to the micro-world and is given a guided tour of everyday things, seen from the angle of the comedian. It is here that the comedian can uncover moments of authentic experience and in this context stand-up comedy can become a poor theatre.

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<sup>26</sup> James Roose-Evans, Experimental Theatre, London: Studio Vista, 1970, p. 62.

<sup>27</sup> Grotowski quoted in Ibid., p. 63.

## **Fear and Loathing on the Comedy Stage.**

“He dares to see what his listeners shy away from, fear to express. And what he sees is a sort of truth.” Comedians.<sup>28</sup>

The comedian can not only talk of what is true but what is feared. A stand-up comedian has a licence to say the unsayable. Explaining fear goes some way towards removing, or rationalising, it. Fear catapults us into the future and is focused on what we think might happen: we do not fear something because it has happened but fear it because it might happen again. There is a difference between rational and irrational fears. Rational fears, like fear of death, violence or poverty are “a realistic response to perceived danger in the environment.”<sup>29</sup> Rational fears require a framework of understanding. They are fears most of us share, fear of death of pain and of irretrievable loss. No amount of personal rationalisation can dissolve the source of such fears, but in understanding them we can we move towards a coping strategy. Irrational fears are those based on misinterpretation or distortion of fact - like racism, monsters under the bed and faces against the window - they are fears of the ‘unknown’. By explaining what lies behind the fear, shining the torch under the bed, we take steps towards dealing with them. Identifying the cause of fear, saying what we “fear to express” is the initial stage in dissolving mystique. As Frances Gray points out “areas of oppression have not only to be identified but named, because only through naming can they become part of public knowledge.”<sup>30</sup>

Once we admit the existence of a problem, we explore and explain: hidden away they fester. For some, the stand-up comedian serves the purpose of saying the unsayable. In saying the unsaid, the unsayable, we witness others exploring territory into which we are afraid to go: Billy Connolly and Gerry Sadowitz in Britain and Lenny Bruce, Bill Hicks, Denis Leary and Sam Kinnison in the US all dealt with this; they took the mandate of their audiences to go to excess. It is this that can be cathartic: to purge the desire, to go to such lengths, to say the unsaid. The curiosity is

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<sup>28</sup> Trevor Griffiths, Comedians, London: Faber, 1976, p. 20.

<sup>29</sup> Hilgard et al, 7<sup>th</sup> Edition, p. 425.

<sup>30</sup> Gray, 1994, p. 19.

satisfied and, perhaps, the desire negated without having to live through the results of achieving it. But catharsis has a negative side, being a safety valve to prevent questioning and maintaining the equilibrium of everyday life in the commodity society.

### **Catharsis/Displacement.**

Catharsis, in Aristotle, is the purgation of fear and pity, occurring through the stimulation of emotions via representations to which we can relate. We are drawn in towards the action and empathise with the point of view of the protagonist/s. Through the course of the action, emotions are raised and we begin to experience the game of events subjectively. The representation presents a situation, a problem within that situation, a point of climax and an eventual resolution. Empathy denies objectivity. Our minds are made up for us before we have even decided what film or theatre we are to visit. The reservoir of energies tapped in this process, used to propel the spectator along with the action is a displacement. In Freud, through social relations, instincts, thoughts and desires remain unexpressed and they become repressed. Unconscious motives manifest themselves in other emotions or actions - suggestions leak through other areas - in a displacement. Catharsis, although draining these reservoirs of emotion through displacement of energies, re-establishes an equilibrium; it does not actually remove the reasons for the negative build-up in the first place, which was Brecht's criticism of the catharsis and empathy situation. Displacement can be seen in Orwell's 1984 where the catharsis serves a cynical social end: dissatisfaction with material existence is given vent in the Two Minute Hate. The emotions are raised and a surrogate figure absorbs hostility, siphoning off, or refocusing energy. A more contemporary catharsis is in boxing:

“The crowd loved knockouts. They screamed when one of the fighters was on the way out. They were landing those punches. Maybe they were punching out their bosses, or their wives. Who knew? Who cared? More beer.” Charles Bukowski.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Charles Bukowski, Women, London: WH Allen, 1981, p. 101.

Aristotle saw catharsis as a cleansing or purification of emotions that may manifest themselves in anti-social or anti-establishment tendencies: Brecht saw this as a channelling or a diversion of energies. Instead of the enclosed experience of representation, Brecht wanted to give a model close to 'reality', a situation that we could see as a parallel to everyday life. Instead of offering cathartic purgation, we could use energy normally siphoned away in catharsis to make a decision about that which we have witnessed, pulling away from subjectivity through the alienation effect, giving us a chance to think and reason. Brecht avoided 'happy endings' and instead made contradictions, cause and effect clearer. It moves from passivity to an active mode of thinking.

In stand-up comedy, we can see parallels with catharsis in racist and sexist jokes. Sex, particularly, is made a problematic area of common experience, complex and confused in its manifold power relations. This confusion and hostility can be tapped into ~~to~~, to create tensions for comedy to springboard from. Howard Jacobson, in Seriously Funny,<sup>32</sup> argues for the cathartic nature of certain comedy, lancing the boil at Bernard Manning's Embassy club, a Mecca of unquestioning values or "a cursing temple"<sup>33</sup> which exploit the tensions conjured by those 'incorrect' ideas of racism and sexism. Jacobson sees it as a place where this can safely go on: he is right but it doesn't solve anything (not that it would claim to), and though he claims it lances the racist boil, it just drains pus and leaves the wounds still festering.<sup>34</sup> Laughter can grow from the tension and act of enjoying something that we know is 'wrong', something taboo and the act maintains that taboo. It gets it out of the box (or trousers) waves it around and puts it back. It plays on the tensions already there, excites them, and through laughter extinguishes them, but does not solve why the tensions are there. It leaves the tensions to regroup and reform again. They stay in a mouldy old Plato's cave of comedy, never looking outside to where it comes from.

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<sup>32</sup> Howard Jacobson, Seriously Funny, part 1, Broadcast Channel 4, early 1997.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Jacobson shows himself to be essentially humourless, verbosely over-academic and above much he sees. His trite and tedious liberal bating fails to convince: a racist joke is a device to humiliate someone else for ones pleasure. It is not some simply fey, liberal political correctness that reviles this.

But the worse thing about many of these jokes is that they are boring, predictable and untrue. They are unadventurous and stale, out of step with the experience of contemporary culture as the stereotypes and myths they propagate. Jokes that seem elbow propped at clubhouse or local bar, flush with personal tankard bores and obvious lad mentality. They are as dated as their tellers or the rambling, tedious yarns of Ronnie Corbett, the smug v-neck cosy humour of Forsyth and Tarbuck, and the fake tanned pores of Monkhouse. These jokes don't appear cathartic: they just seem old.

### **Moments and Possibilities.**

“Moments of love, hate, poetry, frustration, action, surrender, delight, humiliation, justice, cruelty, resignation, surprise, disgust, resentment, self-loathing, pity, fury, peace of mind - those tiny epiphanies, Lefebvre said in which the absolute possibilities and temporal limits of anyone's existence were revealed.” Greil Marcus.<sup>35</sup>

“The deeper the experience of a moment, the greater the accumulation of experience. This is why the moment is lived as longer. The dissipation of the time-flow is checked. The lived duree is not a question of length but of depth and intensity.” John Berger.<sup>36</sup>

Everyday life appears as an endless reiteration of socially constructed activities broken by sporadic periods of leisure. We function within everyday life and it becomes experience without depth of meaning, without value. We glide along the surface, the experience of the quotidian, and continue to function; there is little need to spend time thinking about it. Our memories begin to hold one day as much as another and we re-run them on a sub-conscious level. But within our memories there is that in which we find value: these moments of value, revelatory, are the points in our lives that have most meaning, that we value the most. They are moments of authenticity that define ourselves in relation to the world.

Value is meaning: it is the meaning superimposed upon something. The thing's own relative uniqueness or the meaning that it carries creates value. Value lives in a context with other things, a currency system, for example. Money, currency, has

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<sup>35</sup> Marcus on Henri Lefebvre in *Lipstick Traces (On A Cigarette)*, London: Penguin, 1989, p. 144.

<sup>36</sup> John Berger, *Keeping A Rendezvous*, London: Penguin, 1992, p. 28.

value and the currency's worth is subject to context, which gives value a fluidity: 500 pesetas is useless in the pub but valuable in a tapas bar. When the context something is in undergoes a transformation so, too, does the currency. This mobility lends currency a temporary status. The value, and therefore the meaning, of moments is not exchangeable. Nor can we buy into where we think they may occur: they are spontaneous. The value of moments is their uniqueness or rarity. A moment can be equalled but not replicated. The value of a moment concerns the meaning we impose on, or draw from, them. There is a difference between the appreciation of moments as meanings and the fetishisation of moments. To appreciate the moment is to appreciate the uniqueness in time and the relation it has to that which surrounded it. The fetishisation of moments is nostalgia, the preference of the past over the present. Nostalgia is a filtered past, a preferred shared or personal interpretation that ignores casualty: nostalgia would prefer San Francisco not My Lai; the empire where the sun never sets rather than the reality of colonial brutality; it is dishonest. The right wing desire to get back to how things used to be is nostalgia as ideology. Nostalgia can be objectified. Ownership of the fetishised object becomes, in a way, ownership of the material past. Though the essence of the actual past cannot be reproduced, the image can be.

Moments appear to throw new light on the shape of everyday life where much experience is generalised. What we experience, week after week, we see as a regulated flow that changes very little, but these moments - moments that step outside the formulated, the regulated and the normal - open up another dimension to experience and we begin to realise a depth. Stand-up comedy can create possibilities and possibilities lead to moments, to transform or change the mental set. It is the exploration of such moments that can reveal value in, and truths about, ourselves. In the exploration of moments is the exploration of meanings. Moments are authentic and define our sense of self clearly, showing us as we are: being with friends and family; with lovers; our genuine sense of joy at football matches; understanding



truths about ourselves; what we mean to ourselves and others and what others mean to us. This rarity gives them value and makes them significant.

“The difference is, one tells what has happened, the other the kind of things that might happen.”

Aristotle on history and poetry.<sup>37</sup>

Stand-up comedy deals with the universal elements of everyday life, that which is known, common ground, and that which we know to be ‘true’. Comedy always deals with an ‘imaginary’ past and that projected into the future, like Lenny Bruce ‘what if’ monologues, are fantasies. Jokes are constructed and deal with relative truths. The joke creates and explores the situation and the possibilities encountered; the suspension of disbelief allows this and the lack of repercussions.

### **Possibilities.**

“Comedy is about endless possibilities.” Arnold Brown.<sup>38</sup>

Possibility in this context refers to the potential of a situation to transcend its status and offer something more than expected: a possibility is that possessing the ability to go beyond the expected, immediate parameters. Possibilities can present moments and a moment can present possibilities. A joke can present us with opportunities that move beyond the parameters of pretext and punch-line, beyond the function of the joke - to make us laugh - and make us imagine change, see ourselves in new light or understand something we may not have previously. Jokes present possibilities for a wider thinking. For Aristotle a possibility is “distinguished both from the necessary and the impossible.”<sup>39</sup> A joke does not just have to make us laugh, it can move us further through laughter and closer to an authentic experience.

“The incidents of comedy are framed on lines of probability.”<sup>40</sup>

Stand-up comedy deals with what Aristotle called ‘improbable possibilities’, although the events may be improbable within everyday life, in the context of the

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<sup>37</sup> Aristotle, *On the Art of Poetry*, London: Penguin, 1965, p. 43

<sup>38</sup> Cook, 1995, p. 106.

<sup>39</sup> *Dictionary of Philosophy*, NJ: Littlefield Adams & Co., 1973, p. 243.

<sup>40</sup> S.H. Butcher, *Aristotle’s Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, London: MacMillan, 1902, p. 184.

narrative they are indeed possible, powered by the givens within the joke. The possibilities arise from the cohesion of the sequence of events described. Aristotle put poetry (including tragedy and comedy) on a higher philosophical plane; stand-up comedy's power, on the contrary, lies in the direct relationship to everyday life.

A good joke could be one that is highly believable although it is a fiction (jokes are not lies: lies pretend, jokes exist as they are) but this fiction serves as a model for truths. The believability rests on 'poetic truths'. Poetic truth is that grounded on fact but that which "transforms its facts into truths."<sup>41</sup> That is, jokes take things that we know to be fact and places them in a context that, although it may not have happened, could be made to happen or become possible in the context: "What is possible is credible."<sup>42</sup> And if what is possible is credible, the reverse is also true: what is credible is possible. If presented with a credible model, we can take lessons learnt from it and apply it to everyday life. When we learn from our own conclusions, like learning through our mistakes and accidents, the lessons are encapsulated in situations that never leave us. Stand-up comedy can present these situations. The truths in comedy make us make sense of the world and everyday life. We learn truths about ourselves and deal with everyday life in a better way. To paraphrase Butcher, they "express the universal, not the particular, the permanent possibilities of everyday life."<sup>43</sup> These become, not what Aristotle called "improbable possibilities", but real possibilities.

### **Reversing The Focus.**

"We work through laughter not for it." Comedians.<sup>44</sup>

"You actually get people to think through laughter." Mark Thomas.<sup>45</sup>

It is these possibilities of representing truths that can give the experience of stand-up comedy substance, substance that is lacking within the general experience of

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Griffiths, 1976, p. 20.

<sup>45</sup> Mark Thomas in Cook, 1995, p. 128.

everyday life (and much stand-up comedy). Substance gives meanings to moments and it is substance that constitutes the layers and depth of experience. The moment is a temporal phenomenon; substance is that occurring within it and meaning is what we extract from experiencing that cohesion. Substance side-steps commodity values: although we can buy into the commodity, the experience extracted from it is not quantifiable; like drugs can be measured and sold, what we get from them can never be quantified. Sold on its entertainment value, stand-up comedy can transcend entertainment when the comedian communicates something of substance through it. Entertainment is, as much else, experience often without meaning, a method of passing time more painlessly - which is the point. When entertainment itself disconnects from this flow it transforms, takes on new meanings. In everyday life, when we consume - shopping, in front of the television, looking at advertising images - we do so as individual consumer units, homogenised. The commodity is directed at us - enjoy yourself with me, it says - but it is talking to an anonymous everyone. But it can become the catalyst of potential experience. In entertainment, much television, film and music, we observe selected people playing out a game of events, events that continue regardless of our presence; rock and roll acts out our fantasies for us. Stand-up comedy is at its most powerful when it reverses the focus of our attention from the performers and their existence and illuminates the existence of the audience: when the comedian stops talking about themselves and talks about us all. It is these moments that give substance to the experience. The reversal of focus changes gear and the consciousness moves from passive to active mode, from sitting back to initiating a thought process. Thus are moments created. If we are actually involved in a process it means more than just to absorb.

### **Conclusion.**

The stand-up comedian is obviously much more than a 'bloke with a microphone': the crucial establishment of character/persona is primary and bald to the audience: do we like this person or not? If not, the performance can fail (unless, of course, the locus of the performance is one of intentional dislike, like Sadowitz). It is easy to

see the process of stand-up comedy as one of seduction, an interesting persona bringing in an audience, introducing them to a micro-world. But it is also a potentially fragile power relation between audience and performer from which tensions grow and can be exploited for comedy. And what do we get from this experience, this theatre of the imagination? Is it an authentic experience? Is it cathartic? Does it show us truth about ourselves or does it allow us to laugh at that deemed 'incorrect'? It is clearly all of these things and more. It is a complex animal: sometimes merely passing time more painlessly; other times moving us closer towards our sense of self. The stand-up comedian can produce moments of intensity and make us recognise the truth about ourselves. There is genuine opportunity for reversing the focus, empowering the audience, by locating authentic experience within the comedy performance. The principle tool of this performance, this complicated ritual of delight is, of course, the joke.

## Jokes.

A joke is a micro-narrative designed to produce comic effect through an often absurd relation that concludes with an unexpected punch line. The more absurd the relation, yet the more solid the connection, the stronger the joke appears to be. What is 'funny' is a subjective response that renders jokes difficult to grade, but strength of structure and cleverness of the idea expressed can be a plausible gauge. Jokes can be one-size-fits-all and we require little skill in telling what appears ready-made, as part of everyday life; stories and non sequiturs arrive in the workplace, pub or playground daily. In this context, the jokes are those self-written by a stand-up comedian that successfully convey his/her persona and style, but also those that explore the comedian's micro-world and/or system of belief. Jack Dee, for example, will only perform material that he feels is 'true', that reflects his own experiences; he documents his response to the world as he experiences it. What is of interest are the ideas and beliefs held by the performer and how they bring these into play through comic effect. But, of course, stand-up comedy performance does not always rely on easily dispensed jokes and gags: there are comedians whose material would be impossible to pull out of context. Eddie Murphy's stand-up comedy in the early 1980s, Eddie Izzard, Vic Reeves and much of Paul Merton's material are all dependent on more factors than a neatly delivered one liner. On the other hand, Harry Hill and Jo Brand are both skilful gagmeisters who condense some of their best material into a single line.

Jokes can use made up stories based on probable, albeit absurd, and/or exaggerated events; they are a bit like lies. Lies define truth as night defines day; we can use them as a model to find out what is true by finding out what is not. Jokes are not lies though: a joke is neither true nor false, lies nor reality. They are fictions that feed on reality and imagine the possible. Jokes using the absurd can find out what passes for everyday life. Jokes, like lies, have elements of truth within them in order to provide reference points to make them make sense. Jokes can map the probable and illustrate

“the kind of things a certain type of person will probably or necessarily say or do in a given situation.”<sup>1</sup>

Jokes contain probabilities dependent on context, what Aristotle would call ‘universal truths’. This could be misconstrued because some of the truths conveyed can be all too local. Of course, there is behaviour, taboo and embarrassment the world over, especially concerning excrement, sex and ridicule. Truths are often culturally located, influenced by context. Jokes also demand a suspension of disbelief and in doing so can home in on the truth of experience. The suspension grants the jokes space to make itself work, to explore the possible.

There are jokes of both types mentioned - ready made and self written - that document the minutiae of everyday life, the events within it and which build around collective responses to those events. Michael Jackson’s travails of alleged child abuse have encouraged a multitude of, mostly libellous, jokes centring on an often dubious moral response to those events. Hugh Grant’s encounter with Divine Brown is a similar case. However, this is not to say that all jokes of this nature contain a moral example to us all; most of the jokes about Hugh Grant’s ‘perfect English gentleman’ becoming undone (quite literally) seem to merely revel in a sniggery joy. With both joke types - ready made or self written - the events are coded into a form that dictates a specific response and the jokes eventually overwhelm the facts of the incidents and become myths.

Myths are interpretations of events and things, phenomena, that surround us. There are many interpretations of myth and myth is the result of interpretation. Myths are a form of interpretation: once examined, they can reveal layers of information about the social and political structures of the day. They do not necessarily convey ‘hidden meanings’, on the contrary, according to Pierre Hegy they can be “multi-dimensional, open to all at their own level.”<sup>2</sup> They do not exist to conceal but to

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *On the Art of Poetry*, London: Penguin, 1965, p. 44.

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Hegy, *Myth as Foundation of Society and Values*, New York: Edwin Mellin, 1991, p. v.

reveal and hold information in a convenient, transferable form. Myths can serve as a kind of documentation where experience can become easily encapsulated. Myths are not things but things can become mythical when spoken of or represented in other ways. Myth's purpose for Barthes is "to transform meaning into form."<sup>3</sup> That form, for Hegy, can be "a story, gossip, report, talk or account that is taken at face value, because the question of truth has not yet arisen."<sup>4</sup> For Hegy, myths precede the establishment of truth and become translations of experience without recourse to proof or over-rationalisation: they house untested opinions and encapsulate without explaining why. Myths grow out of social relations and cultural experience but also act as parables.

Myths group meanings into forms and hold blocks of information triggered by symbols. The Robert Bruce myth recalls the spider and the cultural cliché but little political or historical flotsam still clings (and it is possible to perceive 'history' as myth). Although we may not recall the precise events the moral core remains, which may be the point of its evolution into myth. We filter information and that considered of use we retain. The symbol of Robert Bruce and the spider becomes tied to a group of significant information that we take as read, irrespective of historical truth. The symbols of Robert Bruce and the spider have become shorthand for a particular meaning, a cultural currency more important than historical fact. Verification of facts may undermine the purpose of myth's interpretation

Myths can become the vehicles of ideology or extraneous morality and encapsulate themes and ideas that support these. They can be either positive or negative rather than 'good' or 'bad'; interpretation is subject to a personal system of belief. The story of Oedipus is a myth and it has passed into the cultural canon, his name acts as a trigger for a complex of meanings. The adverts for the Renault Clio, featuring 'Papa' and 'Nicole', are another kind of myth (and a kind of Oedipal myth also), one

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<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, "Myth Today" in *Mythologies*, London: Vintage, 1972, p. 131.

<sup>4</sup> Hegy, 1991, p. vi.

that displays a bourgeois lifestyle of rural tranquillity with occasional forays into a cafe society, possibly Parisian. It surrounds the car with mythical images, unavailable to most (if at all), and suggests that through the purchase of the car we can somehow align or involve ourselves with that lifestyle. Purchases do not automatically bring whole lifestyles and advertising try to fool us into buying into the unattainable myth. On a less subtle level, racist myths about other cultures are a way of putting ambiguous fears into a more tangible form, providing a 'reason' for that oppression: Jewish people use the blood of Gentile babies to make Matzo; asylum seekers are only here to exploit the social security system; and so on. These are cultural myths that put fears into sound-bite stereotypes and provide pseudo-causes for prejudicial action.

### **Club and Traps.**

A cultural myth widely used is a stereotype. A stereotype acts as a trigger and introduces an already established model, easily perceived with its own cultural data. Stereotypes cut corners and thus alter the shape of those represented, they deny individuality and reduce individuals to single, or a few, characteristics: all Glaswegians are drunks; all Northerners wear cloth caps. They are inaccuracies that, like myths, have had a grounding in experience but which do not bear out in relation to facts.

Certain jokes propagate myths and stereotypes and the ideology and attitudes behind them, lending fake insight into that which they pretend to display. Stereotypes make judgements and apportion blame - the unemployed do not *want* to work - and they become fixed, dismissive. Stereotypes also seem strangely mired in the initial time of hostility or confusion of their conception; jokes about West Indian people seem stranded in 1970s sit-com; jokes about women drivers seem similarly anachronistic and Ronnie Corbettesque. Information and experience within the culture can leave stereotypes behind. Although stereotypes in jokes never question they do, however, document popular (mis)conceptions and, therefore, attitudes. Jokes grow from



contemporary events, objects and obsessions, from them it is possible to construct an insight into given moments of popular culture and the attitudes they embody. If we examine the subject matter of 1970s sit-com, 1940s variety or 1980s alternative comedy we can map cultural shifts using jokes as memories.

“My mother-in law knocked on our door today. I could tell it was her because the mice started throwing themselves on the traps.” Les Dawson.<sup>5</sup>

“My mother-in-law broke up my marriage. My wife came home and found us in bed together.” Lenny Bruce.<sup>6</sup>

The mother-in-law joke confirms the stereotypical image of the dominant, matriarchal monster and consolidates an anti-old woman idea, furthering the notion of the grotesque, and it proposes that all men are constantly at war with them. The mother-in-law joke singles out a particular model for hostility. Within the caricature we find layers of resentment and fear of an external presence, probably interfering, and an acknowledgement of lack of choice in the matter. The influence of “t’ wife’s mother” also destabilises or realigns the power structure of traditional marriage - that of the husband being the breadwinner and the wife as housekeeper - and it is bought into conflict. It eats away at certainties of power through extended families. Although there is a stereotype of old women, the ‘old person as social institution’ is non-existent compared to that of the mother-in-law, perhaps due to levels of power and influence within the extended family. The old woman generates no hostility, nor does the old man, but the mother-in-law’s proximity breeds contempt, seen as part of a power struggle over the wife/daughter. Although perhaps construed as offensive, the Dawson joke is of interest because of its cultural antiquity: changes within the culture have dated the form and it appears hackneyed, as well as ‘untrue’; but some jokes do preserve ways of thinking, opinions, as well as documenting them. In this case, the antiquity of the mother-in-law joke also illustrates a changing social demographic where people no longer get married at an early age or use it as a gateway to sexual relations, the mother-in-law becomes the guardian of that

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<sup>5</sup> Les Dawson, The Les Dawson Joke Book, London: Star, 1978, p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> Lenny Bruce, How To Talk Dirty and Influence People, St. Albans: Panther, 1975, p. 138.

particular gate. There have been changes in political consciousness and conventions within the comedy circuit and audiences that further contribute to the joke's antiquity.

By utilising stereotypes the use of clubs and traps becomes apparent. There has to be an understanding of the joke's situation to become involved in it, a relation, and we create a club through that commonality and/or by the establishment of an 'other'. The club serves to trap others outside of it or to trap them within a frozen meaning, usually misguided. A joke told against women shared by the club excludes women but affirms the commonality within the club - and a club is a weapon as well as an institution - and strengthens its foundation. It temporarily neutralises the notion of empowered woman by offering a show of strength to counter her. The joke seals the club's membership and confirms the consensus of opinion, for them, that the idea was right all along because 'we are all agreed'. Jokes that use clubs and traps fail to question the situation and instead consolidate attitudes and opinions that are mythically based; they trap the situation through re-affirmation. To return to the Lenny Bruce mother-in-law joke cited earlier, we can see the destabilisation of the club's grounding through investing a standard form with a new idea: what started out as a typical gag is inverted and the idea of grotesque stereotype is reversed. Bruce uses the stereotyped joke to question itself and questions conventional wisdom through liberating the person from the type: it subverts the myth and subverts the method. He posits that mothers-in-law can exist as sexual beings and not necessarily as monsters.

Jokes about fictitious situations can also carry attitudes and opinions at large within everyday life, either implicitly or explicitly: the choice to tell or not tell a certain type of joke reflects a system of belief; responses to these jokes locate attitudes towards that discussed. The documentation of these can map the way ideas change within the culture. Jokes locate opinions: they carry opinions and can make us think about where we stand in relation to the opinion expressed. To laugh is to have reason to

laugh and in the locating of the reason is the locating of the opinion. To laugh at a racist joke may not necessarily mean one thinks about one's opinion on racism: in a stand-up context, the joke is quickly over and on to the next one. If one does think about it then the opinion is located: if one does not, then an opinion of ambivalence is also located. Obversely, to laugh at a racist joke may not necessarily mean that one holds racist beliefs: the structure of the joke may be clever enough to surprise us into laughter, even when we may not prefer to do so, although, obviously, there is pleasure in laughing at the taboo, or incorrect. Laughter is a spontaneous emission produced from various stimuli. This is seen clearly in film when depictions of violence can often surprise us into laughter: the early films of Quentin Tarrantino often make us laugh at the absurdity in a situation, only later realising that, perhaps, we should not be doing so. The opposite of an opinion held can define the opinion: that is, to find out what we believe we often find out what we do not believe in a process of elimination. The positive is inherent within the negative. Opinions and attitudes are in a constant state of flux being based on receptivity to experience. We experience everyday life using the residue of experience - memory - as a basis for beliefs and opinions. They inform behaviour by being part of an attitude. An attitude can be a construct, or cluster, of opinions as well as a construct of behaviours and need not be verbal. Opinions are the gears through which we shift whilst experiencing everyday life, they influence decisions and social relations. They reflect the way we view things without recourse to factual explanation, like myths. Only by offering an alternative view of experience, or alternate experience and a secondary interpretation, do these opinions change. Jokes correspond with systems of belief and reflect opinions within that system of belief. The jokes of a stand-up comedian reflect the opinions and attitudes, the way s/he sees things, they reflect his/her micro-world.

### **Smut. Sex. Sexuality.**

Smut and dirty jokes can serve to mythologise sex and sexuality. Much comedy grows around sex and sexual behaviour: in the playground, in the factory or in the

pub. Much joking mystifies sexuality, starting in the playground, where the beginnings of physical fumbblings parallel those of cognitive fumbblings towards meaning. Sex humour can be conveniently divided into three categories: smut, the dirty joke and jokes that discuss sex and sexuality. Sex humour explores boundaries of taste. Boundaries of taste are, of course, subjective and applied to each individual case with each individual's criteria, although there is a range of commonalities. The shock of much humour is in transgressing these boundaries and as much as there is a 'conservative' boundary, so, too, is there a 'politically correct' boundary. Smut skirts on the outside, acknowledges the boundary and does not cross it, or if it does, it is on tip toes. Smut alludes to these boundaries whereas dirty jokes assault them, and it is interesting that Manning, for all his bluff crudeness finds women talking about menstruation offensive thus constructing his own boundaries. Smut and dirty jokes are differentiated by the suggestive and the graphic.

Sex is standard fare for the majority of comedians and the base lowest common denominator is the cheap dirty joke. This is not to deny the rich humour involved in this, but there is a political understanding that divides the joke about sex from the joke about someone 'doing it'. Like pornography, the dirty joke is always someone else. The counter to this is the joke about sex, that gropes towards an explanation, perhaps, or discovers a shared experience. The dirty joke is often too easy, it rests on shock value and the taboos surrounding sex and sexuality instantly create Freudian tensions through the discussion of that deemed 'naughty'. Alternative comedy presented a wider opportunity to discuss sex from two distinct and new angles: that of seeing sex as a subjective experience in which we are all involved; and the discussion of disparate sexuality's (i.e., not the sole property of the great white hetero-male) particularly women's and gay sexuality. Rather than laughing about sex as an extraneous absurdity - that which other people do (we do not share our sexuality with others) - the disparate meanings in sexual relations began to be discussed. Ben Elton, Jenny LeCoeat and Tony Allen, to name but a few, discussed

sexual relations rather than just sex itself and saw that sexuality exists in relation to other elements within everyday life.

“**Obscene** adj. 1 offensively or repulsively indecent. 2 colloq. Highly repugnant (obscene wealth). 3. Brit law (of a publication) tending to deprave or corrupt.” OED.<sup>7</sup>

The definition of obscenity is vague, although we may know what we personally find obscene. Under the OED, it could be the mentioning of the parts, a bodily function or the flaunting of obvious wealth. It is a subjective judgement on an external objective fact, the decision that serves a hierarchy of manners. Obscene language, swearing, can be seen in two separate categories of use. Crowther & Pinfold, in their examination of “40 years of television comedy” wrongly imply that the new alternative comedy’s treatment of sex and sexuality was on a par with the ‘blue’ comedy found in Northern working men’s clubs, which used swearing and ‘dirty’ jokes.<sup>8</sup> Their comparison with the use of language is wrong: the blue comedy style uses language to describe sex and obscenities “to appeal to the prurient interest”; alternative comedy tried to approach sex and sexuality in a different way and demystify it though not entirely successfully.

We can see post-war comedy dealing with sex and sexuality in one of the three ways mentioned: through the dirty joke, like Chubby Brown and the northern club style; through its less offensive cousin, smut, much beloved of Max Miller, Frankie Howerd et al; or in talking about one’s own involvement in an honest way, like Frank Skinner, Jenny Eclair and those descending down the line of the alternative heritage. The first two both deal with sex as ‘out there’ whereas the latter personalises, become subjective. The confusion over alternative comedy’s treatment of sex can be clarified by political input. Sexuality, like politics, is what happens to and around us, what concerns us in our everyday lives. It is not something mysterious, laughed at trapped in a dirty joke (and the worst thing about dirty jokes is that they are too easy).

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<sup>7</sup>Oxford Compact English Dictionary, Oxford: University Press, 1996, p. 686.

<sup>8</sup>Crowther & Pinfold, Bring Me Laughter, London: Columbus, 1987, p. 133.

## **Smut and Innuendo.**

“Unclean, smutty, obscene, corrupt.” Roget’s Thesaurus.<sup>9</sup>

Smut is that which deals with euphemism, evasion, innuendo, usually of a sexual or lavatorial nature. It lacks graphic description, but instead infers. Smut in Britain is, perhaps, considered a lower form due to its earthiness and tradition in entertainment, particularly in music hall and after that, certain areas of television and film such as the Carry On movies and Benny Hill. These latter specialise in innuendo and *entendre ad nauseum*: many breasts are almost exposed; farcical pointlessness is enacted and a salty energy prevails. They are part of smut’s classic lineage and successful comedy and cultural exports.

There is a joy in smut, an exuberance, like with swearing or brief nudity in inappropriate places (comedy basic: shock to laughter). It is a celebration of an inability to deal with biological processes, but doesn’t tell us so (unlike in alternative comedy). Smut and euphemism deal with taboo. The power of contravening the taboo inspires a tension never lost from naughtiness at school, realising the forbidden, and the tension is released by the conclusion of the joke. Taboos are instantly funny.<sup>10</sup> By inspiring the euphemism for an act, the power of the act is invoked, like the fear of archaic curses invoking the Devil or worse, God. The idea of treading on sacred turf, into areas deemed illicit, inspire a child-like feeling of daring. The humour and strength of smut, the playfulness, lies around such turf, moving towards then drawing away, skating around or inferring to the potential violation. But within the simple text of the smutty innuendo can be read a host of complexities.

Stand-up comedy can clearly deal with serious subjects: it gives us information about everyday life. Obversely, that which does not seek to explore quotidian structures

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<sup>9</sup> Roget’s Thesaurus, London: Penguin, 1987, p. 317.

<sup>10</sup> For some prolonged reason, farts, pants and bottoms remain funny despite being done to death by every aspirant comedian and beyond. Jack Dee still finds fart jokes funny, as does Billy Connolly and they must have heard hundreds.

also reveals attitudes and the hierarchy of manners prevalent within them. What is repressed or taboo perhaps tells us as much about how we live as that which is not. There is still the shadow of taboo over certain behaviours and language and this illuminates the hierarchy of manners. In comedy, as much as anywhere, the hierarchy of manners pedestals the 'cultured' and rarefies the scatological. When dealing with either 'higher forms' or 'popular entertainment' we see the operation of 'good taste' and 'bad taste'. Smut offends standards of taste: taste is always subjective, consisting of a series of value judgements. Personal taste is not reduced by the sophistication of opinion condemning it as bad and smut revels in the outrage of those who would condemn it, it is fuel to the fire, making the joke even funnier. Smut offends the hierarchy of manners and implies stepping into a forbidden area exposing that hierarchy's taboos, consciously or not. The indicator of well-constructed comedy is that which exposes taboos and shows them as that, explaining or questioning this status as a taboo: Lenny Bruce to his credit, achieved this.

“**Innuendo.** n, an allusive or oblique remark or hint, usu. Disparaging. 2 a remark with a double meaning, usu. suggestive.” OCED.<sup>11</sup>

Smut and innuendo have a strong history throughout popular culture. Classically, Shakespeare's canon is heavily littered and in McDonald's A Dictionary of Obscenity, Taboo and Euphemism<sup>12</sup> the references are numerous (Shakespeare revelled in the reportage of everyday language and the jokes used therein). There have been many less exalted, but by no means inferior, British exponents of innuendo: the Carry On films and seaside postcards; Frankie Howerd, the master of sauce and camp; The Two Ronnies were prime time purveyors; and television sitcom regularly utilises it - the exploitation of intentions and situations going wrong relies heavily on the art of the 'innocent misconstrued'. Music hall comedians had always used it, from Marie Lloyd to the apparently innocuous George Formby and his “little stick of Blackpool rock”, and, at that institutions culmination, the legendary Max Miller. The camp side of music hall transplanted, innuendo and all,

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<sup>11</sup> Oxford Compact English Dictionary, Oxford: University Press, 1996, p. 512.

<sup>12</sup> James McDonald, Dictionary of Obscenity, Taboo and Euphemism, London: Sphere, 1988.

neatly onto game-show television, most notably Larry Grayson and his friend 'Everard' in the 1970s on the BBC's The Generation Game (although he refrained from introducing his other imaginary acquaintance, Self Raising Fred from the 'Friend in Hand'). A strain of Grayson is alive and well with Julian Clary's double entendre and surprising old maid appeal. The more mainstream Ken Dodd and Dame Edna Everage keep the strain in robust health.

Smut skates round the edges of the profane, the taboo, and indicates a knowingness. This can serve to separate the smutty joke from the dirty joke, from filth. A dirty joke is graphic in description and leaves nothing to the imagination: it is there openly, as itself. It cannot be misread to mean anything else. Smutty innuendo relies on that knowingness and by doing so becomes a kind of coded reference; it is once removed. Smut relies on its daring and sneaks up behind something whereas the dirty joke relies on its shock factor - it openly encompasses the subject. Any shock involved in smut can be denied by the innocence of the joke's teller and any profanity found is found by the listener, as Max Miller pointed out with his "It's people like you that give me a bad name" disclaimer when the audience 'misread' his punchlines. There is a simultaneous knowing and innocence in such smut. Innuendo in comedy, like all double talk from cockney to criminal slang, grew from a need for secrecy, to say without saying. The innuendo in saucy postcards is alluding, double meanings pervade and, although possibly offensive to some, they sit in a nostalgic cosy corner of a specifically English mentality, something George Orwell acknowledged in his essay on meaning in smutty postcards in 1941.

Orwell's essay "On the Art of Donald McGill"<sup>13</sup> is a classic exponent of the virtues of smut. He does, however, alternate use of smutty postcards and dirty jokes, lacking the distinction established here. Orwell calls the postcards dirty jokes, obscene: they are not, they are merely smutty. Time has changed concepts of obscenity: tolerance

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<sup>13</sup> George Orwell, "The Art of Donald McGill", in My Country Right or Left, London: Secker & Warburg, 1968, p. 155-166.



of disparate sexuality; boundaries of permissiveness changing; Page 3 'stunnahs' every day; Benny Hill; coarser language in the various media and so on. Orwell writes that the postcards deal with 'low' humour: sex, primarily, followed by home life, drinking, toilets, snobbery and stereotypes. There is a class distinction. Bearing in mind the outdated morality prevalent and the relative lack of sophistication or wit, anything remotely sexual is targeted: illegitimate babies, newly weds, gargantuan breasts and exposed and cavernous backsides, all fall foul of the caricaturist's pen. As mentioned, the easy laugh is raised from the common conspiracy of smut, the tension generated from the semi-forbidden. The sex humour is tacky and strictly heterosexual (unsurprising given the time) with men, tongues hanging desperate, and women either teasing temptresses or monstrous flesh mounds with angry faces. Sex becomes a means: for women to trap men into marriage; for men as a pleasurable escape from such a rigid institution. There is a grimly reflected social picture portrayed that Orwell does not comment on. No one in these postcards has anything going for them and there is an almost tragic inevitability to the pictured types, a lack of possibilities. The wives are frustrated and hateful, the husbands perpetually priapic and the young girls destined for fat motherhood, like the wives the men would cuckold. The postcards reflect a time trapped micro-world, where the only relief is two weeks at Blackpool, or some such crypto-paradisical resort, or a drunken fling and then back to work. The obscenity that Orwell sees in the postcards is not pornographic - and by this it is assumed he means it contains little for the prurient interest - but smutty: "one notices that his brand of humour only has meaning in relation to a fairly strict moral code."<sup>14</sup> Smut exists in opposition to these enforced codes whilst acknowledging the need for them. It is always conservative in this way, not really daring, just slightly risqué with little fear of recrimination, like the schoolboy sneaking faces behind his teacher, it threatens nothing. Orwell sees the jokes as obscene but not immoral. The jokes rest on extant facts: mostly sex and desire. But sex and desire are not immoral (for Orwell) when framed in the context of marriage and unrealised yearning. People do have sex when they are married and

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

anyway, the henpecked husband never actually gets off with the girl - and why should he? He says the jokes "imply a stable society in which marriage is indissoluble and family loyalty [is] taken for granted." <sup>15</sup> Which is touching in its antiquity. Orwell reflects on the duality of 'man', the 'noble folly and base wisdom', the heroic and the selfish. In everyday life we operate with the latter repressed and, for Orwell, smut gives us a chance to revel in its pleasures, to acknowledge and knock "the world wide conspiracy to pretend he is not there, or at least [that he] doesn't matter." <sup>16</sup> Later he writes, smut is "a harmless rebellion against virtue." <sup>17</sup> This almost innocence in smut's pleasures is 'good-natured' whereas many dirty jokes contain an inherent hostility, a misogyny or fear element. Smut acknowledges the existence of sex but also the need for its containment. Smut is not subversive. On the contrary, it colludes with an overall majority morality that sex is 'naughty'. It is only when comedy deconstructs this notion of 'naughtiness', that it becomes subversive. When jokes explain and explore the notion of the forbidden they become an effective weapon. Subversive is, by definition, the undermining of a perceived repression and jokes that do not challenge that repression can continue it. It is fair to say that smut is healthy and inclusive but also helps keep sex and sexuality at a distance, as a semi-secret and it does not question this status, and in this they are closer to dirty jokes.

Boundaries of taste have changed with the development of comedy and the post alternative comedy agenda. Now, innuendo is enjoyable, not for its secret saying of the unsayable, but almost for its 'ironic' reference to a bygone style. Instead of employing euphemisms for sex, much comedy refers to straight 'shagging' ('fucking' on television is still a relative rarity, before a certain time at least). Alternative comedy, and those following its redefined comedy wake had much to do with this; a newer generation of comedians using a newer generations morality or, more accurately, politics and language (and the two are always linked). Sit-com

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

reliance on innuendo has been recently knocked by the huge success of the BBC's groundbreaking Men Behaving Badly series that did away with cosy euphemism and went straight for the jugular. Framed within an ironic context (and often perceived irony-less, like 'Til Death Do Us Part), Men Behaving Badly allowed us to laugh at another taboo in 'TV PC' times: that of men behaving badly and (almost) getting away with it. Language and limitations have changed. Taboos can be addressed. Innuendo enabled us to talk about taboos but many previous taboos have been broken - in relation to sex, sexuality and drugs at least - so innuendo could face unfortunate redundancy.

However archaic innuendo and smut may sometime see, however comedically 'unnecessary' it may now be, it is such a significant part of British comedy, used by so many great comedians, and so delightful to listen to, that it would be erroneous to merely write it off. There are still those who blow its brazen trumpet: Julian Clary reclaiming innuendo and camp in post alternative comedy; Ben Elton, Rik Mayall et al, acknowledging innuendo with countless "ooh-err missus" references; Reeves and Mortimer slip it in occasionally; Dame Edna Everage, gladioli in hand, shooting off with disparaging innuendoes to all; and in the mainstream, the likes of Barrymore, Shane Richie, Bobby Davro and others all use it on a regular basis. Innuendo is a comedy basic, one of the many in the comedy stand-by's, an essential and underused tool.

### **Dirty Jokes: Bad Faith.**

It is hard, in the sandstorm accusations of political correctness to criticise the dirty joke without seeming fey, feebly liberal or uptight. It is not a shyness towards subject matter that is of objection here or a condemnation of approach, after all, Skinner, Brand and Eclair are far from delicate. The last thing comedy needs is for sex and jokes to become taboo again but for different ideological reasons. The dirty joke is dishonest and perpetuates a myth filtered through a usually white heterosexual male point of view. What can be criticised is the political misrepresentation, that the dirty

joke represents or keeps sex as a dirty thing, not as a genuinely authentic experience (when done right, or wrong). It keeps sex secret and mystified; confusing dirty jokes with the real thing is as dishonest as advertisements. Sex has to be approached in comedy, it is a cause of much confusion and subsequent hilarity, but the further it utilises myths and misrepresentations, the more 'dirty' it becomes and, therefore, repressed. It is not daring to do dirty jokes, it is reactionary and furthers taboos by keeping sex in the terrain of the taboo.

Sartre discusses the concept of 'bad faith' in Being and Nothingness.<sup>18</sup> In relation to the establishment of comic truths, the lies within the dirty joke can be seen as an example of Sartre's bad faith theory. Sartre differentiates between the liar and the person being, or acting, in bad faith. The ideal lie, for Sartre "intends to deceive and ... does not seek to hide this intention from himself."<sup>19</sup> The liar becomes a "character he plays in the eyes of the questioner."<sup>20</sup> This is not to say becoming a character in comedy precludes being a conduit for truths that we may not be able to communicate 'in persona'. Lies are when we know the truth and communicate a different or false version of events directly to others. It is a mechanism. It is a lie to tell others what we know to be untrue but it is in bad faith to believe it ourselves, to propagate that which is false but which we would want to believe. We refuse to admit. Sartre says "to be sure, the one who practices bad faith is hiding a displeasing truth or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth."<sup>21</sup> This is seen in the hostility of dirty jokes. Jokes are not really lies: they are made up stories that can encapsulate lies. Jokes can communicate truths through their structure but they can also communicate lies and (ideological) assumptions and myths that indicate bad faith. For want of a quick example, a joke is culled from one of the stand-up comedians in Trevor Griffiths's Comedians play (and which is mild in comparison to many). A middle aged married couple are visiting a zoo, at the ape enclosure the woman leans too far

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<sup>18</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness, London: Routledge, 1993.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

over and falls in, landing on her back, skirts disarrayed. She is confronted by a large gorilla with an erection. The husband shouts “Now tell *him* you’ve got a headache.”

<sup>22</sup> Obviously the joke is completely made up but within it are ideas, myths, that live in bad faith: women are beyond sex at a certain age; women use headaches as an avoidance strategy; in comparison, the man is still sexually active and she the more sexually reluctant/ reticent. There is also a hostility, a misogynist revenge by proxy, in the joke. The myths that are perpetuated in the jokes are done so in bad faith. [Un]popular myths are never recourse to fact, they precede truth and translate experience without recourse to proof or explanation.

Bad faith is an easy way out. Dirty jokes are an easy way of dealing with something we know about but suspect a problem with. They are bad faith because they accept unthinkingly the untruths within them (gross characterisations, etc.): dirty jokes do not question but maintain, like smut. There is, however, a third approach to sex and sexuality that neither excludes, continues to repress or deny or that exists in bad faith. We can look at various comedians and begin to differentiate between styles: Max Miller’s use of smut and innuendo; Chubby Brown’s dirty jokes; and Frank Skinner’s more honest approach that neither mystifies or represses sexuality, but deal with it as an authentic but no less comic experience.

### **Max Miller.**

“He used to say ‘I’m nothing offstage really, nothing. But the Cheeky Chappy, he’s something.’”

Roy Hudd on Max Miller. <sup>23</sup>

The comic character of Max Miller is endearing, personable and there is a shared intimacy and warmth within his performance. He is like a nearly honest spiv or con-man, but he is not crafty. Miller’s character vacillates, is hard to pin down, and brings in each gender to his confidence differently; he does not exclude women, he confides that he knows their little secrets, knows what they like and loves them for it; with men - we know they love it! This allows him to get away with it, both men

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<sup>22</sup> Trevor Griffiths, *Comedians*, London: Faber, 1976.

<sup>23</sup> Max Miller: *Heroes of Comedy*, Screened Channel 4, 1997.

and women want him to overstep the marks they dare not go beyond. His reference points are obscure to neither, he is equally at home with one or both. He is sexy but not predatory. His clothes are outrageous, and closer to a clown's or Pierrot's, which give him an unnecessary pathos, the loud suits and plus fours and tiny hats. But they are also flower patterned and loose fitting, like frock material or frightening curtains. Victoria Wood <sup>24</sup> points out the sexual ambivalence of Miller: he is neither macho nor effeminate but he is teasing and playful. He is willing to disclose equal amounts of information to both men and women. His is camp but music-hall camp and playful rather than effete camp; he plays with his cuffs, his wrists go limp but he is too smart to be a put upon mockable effeminate, like Grayson, for example. He is almost too sharp.

Miller talks to the audience, his shoe on the footlights, referring to their brief excursion from knowing morality. The style is in the confidential, he looks behind the wings, edgy about saying something naughty that 'the authorities' may hear, even though the audience are there to hear him say precisely that, which he never does, he always pulls out at the last minute. This fear of being 'caught in the act' is endearing, it brings us together under threat from those who would have us not laugh, like Manning's "They can't stop us laughing."<sup>25</sup> There is a constant tension between this and the feeling that he may go too far, which he never does. He overrides the punch-lines even to the extent of not finishing the jokes, reminding the audience that it is their interpretation of what he is saying, not his intention, that is 'off colour'. He lets the audience do the work and they become further involved.

The gags are not 'blue' gags, they refer to sex and they are clever. Morality standards of the day being vastly different his reputation grew as being 'blue' but compared to the Rottweiller gags of Manning or Chubby Brown he is a neutered Poodle. This

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> This imagined 'they' : Manning uses 'they' as a performance ploy to bring together the audience, in conspiracy against the politically correct, the left, the whingers and the killjoys. He unites the audience with him in their besieged prejudiced.

reputation of being 'risqué' seems vastly overblown in retrospect. It is difficult to see Miller as immoral, if anything he is cathartic. Miller maintains the status quo by keeping the smut on the stage and letting the audience get it out of their system and in this way he is reactionary. He does not liberate but acknowledges the moral code. He only talks about what we already know, after all.

"Mary Ann, Mary Ann, let us get together on the five year plan  
We'll both go out to work, every morning t'will be fine,  
I'll bring my wages home and you can put your bit to mine ...  
Go on, make something of that ... filthy lot, filthy!" Max Miller.<sup>26</sup>

### **Chubby Brown: Exposed.**

"Women are like turds. The older they are, the easier they are to pick up." Chubby Brown.<sup>27</sup>

"I enjoy the minge. I think women as sugar and spice and all things nice." Chubby Brown.<sup>28</sup>

Brown's jokes reduce women to lumps and gaps. He denies misogyny, he doesn't hate women but he has no respect for them and cannot see beyond the physical. He is a monomaniac and cannot keep his hand off it; he has the sustained, arrested curiosity of the uninitiated, finding endless fascination in sex. He is perpetually priapic but he is always 'a fat bastard', self deprecatory, and for all his posturing we know he isn't getting any, even from his 'wife', as he tells us. The jokes live in bad faith, disrespect women (and everyone else) and objectify the genitals into a mysterious realm. This monomania can be trying, but for him there is no more to life than just sex.

The references and population of the jokes are mundane but not revealing: the wife and her mother are in there and marriage is the unfortunate price for regular sex. Once married, just like the postcards of before, wife mutates into monster and sex is a chore which justifies his philandering and her affairs with the milkman. His family and childhood, his pets and holidays and always sex and 'the minge' are the joke's parameters; they are basic, corny but simple one liners. It is dated, a little predictable

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<sup>26</sup> Heroes of Comedy, Channel 4, 1997.

<sup>27</sup> Chubby Brown: Exposed, Polygram Video, undated.

<sup>28</sup> Howard Jacobson, Seriously Funny, Channel 4, 1997.

(even disappointing) and does not question anything but boundaries of taste: there is no enquiry there, but no demand or desire for it. He gives little away about himself (like Monkhouse with his imaginary wife/sex life) and there is little comic discovery of truths but that is not the purpose; Chubby is an entertainer first and last, strictly for laughs. Chubby is not as endearing as Miller and lacks the charm and warmth. He is personable, more so than Manning and Jim Davidson, but he is lecherous rather than curious, crude rather than risqué: there is no innuendo smartness and there is little vulnerability. We know he is a character, which is why he can get away with it.

There is still a huge audience for it, he sells out tours, and the unavailability on television lends it an air of illicitness which is used as part of the hype. Chubby is hyped as outrageous but he is not, he is crude but there is little hostility, it is just rude. It is no more shocking than any joke heard in the pub (and it would be true to say these jokes influence pub culture and vice versa). In a way, Chubby and crew are now the alternative comedians, not because what they are doing is 'new', precisely because of the opposite. Since the restructure of the comedy agenda and the influx of the alternative to the mainstream the stand-up of Jimmy Jones, Jim Davidson and Chubby have all been moved to the peripheries of comedy despite their audience sizes and it is their dated approach to subject matter that has pushed them to these peripheries.

### **Frank Skinner: Live At The Palladium.**

“What I do is on stage is basically me, so I’m not going to pretend that I think about women in a different way than I see them in an everyday situation. I think you can talk openly about how much you like a woman’s tits without being sexist.” Frank Skinner.<sup>29</sup>

Skinner’s performances always expose his own inadequacy: he is revelatory, simultaneously self deprecating and lacks hostility but he is direct and honest. His is a subjective response to sexual activity. He does not tell jokes but in the extended monologues<sup>30</sup> - packed with observation, painful to recognise at times - he takes us

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<sup>29</sup> Frank Skinner, Loaded magazine, October, 1994.

<sup>30</sup> Frank Skinner Live at the Palladium, 1995.



on a trawl through everyday events: dog farts, old people, Blind Date and obviously football. He always returns to sex, his manly boastful prowess and its often sad realisation. He is an oddity, unique. He is prole but does not downplay, or overreach, his intelligence. Lumpen lad tags aim in his direction but he deflects them, he is no “get yer tits out for the lads” lad. He is liberal/left states tolerance for gay sex and he represents women as often having the upper hand, if anything, often failing to meet their criteria for any kind of relationship beyond basic headboard action. He refers to pitifully short and terminated relationships. Skinner’s world is small, triangulated between bedroom, the match and the bar. He goes for the crude over the erudite and discusses dog dirt, anal sex (a protracted plea for hetero-tolerance), anality and all too brief ejaculation. Skinner is crude and revels in reporting the downside (or the backside) but does not overplay the shock, although he could go for it every time. He is torn between innuendo (although not as much as Julian Clary) and the truth in the absurdity of behaviour.

Skinner’s routine on anal sex exposes the taboo and introduces the question, ‘why do we find this strange’. He moves from the basic gag to an enquiry of why it is legal for gay men, but not heterosexual men and then moves into a fantasy on a citizen’s arrest scenario. There is a crucial difference here: a dirty joke would maintain a distance, make it ‘filthy’ and laugh at someone else involved in some ‘animality’, doing something we would not do. Skinner situates himself right in the middle (or end) of the action and such is his stage persona, that we identify with him, go along with his obsessions and interests and find much in common.

Skinner presents a persona, one of the most affable yet, based on being ‘normal’. His ‘lad appeal’ obscures the fact he is much too vulnerable for the ‘18 pints and a Vindaloo’ stereotype. He looks like he does comedy, not to show off (like David Baddiel) but because he can’t help it. There is a definite authenticity to Skinner (although his stage name is false) and in his material and when we laugh at the situations, the failings, the hilarity is a laugh of recognition. His material can include

'true stories', other material we know, have experienced or the reference points are only too common to us.

It is Skinner's relationship with the audience that is fascinating as he cannot leave them alone. He creates an instant rapport (easier now they come specifically to see him) and talks to individuals, calls them by name and refers back to them as sounding boards for the duration. Hecklers welcomed, he unloads timely derogation throughout the act. On video it is difficult to say how close it is to other performances as the filmed version is hyper-realised, edited and smoothed over. He could almost occupy the same space as the trad-Northern comedian but he has a post-alternative comedy agenda. The left ideology of alternative comedy is now diluted in the mainstream and assimilated, part of the new comedy lexicon. It does not need trowelling on, it is encoded within comedy performance ethics. The comedy is of post-PC lewdness and crudeness but it is non-Chubby in content. Skinner is no misogynist and he places his angst within the bounds of his own prowess and the failure of its realisation. He is a disappointment to himself but great when he tells us so. Chubby is straight hetero-comedy and just a bit more extreme than Skinner, informed by a different system of belief. Skinner has a broader menu, Chubby is stuck in the chip shop (which is where he wants to be). Max flirts with the suggestion whereas Chubby reduces sex to a joke and this is the difference between him and Skinner, the lack of questioning: Brown keeps it in the dark, illicit; Skinner is al fresco and wants to have a good look and find out why it is like it is.

### **Jokes As Viruses.**

"28/3/94. Chancellor Dolfus of Austria bans jokes about his diminutive stature." The Independent.

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Within these jokes, smut and filth, we can see ideas in bad faith distorting concepts of sex and sexuality, creating myths and making opaque sexual relations. Once they have passed into the community as ready-mades, they further these misconceptions

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<sup>31</sup> Independent, 28/3/94.

and infect viewpoints. In this they begin to act unconsciously upon us and can be explored through the metaphor of the virus.

Censorship has an ideological basis as Chancellor Dolfus of Austria demonstrated, banning jokes about his height which undermined his status as a power figure; as the American censors demonstrated taking the subversive Lenny Bruce to court on more than one occasion to close him down; and as the Home Office demonstrated by banning Bruce from appearing again in Britain, after his debut performance at Peter Cook's Establishment Club. The precarious position that the magazine Private Eye occupies, its constant wrangles within the courts over allegations, further attests to the power of informed humour. Denial is an act of empowerment for the censor, if only empowerment through self assurance. Censorship is not an antidote to an idea, nor does it destroy the fact of dissent or the reason for it. Censorship is a denial of access to an idea, although the idea may remain, even if only in someone's head. The information or ideas contained in spoken jokes, however, are more accessible than acres of newsprint.

Jokes communicate in accessible form, easily transferred or transformed; their power is to contain and move ideas and information. Information is power but, in the information technology age where information is a commodity, it is only of use via a medium where it can realise itself. Information is only powerful when it has, or contributes to, a specific purpose. We can receive information without acknowledging it through jokes and the information within them can be stronger than realised. Jokes become free agents, floating through everyday life, carrying information and ideas. Information becomes powerful as a tool, as a means to an end and the joke as a medium of information is a possibility, it channels power to those ends.

## Viruses.

“A virus, consisting of genetic material enclosed in a protective coating, is one of the simplest entities able to reproduce. Viruses have no metabolic system, they have no intrinsic motility, they cannot respond to stimuli, and they do not grow in the usual sense. The ability to maintain genetic continuity, with the possibility for mutation, is the only basis for considering viruses to be alive.”

C.R. Goodheart, in The Virus: A History of the Concept.<sup>32</sup>

Viruses populate the area between living molecules (those that duplicate, like those constituting a sheep) and non living molecules (those that do not, like those that constitute iron). They should not be classified as organisms; they are not independent and cannot reproduce or carry out metabolic processes without a host cell. The virus is parasitical in nature. A virus cannot generate or store energy but saps this from the host. Viruses are unable to reproduce without inhabiting a host cell first and when infected, the cell is occupied by the virus where it begins to work. The infection characterised by the virus is the replication of the viral strain, repeated units, throughout corresponding cells in the host organism. That is, each virus or strain operates in a slightly different manner and affects the host differently. Viruses operate in several stages. They attach to a host cell to which they must be able to relate; not all viruses are fatally responsive to human cells, for example, it is rare for a person to have the tobacco mosaic virus and also “viruses can replicate in many different tissues without producing clinical diseases.”<sup>33</sup> On infection, when the virion or virus particle attaches to a host cell and it begins to penetrate the outer wall or membrane, and either just before or when the cell is penetrated, the virion begins to “uncoat”, or shed its protein jacket in order for the genome to be released to replicate itself within the chemicals of the host. Once the virus has spread through a number of cells, disease becomes apparent.

As with football chants, the source of viruses is difficult to locate and it is within these manifestations that we see parallels with jokes. Jokes spread by word of mouth and from exposure to contained environments. Jokes spread quickly. Once in

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<sup>32</sup> C.R. Goodheart, in The Virus: A History of the Concept, London: Heinemann, 1977, p. 12.

<sup>33</sup> Kucera/Myrvik, Fundamentals of Medical Virology, Philadelphia: Lea & Febiger, 1985, p. 11.

possession of a joke there is little to do with it except pass it on to someone else. Jokes and metaphors run in parallel to everyday life; they operate with an 'equivalence'. They act as sounding boards or models. Wittgenstein, in saying we learn through effective models, saw the possibility of assimilating an approach towards something using a parallel to everyday life.<sup>34</sup> To get a point across we make an extension into metaphor; metaphor lends weight and offers a different angle to looking at things. Metaphor can be seen as a way of clarifying information. It is within the metaphor that we can explore the ways in which ideas are communicated through jokes. Laughter is infectious and that which creates laughter, jokes, can be seen, metaphorically, as viruses. Like viruses, jokes populate the territory between the living and the non-living. Jokes are very much part of everyday life but they are ephemeral. They are not everyday life, they are ancillary, a representation. They can operate as myths, making us make sense of the world, mapping common experience (what we do) into knowledge (what we know). They grow within everyday life but cannot exist without it. Jokes spread, pass from person to person, spreading through human contact.

Jokes can exist in a closed environment. A closed environment is a situation that tends to remain the same. People can pass through it but that which constitutes the structure of the environment remains unchanged. In this way, jokes remain in the playground and are handed down from year to year, caught within a context outside of which they make no sense, or have little purpose. That is, playground jokes, jokes about the factory or those in command, armed forces jokes, once externalised they melt away. The conditions, the climate, need to remain structurally unchanged in order for the joke to continue existing. Jokes like these need a preserved atmosphere. Jokes in playgrounds are useful in the function of learning; we know jokes make us make sense of the world and in the playground they become methods of play, exploring and communicating. The playground is where we begin to understand

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<sup>34</sup> "Nothing is more important for teaching us to understand the concepts we have than constructing fictitious ones." Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980, p. 74.

what humour is for. Our sense of humour is linked directly to that which constitutes our identity and within the playground, the influence of jokes begins to shape who we are: what we find funny depends on our experiences but lacking much experience, we begin to develop a received sense of humour, a cultural foundation of reference points. These jokes are also informed by jokes within other media, such as comics, puzzle and joke books and so on, which inform the context of the playground. This recycling ensures that jokes remain in enclosed environments. Once utilised however, the jokes are left where they were found, in the playground, they have surpassed their use and are passed down the line.

“There's very little that won't take a joke.” Comedians.<sup>35</sup>

Jokes exist given the right conditions. They, like viruses, float through the language of everyday life and attach themselves to a given situation; they are always there but can only be realised given certain conditions. Logically, there must only be a finite amount of types in jokes but each type could be applied to each situation differently or each different situation. The jokes need the situation in order to exist, the host cell of the moment. Attached, realised or read, the information of the situation is absorbed by the joke's structure. The joke is then made. Different jokes require different conditions to be realised. Different jokes require different prerequisites and create different effects. The structures of jokes are common property, like language. Therefore, jokes run throughout everyday life. Decoded, the unravelling of the joke's DNA reveals information about everyday life. It is in the minutiae that the bigger picture begins to be revealed.

Jokes are viruses; they spread ideas in the same way that viruses spread infection; there needs to be a host cell in order for them to work. They are neither alive or dead, they merely are. Inoculation is possible; experience is a resistance when that transmitted within the joke is contradicted by what we know to be true. When

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<sup>35</sup> Griffiths, 1976, p. 20.

something is presented that we know is contrary to experience, the idea is rendered neutral. As viruses can spread, they can also be cured.

### **Conclusion.**

It cannot be said that something is just a joke, isolated, decontextualised, for it never is, it is part of an ideology or a system of belief expressed in a certain format. A joke is an idea manifested in a form with which we can deal. When we make jokes, even about our behaviour or social blunders, it is a way of encapsulating and reducing a sentiment or reaction. Nothing is as it is solely. A thing locates a meaning within a context, it is indicative of a system of signs and meanings. Similarly jokes do not exist in a vacuum but relate to real events, realistic or absurd within everyday life. They signify behaviours and relations to subject matter for we have to relate to them in order to laugh. We can see ideas moving through jokes, myths, stereotypes and attitudes and opinions, a complex of meanings spreading through everyday life. Jokes and comedy can be life affirming, of course, and not all comedians have relied on the reiteration of received ideas about sex, sexuality and smut or utilised easily compacted myths and stereotypes. In British comedy there has been a strong, if narrow, 'subversive' history running from The Goon Show in the 1950s, through the satirists of the early 1960s, Monty Python's Flying Circus and into the Alternative Comedy moment and beyond. This comedy and its practitioners looked at the political effects on everyday life, either explicitly or implicitly and celebrated, denigrated, subverted and decimated comedy icons and ideas to move comedy on and create a dynamic force that remains strong today.

## Post-War Stand-up Comedy: A Subversive History.

“What good is thinking, writing or acting”, Henri Lefebvre wrote in 1972, “if one’s only achievement is to continue that long line of failures, self destruction <sup>s</sup> and fatal spells lasting from Jude the Obscure to Antonin Artaud?” Greil Marcus. <sup>1</sup>

→ Superfluous inverted comma

It is possible to trace a ‘subversive’ history of post-war comedy in Britain that leads from The Goon Show through That Was The Week That Was, Monty Python’s Flying Circus, alternative comedy and to the present day. This subversive thread, whilst not being entirely anti-establishment, does embrace shades of iconoclasm ranging from the ‘educated’ critique of the various satirists in the early 1960s to the phlegm spraying angst of Gerry Sadowitz, the sexual politics of Mark Thomas and the fantasies of Eddie Izzard. The comedians mentioned may not have set out to subvert the more traditional forms of comedy - the music hall stand-up style, the cosy BBC radio style, the sit-com formula - but they exerted a significant influence on stand-up comedy today and embody a certain spirit that repeatedly crops up and passes through several decades.

“A personal expression within a framework created by others cannot be termed a creation. Creation is not the arrangement of objects and forms, it is the invention of new laws on that arrangement.”  
Guy Debord. <sup>2</sup>

In post-war comedy the key figures of this subversive strain embraced some or all of the following: a willingness to experiment with form as well as content, introducing complex ideas in an accessible form of comedy; a desire to establish political and

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<sup>1</sup> Greil Marcus, Lipstick Traces (On A Cigarette), London: Penguin, 1989, p. 188.

<sup>2</sup> Guy Debord/in Stewart Home, The Assault on Culture, Sterling: AK Press, 1994, p. 29. Home is one of Britain’s most interesting and energetic writers in this area but has met with some obloquy perhaps due to his anarchist leanings, his extreme ‘experimental’ novels and propagation of prole Punk and skinhead culture. He has worked in visual/performance art, music, produced the magazine Smile and was a key figure in the Festival Of Plagiarism and Art Strike events in the late 1980s (see The Festival of Plagiarism and Art Strike Handbook both London: Sabotage, 1989.) Along with the more academic Sadie Plant, he is the Situationists most succinct critic, refusing to be dazzled by Guy Debord or be deluded by the paradoxes and hypocrisies running rampant within sections of this elitist movement. He does celebrate their poetry, humour and passion for ideas and fits them into a context of dissent in art and culture in the 20th Century, from the Dadaists onward, in Assault On Culture, which lacks depth but not insight. He is one of the few documenting these areas. Anarchist press AK, based in Sterling, Scotland, publish most of his works.



social truths within the quotidian and a desire for change; a mix of the surreal and the everyday; a move away from standard forms of jokes and the traditional 'whipping boys' of mothers-in-law, the wife and foreigners; a dissatisfaction and/or subsequent move from the standard of comedy of the day, an ability to side-step the entertainment trap and provide something of substance that is not only funny but also of its time, its moment; and, finally, to expose and explore the gap between how we think things appear and how they actually are.

The major shifts in the comedy consciousness with which we are dealing here have all, to some extent, invented new laws on previously established arrangements: The Goon Show's radical exploration of the radio medium; Beyond The Fringe's sharpened satire bringing revue, stand-up comedy and satire under one umbrella; the That Was The Week That Was exploration of the limits of television; Monty Python's Flying Circus use of the mundane and the bizarre; and alternative comedy's radical attack on the political agenda of comedy in the face of social and cultural malaise in the late 1970s. These protagonists all <sup>weird</sup> their own ideas of comedy and exploited the possibilities to the full. These are the main links in this subversive thread, although there are several individuals who have made remarkable progress in furthering this connection, from The Goon Shows through the 1960s and 1970s to the present. We can see a decisive split from radio and music hall roots in the 1950s through a surreal and satirical comedy-scape to merge back with straight stand-up in the guise of alternative comedy, which continues today albeit converging all the time with 'the main stream' of television and live comedy. The Goon Show broke the more formal mode of radio entertainment by offering a bizarre surreal series of radio episodes ending in the 1960s. This surrealism informed the progenitors of the so-called satire boom of the early 1960s, if only through following the exploration of possibilities within the new medium of television. It continued through these into the various guises that preceded Monty Python's Flying Circus. From there it was picked up again and influenced a number of comedians in the late 1970s in the alternative comedy boom where it reintegrated with a purer stand-up comedy form

again. This thread is still prevalent, albeit with some of its more political and satirical elements trimmed away, arguably for the sake of commercial remuneration. Although those mentioned here are not necessarily stand-up comedians, they have all played a part in furthering comedy in some form or other. Each example has been a key influence, directly or not, on the alternative comedy 'moment' and the re-writing of the stand-up comedy agenda.

Britain at the start of the 1950s was still suffering from a post-war malaise paradox: on the one hand still triumphant at the outcome of the Second World War but on the other wrought by the economics of such a victory; a proud empire but facing inevitable decline with the rise of America and Russia as post-war super-powers. Britain (rapidly acting out of accord with its prefix of Great) lumbered through the Suez crisis, the start of the Korean war and joined Nato, aligning with America in the Cold war, saw the rise of Anthony Eden, the decline of Churchill and the unfortunate success of Lonnie Donnegan and 'skiffle'. Teddy boys, 'juvenile delinquents', resentment over national service and CND all later pointed the way to pressure for social change: post-war 'youth culture', a new invention, became defined in reaction to the political and social constraints of a pre-war morality. The Goon Show ran throughout a decade that saw the end of rationing, austerity and belt tightening and the start of a new era of consumerism, affluence and upward mobility, television, the establishment of the welfare state and increasing prosperity. A grim and grey period that has eluded the 'industrial nostalgisation' of the 1960s, which has been over-represented and commodified, the 1950s were a key transitional and implicitly political era for comedy.

### **The Goon Show.**

"Myself and [Peter] Sellers always thought of ourselves as comic Bolsheviks. We wanted to destroy all that went before in order to create something totally new. We were actually very serious about that." Spike Milligan. <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Observer, 2/12/95.

The Goon Show - with Spike Milligan, Harry Secombe, Peter Sellers and Michael Bentine, who left early on - started broadcasting on the BBC in 1951 as Crazy People, changing their name to The Goon Show in 1952 and continuing as such until 1960. Although The Goon Show was groundbreaking it was not without their own antecedents; The Marx Brothers (though by no means exclusive) use of daft names, hectic slapstick, wise cracks and general tumult and silliness were the most obvious connection. In radio, there are clear parallels with Tommy Handley's radio show It's That Man Again, or ITMA, which had begun to use the medium to broadcast "a torrent of puns, rapidly delivered to a barrage of sound effects."<sup>4</sup> The Goon Show, in reaction to the austerity years presented, not life as we know it twisted, like the Marx Brothers, but an alternate universe where the laws of physics, the rational or reasonable did not apply to the population of unique characters. Little had any consequence and anything could appear, disappear, stop or suddenly change. The Goon Shows appears to have been a half hour removal from the moment, an abstraction, rather than an entertaining distraction or a critique. Although it is hard to gauge the effect it had at its defining moment it is still possible to chart the effect it has had since. The Goon Show constantly deconstructed the medium of radio while remaining, paradoxically, absolutely dependent on it ("try doing this on television."<sup>5</sup>) for the success of sound effects gags as well as the rapid temporal, spatial and contextual changes. The Goon Shows constantly refer to the fact that they are within a radio show thus dissolving the mystique of the medium. They took Groucho Marx's filmed asides to the audience beyond the logical limit. This deconstruction continued as they tested and expanded the possibilities of broadcast radio. They improvised asides, read out spoof stage directions, pointed out the age of some of the jokes, laughed over errors in diction and at their own gags, especially Secombe whose hysterical high pitched giggling seems to be an integral part of the overall sound. On the recordings the audience cheer at recurring phrases and the character voices and the repetition of corny jokes; there is almost an ambience of camaraderie

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<sup>4</sup> Leslie Halliwell, Double Take and Fade Away, London: Grafton, 1987, p. 218.

<sup>5</sup> The Goon Show: The Dreaded Batter Pudding Hurler of Bexhill on Sea, BBC Comedy Classics, Vol. 1, 1954. Randomly chosen selection.

or even gentle conspiracy between the audience, the performers, crew and band. Milligan (and later with Eric Sykes) exploits as many joke styles as he can: jokes of satirical content at the expense of Lady Docker and Clement Atlee in “The Dreaded Batter Pudding Hurler”;<sup>6</sup> homeless Prime Ministers, clueless Chancellors and nuclear missiles in “The Jet Propelled Naafi”;<sup>7</sup> seemingly deliberate music hall corn and catchphrases - “kindly leave the stage”, “I don’t wish to know that” - and innuendo - “Up your pipe”, “Hello Sailor” and more extreme silliness and surrealism - a man living inside a gas oven on a lifeboat.<sup>8</sup> Despite the absurdity of it all an obvious intelligence drives the scripts; peppered with contemporary cultural data, historical and literary references and a boldness of approach, they have an almost childlike glee in their mania. The Goon Show still maintains a legion of fans and remains funny, despite the antiquity of many of the gags, references and language; jokes depend on language and language changes constantly. Exempt from these temporal, spatial and rational restrictions, there is no closure in many of the stories. Milligan seems to just stop at the end of the thirty minutes, often with little respect for conclusions or narrative. The structure seems almost improvised in feeling, even random, but it has a fast pace and is almost hysterical in content with a remarkably high gag count. Their approach to the medium remains unique and groundbreaking and, as yet, unsurpassed.

The advanced commodification of leisure pursuits, broader marketing of sartorial styles, the beginnings of US pop cultural hegemony and of ‘youth’ as a marketable concept seeing out the last years of austerity all placed The Goon Show firmly within a broader cultural shift. Milligan has continued to plough his own unique and, at times, startling furrow with the various Q programmes that, despite their generally acknowledged influence on Monty Python’s Flying Circus and alternative comedians, the BBC seem content to resign to the archives, a point that aggrieves Milligan himself: “It’s an outrage, because that’s what gave the Monty Python lot

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> The Goon Show: The Jet Propelled NAAFI, Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> The Goon Show: The Dreaded Batter Pudding Hurler of Bexhill on Sea, Ibid.

their idea. They'd all been flops up until then and then Q came along and it fitted their format completely".<sup>9</sup> Spike appears more these days on chat shows promoting his writing, which ranges from the profound to the ludicrous, than in a context where he can explore his more visual and bizarre ideas. His influence is not as noticeably significant in contemporary comedy, he is name-checked less and less, but he must take the credit for kick-starting a subversive strain of British comedy.

### **The Lad Himself - Tony Hancock.**

The subversive thread continued in an altogether different form to The Goon Shows and into that which defines the polarities, or parameters, of British comedy. The Goon Shows represented the beginnings of a surrealism that has remained influential within comedy to this day whereas Tony Hancock grounded his comedy all too clearly within the dull quotidian of English 1950s suburban sit-com land. Relatively fixed, the location in Hancock reflects a stability if not a stagnation; in The Goon Shows location is completely flexible, representing a free range imagination. Hancock's most influential contribution to post-war British comedy is that he predicts and subverts the suburban mores of future sit-coms; few appear to have strayed from the 1950s standard neighbourhood model. A random check of the week's programming<sup>10</sup> of sit-coms - Sykes, Hancock himself, The Lovers (all repeats), a new Reginald Perrin series sans Perrin, Coogan's Run and Game On - find them all located in a time-warped neighbourhood of semi-detached grey cardigans and estate cars (although Hancock did eventually move from East Cheam to the more upmarket Earls Court). Existing in a nameless, vaguely recognisable periphery forever English suburban, the BBC's most popular sit-coms, Keeping Up Appearances and One Foot In The Grave (both acutely observed and acted superbly by the leads, Patricia Routledge and Richard Wilson respectively) also appear a stones throw away. Hancock's Half Hour, written by Ray Galton and Alan Simpson, originally broadcast on BBC radio from 1954 to 1961, appeared on television from

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<sup>9</sup> Time Out, 10/4/96.

<sup>10</sup> Guardian Weekend, 18/10/96.

1956 to 1961. The programmes dealt with the aspirations of the central character, his comic truths filtered through a layer of grim pessimism, his attempts at self betterment (almost an analogy of the fading British Empire) destined to failure and self delusion. He resents those to whom he would aspire; the rich, the successful, the 'cultured'. He presents a figure that is easy to mock but which reflects so much of the English quotidian. Pedantic in detail and full of platitudes he can never live up to, the Hancock figure moves through his frustrated days, a work-shy incompetent of few apparent means. The programmes are full of fascinating quotidian detail and cultural phenomena - the space race, teddy boys, Cliff Richard gags, NHS slogans, crates of stout and bread puddings - which all seem lost on Hancock, incapable of having fun and unable to fit any social context despite all efforts to the contrary. Pompous and easily deflated through his own ignorance, he sees cliché and phoney common knowledge as wisdom and is offensive without actually meaning to be by being disparaging in his praise. Hancock, reflecting the state of a post-war power in decline, remains convinced of what little former importance he can cling to and is arrogant enough to believe others are interested in, or impressed by, his petty achievements. Much given to pontification, he attempts to impress anyone who happens to be in the vicinity but they quickly move away. The Hancock figure is delightfully misanthropic, always disappointed or deflated by people and himself and seems fated to remain in his room on his own, the one place and person he can rely on although remaining convinced this is plainly beneath him. He is always single, despite his occasional efforts to the contrary, and he is usually lonely. There is a difference between 'alone' and 'lonely': alone is a choice, a decision to be solitary; 'lonely' implies a situation created contra desire. Hancock is a classic comic character and wholly believable mostly due to the skill of the writers framing the character of the real Hancock in the guise of the comic one. The pieces really take off during his monologues, the lonely guy incapable of forming any kind of coherent relationship, digressing into flights of fancy that rapidly crumble once they attempt to cross the divide into reality, which is rarely far away.

In The Blood Donor he is full of bluster, patriotic duty and tales of military bravery that dissolve when he faints after an injection - "I didn't faint, I was sleeping" - <sup>11</sup> In The Radio Ham <sup>12</sup> he proves, yet again, to be incompetent, confounded by demand and useless in a crisis. There are the flights of fancy, satirical digs, much detail and the fascination of the central character - as well as the supporting cast, the wily Sid James, the oily Kenneth Williams, the over-bearing Hattie Jacques - that lend the programmes such lasting appeal. They are all great British comedy actors. However, it is the dismantling of attitudes and the pinpointing of pretension as well as the unwavering accuracy in the depiction of English suburbia and its mores that give the programmes strength. Although he is always an outsider it is only by being so that he can give glaring insights into the pretensions of English existence. Hancock is like a long running metaphor for the English system of belief. The situations are familiar, the aspirations of betterment our own but it is the inherent flaws within the character that render him comic. His inelasticity, or inability, to adapt to circumstances make him a classic Bergsonian comic character; he is the figure that Plato speaks of, full of the vanity of pretend virtue in light of obvious humility. Watching him, not only do we realise the error of his ways but the errors of our own.

With both Milligan and Hancock's work, we begin to see comedy in reaction to the political and social circumstances of the day: The Goon Show's surreal escape into a parallel world in reproach of the staidness of the BBC and the politics of austerity; Hancock offering a direct critique of social mores of 1950s Britain. Similarly, as we shall see, That Was The Week That Was and the satirists of the early 1960s were to embody many of these qualities as they experimented with form and offered a critique of out of touch parliamentarians who have failed to notice the beginning of a new technological and youth focused era. Monty Python's Flying Circus mixed satirical comment with the surrealism of The Goon Show in a definitive 1960s style with a healthy disregard for form. Alternative comedy also grew from a reaction to

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<sup>11</sup> Hancock's Half Hour: The Blood Donor, BBC Comedy Classics, Vol. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Hancock's Half Hour: The Radio Ham, Ibid.

the rightward swing of comedy in particular and politics in general. Now, in the late 1990s, with the political edge shaved off much of the stand-up comedy (except a few who can easily be nailed as 'too 1980s') we also see a greying of the arena of party politics, a merger into the middle ground which echoes within comedy. It is an echo that repeats time and time again in the growth of comedy and the change of political and social convention, the history of comedy reflects these changes.

### **Beyond The Fringe.**

"Our idea was "isn't it funny that ..." - let's observe what actually goes on, imitate it, and remind people by the shock of recognition how absurd things are." Jonathan Miller. <sup>13</sup>

"It was shocking and thrilling, but it was done with such skill and intelligence that it could not easily be shot down, dismissed or shrugged off." Michael Palin on Beyond The Fringe. <sup>14</sup>

Probably the first direct and iconoclastic assault on traditional mores and institutes, Beyond The Fringe (Jonathan Miller, Peter Cook, Dudley Moore, Alan Bennett) performed in 1960 at the Edinburgh Festival. All the members have since gone onto follow their own paths: Miller as both film and opera director; Bennett as dramatist; Moore in increasingly banal films; and the now dead Cook with Private Eye and various other comic assaults. All have veered from the iconoclastic to the resolutely conventional. Cambridge (Miller, Cook) and Oxford (Moore, Bennett) educated, the four members had all worked in revue and when put together pooled their resources to come up with Beyond The Fringe. Beyond The Fringe is remembered for its satirical bite but they also included comedy for comedy's sake presented with minimal staging, dark, plain clothing and music. Attacks on religion, war and the class system and impressions of the Prime Minister (Cook) were by no means revolutionary (and various members admit they were never 'angry young men') but no one else seems to have been doing it. Although not as widely known as The Goon Show and Hancock due to recordings and television repeats, Beyond The Fringe was important for its move into a cabaret style, relatively light censorship (being in the theatre gave slightly more flexibility than on BBC radio, law permitting) and

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<sup>13</sup> In Roger Wilmut, From Fringe To Flying Circus, London: Methuen, 1980, p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> Observer, 13/1/95.



consolidation of format. The satire element explored possibilities further exploited by That Was The Week That Was. Beyond The Fringe was presented as revue and as the show developed they also began to laugh on stage, which according to Miller did not work against them. In a theatre rather than a cabaret setting this brings it closer to stand-up comedy performance with the performer actually being involved in real time, appreciating what the audience appreciates and puncturing the orthodox audience-performer relationship by reducing the distance between them.

“Cook: I want you to lay down your life, Perkins. We need a futile gesture at this stage...

Miller: Goodbye Sir. Or is it Au Revoir?

Cook: No, Perkins.”<sup>15</sup>

In Beyond The Fringe: At The Fortune Theatre institutes are ridiculed: the Royal family, Civil Service, the Women’s Institute, the government, public schools and the BBC. Kennedy, class, Colonialism and African dictators come under fire and the cast camp it up splendidly on “Bollard” as an effeminate advertising agency. The previous war hangs next to the threat of another one, the bomb, the Cold War and The End Of The World. There is a satire on civil defence procedures, clever wordplay and official-ese mangling negative meanings into their opposites. ‘Boffins’, cups of tea, tinned fruit, rationing and London Transport. Mingle with pastiche lieder and joke songs, courtesy of Dudley Moore, a spoof Benjamin Britten version of ‘Little Miss Muffet’ with suitable pomp and seriousness. ‘Erudite’ humour, ‘educated’ referencing, absurdity and the obligatory silly voices and daft accents abound. It is unfortunately smut free, though the occasional and privately sniffed armpit, a toilet and a ‘de-trousering’ skirt round the outside. Cook’s ridiculous Harold MacMillan impression is outstanding, he is practically senile and clueless in a changing world, hopeless and misinformed. Bennett’s “Take A Pew” sermon is still funny and gets the best laughs so far. The material reflects concerns of

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<sup>15</sup>At the Fortune Theatre & On Broadway, EMI Records Ltd., 1990. This tape comprises of two tapes, the first at The Fortune Theatre, 10/5/61, and the second on Broadway from November, 1962 and January 1964, by which time Miller had been replaced by Paxton Whitehead.

the time: the bomb, the outdated and inept Tory government outdated and the sea change in culture. It is hard to find funny the obscure references, forgotten events and then-topical targets but it is different to the usual fare from the era, on the radio or in theatre.

Beyond The Fringe is probably more important for what the various members went on to do, or what they inspired, than for what they felt they actually achieved. They clearly continued and consolidated the strand of comedy dealt with here, encompassing all the elements. If Beyond The Fringe suffers from anything it is mythologising: due to the lack of serialisation in any medium, it suffers from hazy memory syndrome and 'them were the days', performing in theatre/cabaret as they did. It appears in aspic, devoid of context. The material is harder to access and transcripts in books communicate not timing or passion but words: comedy is always more than that. The show was a success in America (rare for much English comedy) and continued with replacement members until 1966. Despite its longevity the changes in comedy that it inspired eventually usurped it. Of all the members of Beyond The Fringe it was Peter Cook who played a key part in the continuation of the strand.

### **The Establishment Club.**

Despite efforts by many concerned to allege the contrary, That Was The Week That Was, Private Eye and the Establishment Club have become enshrined as part of 'the satire boom' in the early 1960s. This commonly linked triumvirate occupied the same few fruitful years, the utilisation of satire and, in the case of Private Eye and The Establishment Club, Peter Cook's money. The important connection is that they all contributed to the continuation of a subversive form of comedy in a variety of media and added to a general consensus for change. Private Eye is not of primary importance in this context but the opening of the Establishment Club provided the possibility to develop a harder edged comedy in a stand-up comedy/cabaret context.

It also introduced the work of Lenny Bruce, amongst others, to a large number of performers and audience.

Cook opened The Establishment Club in 1962 in a former strip club in Soho due to the lack of live comedy venues in London (a reason and premises later echoed by Peter Rosengard in the late 1970s). Inspired by the cabaret he had seen in France and Germany, Cook put up the money to create an outlet for comedy with a satirical bent. Performers and writers from the Oxbridge circle came to perform regularly: Dudley Moore, John Bird, John Fortune and Eleanor Bron being some of those still performing today. Although not strictly stand-up comedy, it did showcase satirical monologues and the more traditional revue formats and sketches. The material attacked the various political figures and issues of the time, the church and class as well as the liberal left within the audience. As mentioned previously, John Wells wrote that the audience consisted of many “bird brained intellectuals [who] strode proudly out [of] the theatre to attack the lobster thermidore.”<sup>16</sup> This is a fair point. The privileged enjoying satire attacking that which they are part of. And indeed that which the performers were a part of. What weakens the performances is the fact that they are, if not encouraged, at least tolerated in ‘good spirits’ by those they criticise, like the gentle mockery of The Footlights Revue. Change does not occur through the sole appreciation of ‘political’ comedy, it must be part of a wider consciousness and a desire to dismantle the prevailing ideology. It is fair to say that the mythical ‘satire boom’ was voicing dissatisfaction with the government and the social and sexual mores of the time. Whether they achieved anything is hard to divine.

The Establishment Club lasted for two years in all and, <sup>as</sup> with Beyond The Fringe the performers could develop material with a little more ‘bite’ to it without the need to clear it first with the Director General; being a club with live arena remained a little less restricted by the constraints on radio and television. The cast of The Establishment Club did present an idea to the BBC for a series of programmes that

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<sup>16</sup> John Wells, “Not Filth But Satire” in Masterpieces, London: NEL, 1983, p.11.

never came about although John Bird claims some of the ideas later appeared in That Was The Week That Was.<sup>17</sup> The Establishment cast did, however, visit America and attempted to cross over into TV. The club began suffering financial problems and, after a change in owners, finally turned into a porn cinema.

### **That Was The Week That Was.**

“You can’t do filth here unless you’ve got a degree”. Frankie Howerd illustrates the comedy/class divide on That Was The Week That Was.<sup>18</sup>

Although That Was The Week That Was has not, as Leslie Halliwell claimed, “changed the face of comedy for all time”,<sup>19</sup> it was certainly important in at least a couple of ways: getting satire out of Oxbridge and into people’s front rooms and opening up the medium of television to explore the possibilities therein. It was not just the material that was radical but the fact that on television the cameras and technical paraphernalia, audience and minimal set constructions were all plainly visible. This served to dismantle the illusion of television in the same way that The Goon Show, constantly referring to the fact that they were a radio programme, dissolved the distance and mystique of that medium. The recent BBC re-run of the series showed that That Was The Week That Was still retained considerable power; the direct accusations aimed at government misdemeanours and ministers in particular are something that, due to libel laws, has sadly declined on television (BBC2’s Have I Got News For You occasionally excepted). It faced much criticism, as all satire should, and received complaints over smut (despite smut’s great English tradition in comedy and theatre) and ‘sexiness’.

A sample programme<sup>20</sup> opens with the title song, sung by Millicent Martin, rewritten to include the weeks events, the camera panning round showing the crew and equipment, the audience listening. David Frost, all tight suits and bizarre haircut,

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<sup>17</sup> Wilmot, 1980, p. 57.

<sup>18</sup> That Was The Week That Was, undated 1963, broadcast BBC2 11/10/93.

<sup>19</sup> Halliwell, 1987, p. 210.

<sup>20</sup> Undated 1963 broadcast, 11/10/93.

continues to introduce songs, sketches, 'news headlines', fake sermons (like Alan Bennett), cartoons, monologue and live interviews; there is a lot going on, fast paced and young faces deliver an intellectual cool. The anger does not appear to have dissipated and remains convincing, not contrived, its targets justified: Harold MacMillan, CND, USA, the aristocracy, class, the educational system, government hypocrisy and up to the minute comment on events. Its live broadcast also gave no opportunity to smooth out mistakes and improvisation and Bernard Levin's interviews, in particular, are worthy of note. Questioning his target/victim each week in a hectoring, aggressive tone, Levin showed up the pompous and ill-thought out. Being live, tensions arise from the fact of it happening now in front of the viewer, like stand-up comedy. The topicality seen so late is, at times, obscure and, worse, not funny. Although the specific context may appear lost, certain situations seem destined to be repeated in more recent history: indiscreet ministers, bad government and philandering priests re-speak the jokes in our minds. The highlight of the sample was the "Week in Westminster" monologue performed by Frankie Howerd (now recuperated from tired music hall innuendo to cult status comedian, whilst still doing the same act, in classic music hall tradition). Howerd delivers his standard twitchy, stammering 'ooh-err no you mustn't' whilst sending up the cast - "Ned Sherrin, he's a nice man, underneath" - <sup>21</sup> but, somehow, also manages to explain the economics of the recent government budget. That Was The Week That Was was not stand-up comedy, although it used monologues, but it served as a conduit for this strand of comedy to continue and develop into the mid-1960s. More importantly it also inhabited the mainstream, like The Goon Show and Hancock's Half Hour, and communicated to a broader audience than Beyond The Fringe, for example. Frost went on to produce more diluted versions of the format but the strand continued in other, more experimental guises.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

## Peter Cook and Dudley Moore.

“PETE: ‘BASTARD - Child born out of wedlock’

DUD: Urgrgh! What’s a wedlock, Pete?

PETE: A wedlock, Dud, is a horrible thing. It’s a mixture of a steam engine and a padlock and some children are born out of them instead of through the normal channels and it’s one of the filthiest words in the world.” Pete and Dud On Sex. <sup>22</sup>

Following Beyond The Fringe and the closure of the Establishment Club, Peter Cook and Dudley Moore moved into a more commercial and less satirical area of television work. Although firmly planted in the mainstream, Not Only ... But Also (broadcast by the BBC between 1965 and 1970) continued to take a more cerebral stance in comedy, mixing liberal amounts of smut into the recipe. Cook and Moore’s best work is reliant on repetition, the extraordinarily dull made absurd, silly voices, daft names (e.g., Sir Arthur Streeb-Greebling), recurring characters (Aunt Dolly, Uncle Bert transplanted to any random situation) and rambling dialogues. Their best known creations, Pete and Dud, were the two uninformed idiots continuously engaged in pointless debate full of exacting and trivial detail, bus routes, landmarks and such like. It is a familiar format used, with varying success, by many comedians: Mel Smith and Griff Rhys Jones, Hale and Pace, and Harry Enfield and Paul Whitehouse with their Self Righteous Brothers. There is also an echo of Beckett’s Waiting For Godot in the absurd banter, daft costumes and pointless behaviour. The time wasting of Vladimir and Estragon with their clowning games and ultimately exasperating discourse leading nowhere predict Pete and Dud. And, of course, Waiting For Godot was based on music hall acts, both of which Cook and Moore must have been aware of. Markedly less satirical than Beyond The Fringe and That Was The Week That Was, Not Only ... But Also did get to grips with class, psychology, art, religion and, more often than not, allusions to sex. Cook’s stone faced character serves to undermine Moore, who is often reduced to giggling fits, which gives the recordings a live and improvised feeling. Listening back to the recordings, it seems remarkably tame (as much comedy does) especially when compared to their later, notorious, Derek and Clive tapes that usually consisted of

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<sup>22</sup> “On Sex” from Dud & Pete: The Dagenham Dialogues, London: Methuen, 1971, p. 45.

around an hour of unfettered and joyful obscenity. However, Cook and Moore displayed a willingness to experiment with form and content: minimal sets and low key lighting; much of the material written through improvisation (Cook's favoured method); expressing complex ideas (psychoanalysis, art) whilst avoiding traditional gags and targets; mixing the surreal with the mundane and everyday; and the pushing of 'boundaries of taste'. Cook and Moore reflected a time of change as attitudes, especially towards politicians, satire and sex began to be re-evaluated in the mid to late 1960s.

### **I'm Sorry I'll Read That Again.**

"Here are the news. The entente cordiale was strengthened this morning at a mid Channel ceremony. President De Gaulle, the well known foreigner, opened the escalators connecting the 10 mile French Channel tunnel to the 10 Mile British Channel bridge." <sup>23</sup>

In this context, I'm Sorry, I'll Read That Again is perhaps more important for what it influenced, or led to, than what it actually achieved as a comic entity: it represented the transitional period, post-That Was The Week That Was, of a strain of satire that developed into the surrealism of Monty Python's Flying Circus. With compulsory side partings and public school education, the I'm Sorry I'll Read That Again team was the proving ground for the talents of John Cleese and Eric Idle, later of Monty Python's Flying Circus, as well as members of The Goodies, which may or may not be of import. First broadcast by the BBC in 1964 it continued, on and off, until 1973 and broadcast the work of several Footlights graduates most of whom went on to better things. Satirical in content and with a heavy bourgeois 'educated' bias it attacked public schools, cricket, military and class bias, the medical profession (member Graham Garden was a doctor) and spoofed quiz shows and political figures. Choice innuendo, deliberately bad gags (acknowledging an ironic distance from an obviously bad gag is a good way to pass off sub-standard material) and an armoury of ubiquitous, post-Goon Show 'funny voices' in sketches fill the shows. They also filled out time with 'amusing' songs that are rarely funnier than the

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<sup>23</sup> I'm Sorry I'll read That Again, 3/4/64. BBC Radio Collection, 1992.

opening gambit. As ever, satire is always subject to the flow of culture and a lack of longevity is inherent. This is a problem for much comedy: the truths and experiences may be universal but the form or context in which they are enfolded often prove not to be. If anything, the work of Cleeve is the most outstanding, usually delivered briskly, it belies a precision and economy in the accuracy of writing. I'm Sorry, I'll Read That Again continues the real or imagined Oxbridge hegemony of much satirical radio comedy still noticeable today, although having usurped the dominance of the cosier elements of the BBC radio-com it is perhaps preferable.

### **The Bonzo Dog Doo Dah Band.**

“An early exponent of the surreal comedy later advanced by Monty Python Flying Circus, [the singer Vivian] Stanshall was admired by such figures as Michael Palin, John Cleeve and Stephen Fry.” Robert Chalmers.<sup>24</sup>

The Bonzo Dog Da Da or later Doo Dah Band were a bizarre collection of musicians and ‘eccentrics’ (see Monty Python and the Holy Grail) whose frenetic mix of satire and surrealism preceded Monty Python by several years and explored similar territories, albeit in musical form. All capable multi-instrumentalists, the Bonzo Dog Band, as they were better known, established themselves in London’s Art school scene<sup>25</sup> in 1965, initially influenced by The Temperance Seven and The Alberts, “a crazed cod Edwardian jazz and performance group featuring [Barry] Lacey’s maniacal hominoids.”<sup>26</sup> The Alberts had come from the RCA surrealist/protest/jazz milieu and had eventually utilised robots in their stage performances, robots that were “magnificent hominoids, sick, urinating, stuttering machines constructed of the debris of the century.”<sup>27</sup> The Bonzo Dog Band would “continue to exploit the theatrical devices and the English ‘cod Edwardian’ strategy originated by Lacey and the Dodo Society in the early 1950s.”<sup>28</sup> Stanshall had been known to conduct impromptu ‘performances’ on tube trains: dressed as a

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<sup>24</sup> Observer, 23/4/95.

<sup>25</sup> London Royal College of Art, Central College of Art, etc.

<sup>26</sup> Alex Seago, Burning the Box of Beautiful Things. Oxford: University Press, 1995, p. 88.

<sup>27</sup> Jeff Nuttall, Bomb Culture, London: McGibbon & Kee, 1968, p. 125.

<sup>28</sup> Seago, 1995, p. 88.



vicar, he would obviously pick-pocket an accomplice with the use of fake hands; or he would try, unsuccessfully, to hang himself, frustrated at his lack of knot tying abilities as fellow passengers looked on passively.<sup>29</sup> The Bonzo Dog Band were important for several reasons, not least because they spliced together the three elements of jazz, surrealism and satire informing this subversive comedy into one cohesive whole and brought it closer to the wider mainstream through pop music. The Goon Show, That Was The Week That Was and Peter Cook and Dudley Moore all featured jazz interludes and all dealt, to varying degrees, with elements of satire and surrealism; The Bonzo Dog Band created danceable comedy. Their music used much simultaneity: performance elements, satire, masks and costumery; unusual instruments and contraptions; jump-cut music, mixing styles with loose jazz into bizarre melds; and obliquely referencing Spikes Jones and Milligan simultaneously. They had appeared in musical interlude on Do Not Adjust Your Set, a sort of I'm Sorry I'll Read That Again spin off for children in which Bill Oddie wrote songs and, more importantly, Eric Idle, Terry Jones, Michael Palin and Terry Gilliam converged. Quite what the teatime TV tots made of them is undocumented.

Their first record, Gorilla,<sup>30</sup> was tongue in cheek pop parody and trad-jazz based, featuring "Death Cab For Cutie", an Elvis doo-wop spoof. By the peak of their career they were mining an altogether weirder seam. Their second record, The Doughnut in Granny's Greenhouse<sup>31</sup> featured a suburban rivalry over the fence satire, "My Pink Half of the Drainpipe" ("...keeps me safe from you!"); "Can Blue Men Sing The Whites" a swipe at the rash of white, English blues guitarists currently populating the music scene; "Beautiful Zelda", an intergalactic love song; holiday resorts, spacemen and funky voodoo wierdness were amongst other subjects up for inspection. The Bonzo Dog Band did fall faintly foul of flower power influence but luckily managed to split up in 1970, before committing anything too embarrassing to vinyl. Their unique sense of the absurd would no doubt have kept them a sensible

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<sup>29</sup> C.f. Robert Chalmers tribute to Stanshall in Observer Life, 23/4/95.

<sup>30</sup> Bonzo Dog Doo Dah Band, Gorilla, EMI, 1966.

<sup>31</sup> Bonzo Dog Doo Dah Band, The Doughnut in Granny's Greenhouse, EMI, 1967.

distance from the erroneous peace and love sentiments of the time. By the inclusion of Neil Innes in a musical capacity, Monty Python's Flying Circus were to contain a more direct influence (and influence can work both ways: The Bonzo Dog Band absorbing radio comedy and the radio writers absorbing the work of The Bonzo Dog Band). He appeared in several episodes of Monty Python's Flying Circus and their movies and later produced his own Innes Book of Records, a more tempered programme featuring various parodies of musical style, most notably a wheezy Bob Dylan type busker protest song in a subway. The Bonzo Dog Band are probably best known for the unfortunately twee single "Urban Spaceman"<sup>32</sup> which reached number five in the pop charts in 1968, their only real 'success': it is hardly representative of their finer work which may be construed as a little 'far-out' but crucial as a link between early 1960s satire and Monty Python's Flying Circus. A popularity with the student audience, an acknowledgement for their versatility, multi-instrumentalism and parodying skills but most of all their unique sense of extreme humour preserves and separates them from other, later, musical 'comedy' acts The Wurzels perhaps, or The Barron Knights. The Bonzo Dog Band deserve a lengthier tribute, as does Stanshall's subsequent work, most notably the "Sir Henry Rawlinson" records, radio programmes and film.

### **Monty Python Flying Circus.**

Monty Python's Flying Circus started broadcasting in October, 1969. The members of the group had all worked in radio and TV comedy (Do Not Adjust Your Set, I'm Sorry I'll Read That Again) and just as The Goon Show and That Was The Week That Was had exploited their medium of radio and television, Monty Python's Flying Circus exploited all the possibilities given by outside broadcasting and film and animation techniques with a significant emphasis on visual back referencing and continuity. It is hard to quote them; they did not dabble with one liners. Many sketches blend into one another and there is much Spike Milligan Q-style walking on and off, e.g., a "Face The Press" sketch ends by being watched on television by the

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<sup>32</sup> Bonzo Dog Doo Dah Band, "I'm the Urban Spaceman", EMI 1968.

characters of the next sketch. <sup>33</sup> The links are often the best thing about the programmes with the sketches relying on silly voices and dragging out the initial premise to often tedious length. The team willingly donned the dress of comedy but with their own cerebral twist: pinafore clad wifies, like intellectual Les Dawson's discussed Hockney, Proust and Sartre. Despite the Franco-philosophical references the programmes are full of quintessentially English cultural data and satires on the class system, bureaucracy, historical and cultural figures. Some of the sketches have a significant resonance for today; the semaphore version of Wuthering Heights predicting the BBC's obsession with costly/costume dramas of the mid-1990s. <sup>34</sup> There is a lot going on and, in the video age, much can be re-discovered with the rewind button. The techniques are varied: deconstruction of clichés (and the invention of their own for later generations); the halting of sketches mid-flow and talking to camera; the absurd names and silly voices; the back referencing and dissolving borders between sketches; using music hall clichés and repetition; and the multitude of cultural references from literature, philosophy, history and politics, which satirised and gave the comedy a richer texture, which may have been lost on some. There are no sacred cows, some of it is cruel and much of it is just plain silly. They maintained full use of the everyday and the bizarre, the mundane and the high-brow: they were surrealist in the original sense of the word - juxtaposing seemingly unconnected elements in contexts vaguely familiar. They also utilised comic characters in true Bergsonian sense, entangling the stiff upper-lipped captain or office bureaucrats in spiralling events of absurdity.

The problem with any analysis of Monty Python's Flying Circus is that it can seem annoying and clichéd and much is dated; it is hard to gauge the effect it had on the viewing population. Added to the fact that much of the material has passed into comedy clip land on television and some of the better known is clichéd through repetition, there is no problem with fast forwarding some of the videos. They have

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<sup>33</sup> Monty Python's Flying Circus - The First Four Programmes, BBC Videos, 1989.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

become an institution, like The Goon Show. The animator Terry Gilliam is the only one still doing ground breaking work in film. Cleese is a Liberal Democrat puppet and the others remain variously Hollywooden or paddle around the world in a canoe.

### **Stand-up Comedy in the 1970s.**

Post-Python, the strain existed within a purely straight stand-up comedy style - pre alternative comedy - with Billy Connolly and Dave Allen. Connolly, until relatively recently, and due to his uncompromising stance over use of language, operated almost exclusively as a stand-up comedian. Although occasional chat show appearances boosted his audience significantly, television sensitivities previously viewed his language and subject matter as extreme. Allen's various programmes for BBC TV, in which he sat smoking and drinking whisky, revealed his unique and often barbed view of life. Interspersed with sketches that usually attacked the Catholic church and sexual mores of the time, they achieved considerable success. Both comedians have pushed the limits of acceptability in taste and language and shown the truth of how things are rather than how we imagine them to be. They are both significant in the pre-alternative comedy era as they broke ground (and continued to do so) that alternative comedy rarely acknowledged although covered itself.

### **Billy Connolly.**

"I love the way the boys [sic] have changed the direction of humour. Where religion and politics used to be taboo subjects, they are now essential ingredients. I think I had a part in the changing of it because for a lot of years I was out there on my own." Billy Connolly .<sup>35</sup>

"I'm sometimes credited with inventing 'alternative comedy' - which I probably did." Billy Connolly.<sup>36</sup>

Connolly, a Glaswegian ex-welder, developed his stage persona in folk clubs throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s. He had originally played banjo in folk bands but had gone on to work solo. His monologues, characterised by trad-gag

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<sup>35</sup> Anthony Davis, Laughtermakers, London: Columbus, 1987, p. 40.

<sup>36</sup> Radio Times, 18/9/94.

avoidance, much profanity and a refusal to shy away from the squalor and detail of everyday life gradually dominated his act. His beginnings in the Glasgow shipyards and exposure to “Red Clydeside” history, the left wing politics of the folk clubs, Glaswegian humour and an intolerance of traditional mother-in-law/ the wife jokes led to the formulation of a quasi pre-alternative comedy. For all the criticism of profanity and depravity Connolly has maintained a fairly high moral stance: he attacked organised and hypocritical religion; he spoke of the insularity and violence within the family; he avoided outright racist and sexist material, which was a comparatively rare stance in stand up comedy in pre-alternative comedy days.<sup>37</sup>

Much of Connolly’s material is self written and, like Dave Allen, obsessed with bodily functions but he places it, if not questions it, in a social context trying to get to the truth of why things are embarrassing. It is not all vomit and backsides, Connolly is expert at bringing the profound to the familiarly obscene and deals with sex not as a voyeur sniggering at the act or using sex as a reason to debase someone but as a participant fully aware of his own inadequacies. He has also dealt, with childhood beatings and fear of parental violence, which is hardly the source of much comedy but he manages to deal with it as a social fact of a, perhaps, previous world. He is expert, like Roddy Doyle in Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha<sup>38</sup> at recalling childhood detail and getting to grips with the hilariously universal elements of growing up. Connolly’s strength is that he always appears the same in interviews and stage work, has a considerable persona and tackles everyday life in the language heard in any pub or football match in most parts of the country. Connolly appears to have suffered from the affliction common to many comedians in the 1970s of making spoof records: “In The Brownies”, “DIVORCE” and “The Welly Boot Song” are destined

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<sup>37</sup> Jonathan Margolis, in The Big Yin: The Life and Times of Billy Connolly quotes him as saying “these new comedy people who say no racism, no sexism, no that-ism, no this-ism. How dare you start rewriting the rule book?” (Margolis, 1994, p. 193). Connolly, inevitably, has changed his views over the years in accordance with his lifestyle. Whoever he hangs round with and wherever he lives, however, his comedy has been some of the best around.

<sup>38</sup> Roddy Doyle, Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha, London: QPD, 1993. Doyle’s best work gets straight to the unique yet universal experience of growing up in a new working class estate in the not-so-swinging 1960s.

to be bracketed with the Barron Knights. It is difficult not to view these ‘funny’ singles as promotion for more expensive products, like records and tours, or just to keep the public profile on the map between tours for those who would not have chance to see him live.<sup>39</sup>

Connolly has managed to become internationally successful, whilst retaining some modesty; he has continued in much the same vein without compromising material or language, proved by the BBC with his World Tour of Scotland.<sup>40</sup> It is not true to say that Connolly ‘invented’ alternative comedy, although unlike Allen he does acknowledge at least exerting some influence; something that worked both ways. However, both Connolly and Dave Allen controlled and developed a strain of comedy that directly informed alternative comedy. Connolly performed a more politicised stand-up comedy, iconoclastically similar in stance to Lenny Bruce and Richard Pryor that, with the strain of satire and surrealism peculiar to English comedy, mixed into alternative comedy. Like Bruce and Pryor, his unflinching attitude towards truth, weakness and social morality is his greatest strength, and all three have been strongly moral on hypocrisy, racism and poverty. The other significant achievement for Connolly is that he has moved from folk clubs to comedy stage to rock status (he was support act on Elton John’s American tour in 1976) and has achieved a massive crossover success. Connolly did the same as the Saturday Night Live crew in America by putting across a comedy from the rock consumers point of view, a hipper street comedy. Instead of the more traditional comedy, dealing with family life, the wife/mother-in-law and racism, this comedy deals with subject matter more familiar to a younger audience: an everyday life of casual drugs, music, politics and sex as a serious concern rather than a sniggery ‘golf club Dad’ joke.

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. Alexei Sayle, “‘Ello John, Got a New Motor?’”

<sup>40</sup> Connolly’s “World Tour of Scotland” was a series of gigs round small parochial venues in Scotland interspersed with travel monologues. He refused to compromise his use of language, something which he and the BBC were criticised for.

## Dave Allen.

“Audiences were indoctrinated for years that there were certain subjects which you couldn’t laugh at, you couldn’t talk about - and I’m not just talking about sex ... You couldn’t talk about the church, and you couldn’t - especially on television - talk about politicians, or the judiciary”. Dave Allen.<sup>41</sup>

Dave Allen has developed a unique and sardonic comedy attitude, fuelled by a just visible compassion. His stand-up comedy and television shows in the late 1960s and 1970s (BBC’s Dave Allen At Large, Dave Allen Tonight) did not disguise their contempt for papal hypocrisy and the baffling aspects of everyday life. Allen sitting on a stool smoking a cigarette is an enduring image: a glass close by and brushing the ashes from his trouser legs with the missing fingertip about which he constantly lied. Although from a different background, comedically and socially, he was with Connolly a conduit for continuing the strain in stand-up comedy, was a clear antecedent of alternative comedy and confronted taboos whilst carrying the mandate of popular success despite the menu of “religion, sex, papal infallibility, cemeteries, madness and nose picking.”<sup>42</sup> During the late 1960s and 70s his work stood out from the majority of television comedy in that it appeared neither ‘highbrow’ or surreal, like Monty Python’s Flying Circus, nor variety based, like many stand-up contemporaries. He has remained rooted firmly within the everyday experience (despite being like several other Celtic comedians performing ‘Irish’ jokes, forgivable considering context). In the 1970s, not given to the cheapness available at the time Allen stood out on television for his straight-faced, non-clowning persona and quite hard hitting material (although the filler sketches seemed often obvious). His dealing with the taboo subjects of sex and religion touched raw nerves, particularly in Ireland. Taboo subjects for Allen, ‘that which should not be talked about’, indicated a problem worthy of discussion; only through discussion can we come to an understanding and subsequently deal with it. This non-legislative censorship makes incisive comedy impossible. Comedy can serve as a catalyst that clarifies a problem.

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<sup>41</sup> Observer, 18/12/94.

<sup>42</sup> Gus Smith, Dave Allen: God’s Own Comedian, London: Robert Hale, 1991, p. 125.

“He refused to comment on the view that he himself was the first alternative comic and spawned the present angry crop.” Gus Smith on Dave Allen.<sup>43</sup>

Allen has sparked controversy several times through not pulling his punches. In Australia, where for several years he had been a successful chat show host, he had a lengthy discussion on masturbation with Peter Cook and Dudley Moore; he featured a sketch in 1975 of the Pope doing a strip act; he had annoyed Mary Whitehouse by screening a post-coital conversation sketch; and in 1990 he initiated a storm of complaint by saying ‘fucking’ during a gag on ITV.<sup>44</sup>

“Comedy is knowing how vulnerable you are; how silly and trite and how petty and wonderful and all those things that make a human being”. Dave Allen.<sup>45</sup>

This attitude is one of the things that stood Allen apart from his less provocative contemporaries: his willingness to examine the quotidian and taboo but also to acknowledge his own vulnerability. With both Allen and Connolly, their vulnerability separates them from the traditional wise-guy stand-up format. A comedian rooted in the more traditional style like Bob Monkhouse, who is without doubt highly skilled, displays no such vulnerability: he is a consummate professional but his slickness undermines him because we know it is a falsehood, not that stand-up comedians have any compunction to reveal anything they do not want to reveal. Monkhouse has “...a slimy comic persona - all showbiz self deprecation, sleazily revelatory about what we are asked to suppose is his sex life, disparaging about his family.”<sup>46</sup> Monkhouse appears too smug and too clever and we are unable to relate to him in the way we can relate to someone like Connolly or with Allen through shared experience or empathy, subject to the ridiculous events of everyday life. Monkhouse seems exempt or unaffected by quotidian frustration. Alexei Sayle stands diametrically opposed to Monkhouse: we may have difficulty identifying with him but he embodies the fascination attached to the street drunk shouting to himself. We want to see the outcome of the extraordinary. Connolly is in the same boat as us,

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.

<sup>44</sup> Source: Smith, 1991.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Stuart Jeffries, *Guardian*, 31/7/95.



so is Monkhouse but he would be travelling first class. Confused, irritated and powerless, Allen is like anyone else stood outside the No Smoking area with a cigarette complaining. Monkhouse is not: he exudes superiority, real or imagined and, worse, knows it. It is possible to locate a further distinction between the 'traditional' comedians, the Royal Command performers, and comedians like Connolly, Allen and later Sayle and the alternative comedians. Although all stand-up comedians tell jokes in front of an audience who have come to laugh, we can clarify the difference if we go back to Debord's previous stipulation that "a personal expression within a framework created by others cannot be termed a creation. Creation is not the arrangement of objects and forms, it is the invention of new laws on that arrangement."<sup>47</sup> Monkhouse and ilk took the well-known format of stand-up comedy, telling jokes, not to change anything (and this is not to say all the comedians previously mentioned were deliberately iconoclastic) but to stamp their personal style on the form; it is their 'personal expression'. The stand-up comedians continuing this subversive strain played with that framework bringing in new subjects, styles and ways of taking it further from the music hall and into a relevant contemporary context - by inventing "new laws on that arrangement". It is this that is worth celebrating.

### **Not The Nine O' Clock News.**

Apart from Connolly and Allen the strain seems to have become less visible during the mid-1970s. Although all of Monty Python's Flying Circus were active in making films and producing their own programmes it is doubtful that these had as much effect on comedy (and the populace) as their previous series. The stand-up comedy of the day continued with its music hall descendants, Irish cartoon comedians and a general mediocrity of material and politics. However, in 1979 a mild version of the strain appeared to manifest itself publicly with the first series of BBC2's Not The Nine O' Clock News featuring Mel Smith, Griff Rhys Jones, Rowan Atkinson (Oxbridge graduates) and an Australian comedy actress, Pamela Stephenson.

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<sup>47</sup> Home, 1994, p. 29.

Although more satirical than iconoclastic and somewhat dependent on revue style sketches, the mix of satire, spoof, songs and sketches were, at the time, a welcome relief in television comedy. The target audience for Not The Nine O' Clock News was obviously young, its politics left leaning and it was placed firmly in between the decline of the Monty Python's Flying Circus and the start of a wider recognised alternative comedy. It was absurd, slightly risqué and, in light of the comedy drought, refreshing. The programmes loose format turned on the fact it went out at the same time as the BBC's real Nine O' Clock News. The programmes usually began with spoof news reading (or breakfast television spoof, relatively new at the time, with the newscasters in their pyjamas, shaving and eating toast) and went on to sketches. It was not so far away from the I'm Sorry, I'll Read That Again format of quick change characters and set pieces, but updated with its use of comedy photo captions (still used in, amongst other things, BBC2's Have I Got News For You) and contemporary music. All the members of the team went on to more mainstream TV and film comedy, most regrettably Atkinson and his Mr Bean programmes for ITV and subsequent hit movie. Smith and Jones continued with their own series and Pamela Stephenson hosted various series and documentaries. Out of all of them, it was the underrated Stephenson who has received most criticism for various reasons (mostly for her private life and multifarious shenanigans) and her work here has been largely overlooked especially her uncanny impressions of Janet Street Porter, newscasters and Royals. Shunned by the younger alternative comedy set, Not The Nine O' Clock News has sustained some (deserved) criticism but, in retrospect, it served as a crucial bridge post-Python and pre-alternative comedy and was a provider of some relief from the tyranny of the dinner suit and mother-in-law gag merchants.

## Victoria Wood.

“We all know we’re all little, frightened, vulnerable people.” Victoria Wood.<sup>48</sup>

“I’m not trying to make them think, but I couldn’t say anything I didn’t half-believe in.” Victoria Wood.<sup>49</sup>

Victoria Wood practically pre-empted the new comedy and, more specifically, many of the boundaries within which women would later operate. Although very ‘clean’ and ‘family friendly’ she has covered a remarkable amount of subjects in wry and often sad detail. Although renowned for her songs, it is in her stand-up where she comes across best: honest, disarming, down to earth. Wood had been a drama student in Birmingham, going into revue and later winning a New Faces competition and from 1974 onwards had begun performing on the occasional television show. Developing a unique song and , at first, shaky performance patten, she has branched out into television comedy, theatre and a more relaxed stand up style, the latter which is of principle interest here. She is incorrigibly normal and when on stage puts across as much of herself as possible: “I feel that that’s me on stage. It’s not an act.”<sup>50</sup> Her appearance is smart but distinctly anti-glamour, more Woman’s Own than Hello, more cardigan than leather jacket.

Although she would hardly see herself as part of a subversive lineage, there is no doubt that she had begun attempting to clear some kind of space outside of the limited comedy parameters - the Northern club circuit or variety television - and preceded alternative comedy in this. She is cited by many who have followed and although she would probably balk at being labelled an ‘alternative comedienne’ she has exerted a subtle influence in her quietly groundbreaking way. Although some have claimed her to be ‘the first woman stand-up comic’, this may not be so true: Marti Caine and Faith Brown, the impressionist, had both been well established before her, although hardly operating in the same territory, either in subject matter or geography. Like Connolly, she grew from a milieu (TV comedy/light entertainment)

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<sup>48</sup> South Bank Show, ITV, 1996.

<sup>49</sup> Roger Wilmut, Didn’t you Kill My Mother-In-Law? London: Methuen, 1989, p. 124.

<sup>50</sup> South Bank Show, ITV, 1996.

that did not fit round her. She moved away to try to find a sense of autonomy where she could dictate circumstance and control. Her success as a playwright eventually led to a television series and opened up possibilities for women in comedy and gave her a public space, a live context, where she could develop her stand-up act.

Wood does not attack targets as such, but sends them up with remarkable accuracy. Her heroines are old biddies, fusspots, eccentrics and the slightly, unnervingly odd. She has often made comedy from the viewpoint of people apparently older than herself. The subject matter and reference points of her micro-world are at odds with her stage persona: she presents a bizarre, though recognisable, matrix of cardigans, 'water-works', shopping at Kwik Save and comfort food. She celebrates rather than denigrates the microcosmic and is acute as well as remarkably positive. Her comedy is totally at odds with alternative comedy's almost avant-garde approach but somehow strangely parallel: performing without a wider context; attempting something unique and unmarketable (temporarily); and creating space for new voices and ideas in comedy.

"Fish, chips, cycle clips, gas light and games in t' street,

Nutty slack, privvy at the back, Gradely I am reet." Victoria Wood from the song "Northerners."<sup>51</sup>

Wood recorded Lucky Bag in 1983, which consisted of a mix of straight stand-up monologue and her terse, witty songs. All her favourite references are here: Coronation Street and trite television shows, BHS head squares, C&A, Cocoa, Cosmopolitan and Women's Realm ("orgasms and how to knit them"); leg warmers in hopeless keep-fit lessons hide burst varicose veins. There are bizarre images of Liberace in the laundrette and occasional rudery, smutting down a level to Dutch Caps, pants and bums, Playtex, contraception, Tampax and sex changes, but she is not coy. Wood refers to herself in joke form, the third person represented, and is self deprecatory, a bit awkward. It is in the detail that surrounds her that illustrates her life growing up in North. There are also digs at her previous experiences in

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<sup>51</sup> "Northerners" on Lucky Bag, Elecstar, 1983.

television - New Faces, That's Life - as well as Alternative Cabaret and the Arts Council. There is a painful description of life in the decrepit seaside town of Morecambe ("Its twin town is Auschwitz" which is as edgy as the comedy gets <sup>52</sup>) with an Old Age Pensioned economy, "kiss me quick hearing aids" and bad bingo. It is a gentle humour and observant; the songs are usually described as 'pithy', (obligatory word for songs that are actually funny), and often bring compulsory comparisons to Noel Coward, if only because there are so few with her snappy, wry minimalism. It sounds like the audience are not quite used to the form, they are unable to situate her, and some of the more subtle details skim suburban pates. Almost everything is underscored by a Northern melancholia, a self deprecation tempered by fondness. There is a sadness and failure, the smallness of the world of disappointment and a mockery of lower middle class Northern life, but also a nostalgia. Things have not changed in the North West and Victoria Wood sounds like she could never feel comfortable more than five miles from Bury Road in Bolton. Things do not really change in Wood's world, a world still remembered through a post-ration book mildew memory or cheap teen Charlie perfume: she likes to dwell on adolescent confusion and loneliness and its reoccurrence in older people. Love songs are sad and mourn the failure of love and the sex is seedy, damp and cold with the lights out under itchy woollen blankets. There are no politics in this world (apart from a casual 1980s Thatcher reference) just people getting on with it, they hate the social lies and strictures but opt for the easy life. The comedy is dense, detailed and requires attention.

The idea of Victoria Wood touring with Punk bands, letting off fire extinguishers in peoples faces or performing a 'stream of offensiveness', however, remains beyond anyone's mortal ken. It is an odd and unique relation to the history of British comedy. She is the antithesis of the college educated great white male of alternative comedy (and their cod cockney accents) as well as the 'gob on legs', beer bellied Northern club comics. She also operates in an entirely different cosmos to the early

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

anti-men hostility of Jo Brand and Jenny Eclair's mouthy slapper and the more political early Claire Dowie and Jenny LeCoat. At times there is a small comparison with the old women characters of Les Dawson: the hushed tones over the garden wall, whisperings and gossip, the minutiae of detail and time trapped fond mockery of a previous North. Wood and Dawson both deal(t) with what they knew but although sending it up but they remain part of it, there is an honesty and integrity, they were proud of their Northern roots. If Wood could be criticised for anything it is within this: a penchant for the overtly twee, the sentimental and a minuscule parochialness (deeply Lancastrian) although within the parochial often lies a more universal experience; we all shop at the global village grocer. She does make implicitly political statements, especially on sexual relations and sometimes social conditions in the North West, her politics are liberal/left and she is known to perform for Amnesty International. There is, particularly in her songs, an interesting sense of disappointment: the lives she portrays are drab, the sex is frustrating, damp and never life affirming but the characters keep on with it, they are not pessimistic: "It's saying this is how our life is."<sup>53</sup> But despite this, the persona that Wood presents on stage is so warm, approachable and amusing it is easy to take. She is unique, her minimal, rhythmic piano playing drives her songs which are genuinely funny and non-exclusive; this is reflected in her huge success and genuinely cross boundary appeal (Alexei Sayle is a fan). Her contribution to this history is chiselling out a gap in the stifled pre-alternative comedy world and showing that women can perform as themselves as stand-up comedians and not just as breasted appendages for the boys to act up to.

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<sup>53</sup> South Bank Show, ITV, 1996.

## **John Cooper Clarke.**

“I don’t want to be nice/ I think it’s clever to swear”. John Cooper Clarke, *I Don’t Wanna Be Nice.*”<sup>54</sup>

John Cooper Clarke started performing in 1976/7 in Manchester supporting bands like The Fall, The Drones and other local Punk luminaries most of who have not stayed the course. His performance poetry was delivered high speed in a bitingly nasal Manchester accent (a welcome regional change from the pretend cockney of much Punk). His poems - bizarre, intelligent and engaged - were increasingly usurped by comic monologues and jokes. Of dubious taste, high intelligence and often deliberately corny, Cooper Clarke straddled the world of Punk, fringe theatre and comedy and was equally at home at the Poetry Olympics, in a Punk context or performing solo at the Band On The Wall in Manchester. Cooper Clarke’s move into the recording world met with varying success. He represented the first link between the Punk milieu and alternative comedy embodying the politics, energy, style and attitude, translated via a 1966 Bob Dylan suit and shades. In America, Patti Smith had already merged performance poetry and music in a pre-Punk context, albeit addled by daft rock mythology. John Cooper Clarke assimilated classic rock staples - shades, drainpipe trousers, exaggerated hair do - and made his way through the post-Punk Diaspora. Cooper Clarke’s performances were like Punk without the music but his words were infinitely more inspired than the majority of spiky (pseudo) churls. His live performance energy did not transfer to the records he made, filled with lame funk and electronic doodling as they were. His poetry, as well as being funny, was remarkably informed and full of references to the beat era, psychoanalysis, political theory and movies and he has always had a keen eye for cultural absurdity, be it the concept of an ideal home, jogging or kung fu. Heckling further enlivened his performances: few could match his wit (however prepared) and it was often here that he was most entertaining: “Your bus leaves in 10 minutes, be under it” and “I can’t hear you, your mouth’s full of shit” being two particular favourites.

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<sup>54</sup> John Cooper Clarke, “I Don’t Wanna Be Nice” in John Cooper Clarke Directory. London: Omnibus, 1979, p. 26.

What perhaps sidelined Cooper Clarke, as William Cook points out, was the paradox between his apparent political awareness - he referenced Marxist-Leninism, Euro-Communism and was involved with Rock Against Racism - and the reliance on “bog standard shaggy dog stories.”<sup>55</sup> A garish line in sexually orientated gags later stood him apart from the more hard-line alternative comedy acolytes with their (at times dogmatic) anti-sexist stance, worthy though that may have been. This reliability on ‘store-bought’ jokes, delivered well but heard several times before in too many bars, was contradictory to the most important Punk influenced stance of alternative comedy, that of writing one’s own material. It was possibly the jokes that served to distance him from the alternative heritage. Although emerging from the rock treadmill a little haggard and with an often barely augmented set he can still be compulsive viewing (it is not unusual to see him perform the same set over several years) and he can still fill a decent sized venue with a variety of punters. Cooper Clarke also started an interest in the possibilities of Punk poetry and made way for the Ranters performance poets of the early 1980s that included Atilla the Stockbroker, Seething Wells and Porky the Poet. However dodgy the jokes, Cooper Clarke’s poetry is undoubtedly in his own inimitable style and surely deserves more recognition that it currently receives.

## **Conclusion.**

We can see that it is possible to trace an active lineage through some of the key moments in post-war British comedy, each example corresponding to some or all of the point listed earlier. Generally, there is a feeling of pushing against boundaries of taste and acceptance, experimentation with form, but also an engagement with ideas and politics - implicit (Tony Hancock) or explicit (That Was The Week That Was). It also appears, as is usual with any given cultural moment critical of the norm, that much has been recuperated. Absorbed into a mainstream consensus, what it once criticised has now embraced it (like Punk) or it has been resolutely ignored, like Milligan’s post-Goon Show Q series. However, alternative comedy came about for

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<sup>55</sup> William Cook, Guardian, 28/7/94.



more reasons than a spontaneous collection of post-Monty Python individuals determined to carry on a clever strain of satire and surrealism in stand-up comedy. The alternative comedy 'moment' existed within a specific context, a political, social and cultural cross current in a changing England. Punk, the National Front, Margaret Thatcher and subsequent cuts in funding to fringe theatre groups all contributed to the next manifestation of this subversive strain.

## **Punk, Politics and The National Front.**

“Don’t worry, be happy, this is just a fairytale happening in the supermarket.” The Raincoats, Fairytale In The Supermarket.<sup>1</sup>

Alternative comedy has clearly had a significant effect on stand-up comedy today. It proved to be a decisive moment in popular culture and the influence has spread significantly to much trad-com, albeit with some resistance. Alternative comedy changed the way stand-up comedy was performed and perceived and it has adapted and become assimilated into the mainstream of comedy. Now it is difficult to see many comedians as either alternative or mainstream; the divide has dissolved and the influence has proved to go both ways, for good and bad. Alternative comedy became more than a conduit for the subversive strain of comedy and it is important to situate it within a broader social and political context. Alternative comedy acted as a confluence of elements within everyday life: Punk; the political unrest of the day; the increasing stagnation of British comedy in general and the decline in funding for fringe theatre in particular.

A principal factor was the influence of Punk on the new comedy: the Comedy Store was to stand-up as Punk was to pop. Both Punk and alternative comedy instigated an upheaval within the form, presented a redefinition of boundaries and a re-examination of any prevailing ideologies. What is of principal interest in Punk are the ideas that have continued to send waves through a complex of disciplines from dance to theatre, visual art to stand-up comedy, couture to cultural criticism and literature. This is not to offer an ‘analysis’ of Punk but to describe some of the ideas within it and how they can relate to the early stages of alternative comedy. Punk did not invent all these ideas but served distilled many counter cultural ideas that had manifested themselves in the 1960s and before: the idea of a cultural underground in particular and youth movements in general; controlling one’s own means of

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<sup>1</sup> The Raincoats, “Fairytale in the Supermarket”, The Raincoats, Island Records, 1979.

production and distribution; and the development of identifiable signs and clothing, identities and the development of a sharper political mental set.

Although Punk and its descendants continue to thrash around in some form to this day, it is possible to identify a Punk moment. A moment in this context, for Hebdige, is “a particular response to a particular set of circumstances.”<sup>2</sup> When the circumstances change, the moment ceases to be. The reaction may not be appropriate to new situations. The Punk moment started with the activities of the group around the Sex Pistols and ended, approximately eighteen months later in several fragmentations: with that band’s demise; the assimilation into the mainstream of many of the key bands and the diversification into a more political or experimental mode by other earlier exponents. After its initial moment, Punk became more diverse and began to act as a focus for political dissent in gay, feminist and anti-racist struggle. It began to embody a wider social discontent and illuminated a tattered political fabric within social relations as well as the hyper-commodification of much pop music and its removal from concerns of everyday life. Jon Savage has already identified and examined a split in the early Punk movement between the art school contingent and the more ‘prole’ bands.<sup>3</sup> This is arguable, like any categorisation, but certainly there was a visible, or audible, difference between the more experimental (Wire, Raincoats, Slits) and the lumpen (Chelsea, Eater, Cortinas). Punk was finally exhausted as a discernible moment when it was identifiable, tamed and therefore more marketable with the manufacture of the ‘new wave’, power pop and second generation bands (The Police, The Radio Stars). Punk, essentially an anti-consumerist ideal, had been assimilated. Assimilation occurs when something that threatens the status quo is bought off, stolen or imitated. It is then identifiable as product, made safe, packaged and mass marketed, reduced to mere commodity status. Masquerading as its original form, it leeches off its source. However, the

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<sup>2</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Subculture*, London: Routledge, 1994, p. 84.

<sup>3</sup> Jon Savage, *England’s Dreaming*, London: Faber, 1992. Savage’s epic retelling of the Punk moment is drawn from personal diaries as well as research. The split between ‘prole’ and ‘art school’ is his general thesis. It is probably the best ‘insider’ account of it all and details the mania, the drugs, the fall-outs and bitching as well as documenting the lesser known participants.

ideas inherent in punk's initial moment transmuted and continued through post-Punk bands and the opening out and development of musical forms, particularly reggae (PIL, Slits) and the use of synthesisers (Magazine, Wire).

“The role of the Sex Pistols has been completely mystified.” Stewart Home.<sup>4</sup>

There has been much contention over who invented what and so on, as well as much academic speculation on the political input within Punk. In this context we will focus mainly on the ideas manifest in Punk and what they meant in a broader cultural field. The initial catalysts of the British Punk movement are clear. The Sex Pistols, under the auspices of Malcolm McLaren, rose to prominence in 1976 with a combination of raw rock and roll, attitude and image antithetical to the increasingly flaccid forms of pop music at the time: bland glamour, sugar sweet singing and pompous rock. McLaren had originally wanted to use them as a front for his SEX Clothes shop - specialising in rubber and fetish wear - but they took on a life of their own. The Sex Pistols achieved notoriety through well-orchestrated publicity stunts, luck and provocation depending on the account. The Sex Pistols notorious, though now embarrassing, appearance on the Bill Grundy show cemented them as monsters in the media and the minds of the nation and instant icons for many others. Their “God Save the Queen” single, released to coincide with the 1977 Silver Jubilee, caused sufficient uproar as did the arrests at the subsequent boat launch party. They also experienced a hostile press reception, violence at gigs and subsequent bans from many venues. Their final acrimonious dissolution coincided with the end of Punk as a moment but did not necessarily signify it in its entirety. For many the Sex Pistols symbolised Punk even though they had signed up with (several) major record labels, had been on the BBC's Top of the Pops, played fewer and fewer live gigs and achieved significant status. Punk in London and Manchester took off and many bands flourished quickly. Punk traded on its outsider status and held significant appeal to the young and disenfranchised growing up in the cities with few employment prospects, little popular culture that spoke directly to or for them and

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<sup>4</sup>Stewart Home, The Assault on Culture, Sterling: AK Press, 1994, p. 85.

who harboured anti-social tendencies. Although the Sex Pistols characterised Punk as churlish (and many deliberately played down their intelligence) this denies the articulacy of many of protagonists - particularly John Rotten/Lydon, Hugh Cornwall of The Stranglers (not 'properly' Punk) and Joe Strummer of The Clash - and the vitality of ideas within it. Similarly, a generally acknowledged Punk 'sound' of three chords, shouted chorus and vaguely anti-establishment ethos was not hard to produce. This, however, does not do justice to the amount of experimentalism in the first (as well as subsequent) waves of Punk. In the initial period The Fall, Buzzcocks, Clash, Slits, and the Sex Pistols all played significantly different forms of music but had unity in approach, attitude or style. Many Punk bands developed their own means of production and distribution, became fairly politicised and helped develop an overall coherence. The Sex Pistols inspired many to form their own bands through the realisation that the manufacture of pop music necessitates little but enthusiasm. But making anti-establishment noises was not enough: there is little point screaming into the void, and the basic desire to be heard created a network of venues and distribution. In February, 1977, the Manchester band, the Buzzcocks, released the first self made, independent Punk record, Spiral Scratch, using borrowed money. Its cheap paper cover showed a Polaroid of the band. Later, the then singer, Howard Devoto said "...the record could illustrate part of 'do it yourself', Xerox/cultural polemic that had been generated." <sup>5</sup> This polemic that Devoto speaks of is the central connecting line from the counter culture of the 1960s, through Punk and into alternative comedy. This polemic, or DIY ethic, reached through all of Punk's media. The Punk fanzine (although not a new form) documented a moment moving incredibly fast, in its own language, in its own ripped and torn style. A self-written, Xeroxed fanzine could move information around quickly, in a more relevant format than the established press when sold at the right places, gigs and interested shops. Fanzines carried the information others needed to know, because those who produced them wanted to know themselves and had a stake in the perpetuation of the scene, as writers and Punks. Clubs opened with

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<sup>5</sup> Savage, 1992, p. 296.

(considerably) more money where bands could experiment in a more 'autonomous' space: El Paradise in London, Eric's in Liverpool, Electric Circus in Manchester to name but three. Punk attempted to control product, production and the means of distribution: it operated with different criteria to the large record companies and its main ethos was passion for the music with many labels specialising in one-off releases. The prime movers in Punk realised the importance of an overall coherence: clothes, record sleeves, badges and posters consolidated the attitude and image. Punk understood and engaged a multi-disciplinary approach, stressing the importance of graphics, design, photography and clothing as much as music. The music press and record companies did not understand its entirety and, therefore, Punk could develop with relatively little interference. By maintaining these outsider/underground ethics, it turned the fact of being ignored into being enticingly positive, something in which, in highly marketed times is difficult to imagine. The record companies, momentarily confused, let many bands develop without market interference and it took these companies at least 18 months to realise how they could contain and market it, but by then the moment had passed on.

Punk was a reaction to events: the bands talked about the effect events had upon themselves and the scene was run by many whom the desire for change was more than an interesting marketing concept. Punk documented everyday life at the time and although the themes began to be unimaginative and repetitive they were covering subjects other bands ignored or failed to experience. Punk made something (urban life) extraordinary because it decontextualised it and looked at it in a new way. Punk changed, or ceased to move, when it became subject to expectations (media and otherwise) in the same way Surrealism limited itself through the dominant group of defining ideologues and their affected cretinism. Alternative comedy would be subject to the same halting when it, too, became predictable, when the framework became rigid and lacked imagination. In Punk, the large record company involvement, in contrast to the independent labels, emphasised identifiable, homogenised product; radical change may alienate the audience - the principal cash

source. This blocks the freedom to experiment, elevates from the audience and establishes a new pop hierarchy: iconoclasts become icons ready to market widely. Maintaining control over distribution means maintaining control over content.

Punk is now represented as something quite cool but it had traded on geek status and had been attractive to the alienated, the bullied and the outsider element; it could be crude, sloppy, stupid and pointless as well as energetic, funny and exciting. The clothes that many of the more successful bands wore did not reflect those of their followers who did not have the money to buy designer bondage gear or if they had many simply did not have access to them or consequently made or altered their own clothes. Punks now seem as embarrassing as old hippies from the 1960s, clinging on to an outdated moment and valuing appearance over ideas. The ideas within Punk moved through the expanding independent scene of the 1980s and into acid house and the subsequent Rave scene, with their emphasis on independent record labels, clothing manufacture and autonomous space.<sup>6</sup> Although this scene is in danger of critical mass and over-commodification, the ideas will hopefully develop and manifest themselves elsewhere.

Punk's stealing and recontextualising of symbols (investing them with new meanings), particularly the Union flag and especially the swastika, led to associations with the right wing and the National Front. Indeed, several bands openly embraced right wing ideas ranging from support for the Conservatives - The Jam, The Stranglers - to the openly fascist Skrewdriver. John Rotten spoke out against the National Front but the two movements remained linked for their outsider status.

### **Racism in Britain.**

“Growing class awareness and class conflict over a period of economic stagnation and then recession, made the manufacture of a ‘black immigration problem’ a highly functioning

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<sup>6</sup> The DIY crew in Nottingham, amongst many other similar set ups around the country, ran their own radio station, record label, rehearsal spaces and events from the early 1990s onwards.

scapegoating strategy that deflected public attention away from anything other than an economic critique of the distribution of social resources in the country.” Charles Husband.<sup>7</sup>

Britain in the 1970s was experiencing serious social and political turmoil under a failing Labour government, soon removed from power by Margaret Thatcher and her Conservative cabinet. Strikes, social upheaval, football hooligans and Punks in the street, and the National Front on the march to probably becoming the third main party in British politics all created tensions that reflected through popular culture. The extreme right wing National Front had been gaining considerable political credibility with its hard line rhetoric. Formed in 1967 from a coagulation of smaller groups, they were to gain considerable electoral success under the leadership of John Tyndall (who had had a Hitler fixation and a conviction for firearms offences) and Martin Webster (author of the tract Why I Am A Nazi). The National Front’s agenda keyed into the ‘Little England’ mentality and the underlying fear of being “swamped by people of a different culture” as Margaret Thatcher would say later on World In Action.<sup>8</sup> The National Front was nationalist, opposed to immigration of all kinds and supported capital punishment. It emphasised biological determinism, using genetics as the basis for social or environmental differences between people.

In February, 1968, 10,000 Kenyan Asians arrived in Britain following Kenya’s declaration of independence. Shortly after, on April 20<sup>th</sup>, the Conservative Shadow cabinet’s Enoch Powell made his notorious “rivers of blood” speech, referring to “the annual inflow of some 500,000 dependants.”<sup>9</sup> Edward Heath duly sacked him which nailed Powell’s reputation to the mast of history and brought out 4,000 dockers and Smithfield meat porters in his support. An opinion poll found 82% of voters agreed with his views and 73% were against Heath for his actions.<sup>10</sup> Following the slump in popularity of Wilson’s Labour government (1964-70) the

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<sup>7</sup>Charles Husband, “Racist Humour and Racist Ideology in British Television” in Humour in Society, C. Powell & G. Patton Eds. Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1988, p. 157.

<sup>8</sup> Margaret Thatcher’s comments on ITV’s World In Action, January 1978.

<sup>9</sup> Chanie Rosenberg, “The Labour Party and the Fight Against Fascism”, in International Socialism, no39, 1988, p. 69.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.



Conservative party leader Heath took over as Prime Minister. Despite economic growth, the government experienced much social and industrial grief: blackouts; the bankruptcy of Rolls Royce; continuing problems in the North of Ireland and IRA activity on mainland Britain; strikes by dockers, miners, postal and railway workers; and the Arab/Israeli war. Immigration began to be viewed as a threat to the already tattered social fabric of a Britain, seemingly at war with itself. Concern over this saw the National Front's vote count increase in the 1974 election, particularly in working class areas where immigration populations were high. By 1976, unemployment had reached 1,500,000 and the now Labour government, led by James Callaghan saw an International Monetary Fund intervention at the end of a year spent grappling with inflation and spending cuts. A convenient scapegoat emerged through the media and popular typing of the resource draining 'immigrant'.

These patterns of unemployment and industrial strife together with the disenchantment in mainstream political parties and their failure to react to certain populist criteria had seen the rise of Oswald Mosely's British Union of Fascists in the 1930s.<sup>11</sup> The rise of the extreme right wing then echoed throughout Europe, particularly in Germany, Austria, Italy and, eventually, Spain. Similarly, the strikes and civil unrest of the 1970s and the fear of being overrun by 'foreign bodies' provided a solid ground for the National Front. Its hard line rhetoric filled a gap the mainstream parties could not hope to fill and appears to have absorbed the drifting voters from their ranks. The National Front's main aim was to get rid of 'foreigners' who absorbed state benefits so there would be more jobs and houses. The fear of British identity being eroded and this draining of resources connected with popular myths and fears. With respectable figures like Powell giving voice to racist ideas, a strain of similar ideas running through popular culture (jokes and sit-coms especially) and sections of the media substantiating such fears, the National Front absorbed a sanctioned respectability. Although it soon descended into squabbling

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<sup>11</sup> "Hurrah For The Blackshirts", Daily Mail headline, 15/1/34. Source: International Socialism, no. 39.

factionalism, the National Front gained significant percentages in the elections: in Blackburn and Lewisham they polled 38% and 44% respectively; in the 1977 GLC election 20%; and in some wards it got a majority.<sup>12</sup> Reaction to this rightward swing manifested itself in political life and the National Front did not hold total sway over it. There were many marches and demonstrations often ending in ructions between police and demonstrators. It was not until the formation of Rock Against Racism in August 1976 and the Anti-Nazi League in 1977 that a broader cultural counter-attack would mobilise mass support.

### **Rock Against Racism (RAR).**

“But elsewhere in Jubilee City there are fears for the Crown Jewels, BBC English, the Talking Clock and Ascot hats. The racial panic was becoming permanent. ‘Race’ was the codeword, the prism through which the crisis was viewed, the people on who it could be blamed.”<sup>13</sup>

Rock Against Racism was organised in response to the increasing respectability of racism in pop music and general politics and culture. David Bowie had made reference to Hitler being the world’s first rock star and flashed what looked like a fascist salute and both Eric Clapton and Rod Stewart in particular had voiced support for Enoch Powell: “I think Enoch Powell is the man. I’m all for him. This country is over-crowded. The immigrants should be sent home.”<sup>14</sup> Although not before buying a copy of Rod’s latest LP, presumably. RAR realised the power of popular culture and pop music in particular and subsequently provided a focal point through which wider, associated problems could be glimpsed. Partially harnessing the increasingly directionless energy of Punk, the association with RAR began to give it a more political focus.<sup>15</sup>

Many Punk bands aligned themselves with the ideas expressed and clarified a general stance towards the NF and placed the Punk talk of boredom and alienation in

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<sup>12</sup> Source: *International Socialism*, no. 39.

<sup>13</sup> Sleeve notes on *Rock Against Racism’s Greatest Hits*, RAR Records, 1980.

<sup>14</sup> Rod Stewart quoted in David Widgery, *Beating Time*, London: Chatto, 1986, p. 91.

<sup>15</sup> Not all bands were involved and certainly not all Punks were. Many had simply latched onto the nihilism and pointless, unfocussed rebellion of Punk and gave ‘politics’ scant attention.

political perspective. Punk's increasing involvement with reggae highlighted the multi-cultural aspect of Britain and realised the threat the National Front had created. On Mayday 1977, RAR put on one of their first major gigs with Punk bands Generation X and the Adverts and reggae bands Aswad and Steel Pulse, amongst others. In August that year, the National Front marched through Lewisham which ended in a riot and 214 arrests. The split in the anti-racist movement between protest and direct confrontation led to the formation of the Anti Nazi League (ANL) in November, 1977. Together with RAR, a broad cultural and political campaign was mobilised which gave a major push forward for the post-Punk movement and tried to raise the political consciousness and dissolve any remaining Punk flirtation with fascist imagery and rock and roll posturing. The DIY ethic was manifest in RAR/ANL and in that a sense of empowerment. Groups could organise anywhere and get help putting on gigs in their localities and the involvement of more famous musicians like The Clash, X Ray Spex and Elvis Costello gave it an added credibility in Punk circles. On the streets the propaganda war continued, and whenever the National Front organised the RAR/ANL would organise counter demonstrations, often leading to many arrests. The ANL, which was increasingly dominated by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), began to get credible political sanctions, industrially and politically, from MPs and trade unions (RAR tried to be politically autonomous, focusing on cultural agitation). As the 1979 election loomed, the National Front experienced a change in fortunes that could not be entirely credited to the anti-fascist groupings and post-Punk politicking, although their agitational activities did succeed in exposing the National Front as extremists. Many people saw the National Front as a single issue party and, even to its potential voters, there was more "wrong" with Britain than immigration. Margaret Thatcher, new leader of the Conservative party, stole the edge from its hard-line rhetoric. The National Front's popularity waned in the election booth and it faced defeat, loss of credibility and demoralisation and factionalising within its ranks. For RAR and ANL the ideas began to seep deeper into the post-Punk culture and anti-sexism, abortion rights, student and union issues and the Right To Work all began to be seen on the same agenda.

## **Punk and Alternative Comedy.**

“It was to do with Punk, and being radical, political and iconoclastic.” Alexei Sayle. <sup>16</sup>

“You have to remember it came out of Punk as well this Punk thing of, it doesn’t matter what you’re doing as long as you mean it.” Rik Mayall on the early Comedy Store. <sup>17</sup>

Punk and alternative comedy had several things in common, the primary points being a political opposition and an antipathy towards the more traditional performers and formats. Punk demonstrated a provocative performance style: fast, funny and up front; aggressive and using street language and swearing; documenting subject matter of everyday life and contemporary cultural ephemera; having a similar age demographic as the audience; experimenting with forms; and often containing the political overtones of RAR/ANL and oppositional left agenda developing in popular culture. All of these have a strong resonance in alternative comedy. Punk made the cultural climate ripe for an attack on the stand-up comedy, as well as on graphics, design, art, dance, theatre and literature. Both Punk and alternative comedy shared an iconoclasm that would have an effect on their audience as well as on the chosen form. Iconoclasm appears almost historically necessary. Iconoclasm is a statement of intent, a manifestation, rather than an agenda in itself. The defaming of icons is the materialisation of contempt for previous orders and idols, a reaction to the prevailing establishment. Iconoclasm, in its gestural angst, attempts to stamp its mark on history, it wishes to precede reformation or revolution. It is the first step. But sometimes, the iconoclast may not want to establish a new belief but to feel the sheer pleasure of nihilism and embracing the void, which Punk did in its historical moment. Punk literally defaced idols: the “God Save The Queen” cover; the graffiti style graphics splashed across images; the appropriation of symbols; and the defiling of establishment imagery. Alternative comedy wanted to attack the established order, just like Punk, to see its transformation. It did not want to be nice, like the Royal Commanders, but dangerous and risky, experimental. Admittedly, like many Punks, there was much fake street-cred dressed up in bad language and attitude, but some comedians were genuinely intimidating: particularly Alexei Sayle, Keith Allen and

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<sup>16</sup>Alexei Sayle, Independent On Sunday, 29/9/91.

<sup>17</sup>Rik Mayall in Roger Wilmut, Didn't You Kill My Mother-In-Law?, London: Methuen, 1989, p. 55.

Mayall and Edmondson's *Dangerous Brothers*. It was provocative towards the established comedy order and attempted to turn it upside down. In this way its approach was iconoclastic: it changed attitudes and made others aware of the possibilities inherent in the form but mainstream assimilation occurred in an almost inevitable way.

The performance style of much alternative comedy was fast and furious and refused to pull many punches. The acts shared the vitality and newness that Punk had had. Although there appears to have been a divide between the politically focused stand-up comedians (Tony Allen, Jim Barclay, Andy De La Tour) and the more performance/character orientated acts (Mayall and Edmondson, Planer and Richardson, French and Saunders), both could affect a more confrontational or provocative style than the more formal comedy. Similarly, the issue of swearing and language use paralleled the shock value much favoured by Punk. The earlier alternative comedians did not all deal with the same issues (or stand in exactly the same political light). Mayall and Edmondson's manic *Dangerous Brothers* dealt with little of a serious content, likewise Planer and Richardson. Arnold Brown dealt with more subtle wit and observational comments and Keith Allen improvised narratives and demonstrated a startling aggression. The subject matter, varying with each comedian, shared an avoidance of traditional targets and attempted to create comedy from their own cultural reference points, experiences and desires. They could communicate with a newer audience from a similar demographic prepared to listen (if the comedian was good enough) or witness the development of a new style of stand-up comedy. In the Comedy Store, the comedians had access to a context where they could experiment. As Mayall pointed out, as long as they were genuine about it, they could find the space to develop new forms.<sup>18</sup> The audience, unexpectant of a particular style, accepted the possibility of failure (if not revelled in it) and like Punk, the enthusiasm and desire supplanted any skill 'learnt' traipsing round the various circuits beforehand.

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<sup>18</sup> See above.

Alternative comedy developed or absorbed a similar political agenda and provocative delivery to Punk and post-Punk. The political polarisation occurring in popular culture, particularly music, could not have by-passed the early performers at the Comedy Store. Many had come from left wing, fringe based theatre where a non-racist/non-sexist agenda had already been implemented. Sayle had been in *Threepenny Opera*; Barclay in *7:84*; De La Tour in *Belt and Braces*; Tony Allen worked in street theatre; Keith Allen worked with a “surrealist theatre troupe”;<sup>19</sup> and Mayall and Edmondson had been presenting their own performances at fringe venues like the Woolwich Tramshed. They could not have been unaware of the political imperatives in popular culture, whether they acted upon it or not. Together, post-Punk and alternative comedy could present a broader awareness of prevailing right-wing ideas. Alternative comedy was happening as the Labour government disintegrated and Margaret Thatcher stole the right-wing/racist vote from under the noses of the National Front. Those developing interest in wider cultural issues who had grown up through early Punk days were open to more political activity and ideas than previously. As the government began cutting the funding for these fringe groups, thus pushing some performers into comedy, the oppositional strain in certain sections of popular culture became more focused.

Clearly alternative comedy can be situated in a social and political context. The end of the Punk moment preceded the start of The Comedy Store and the varying fortunes of the National Front; the polarisation in much of popular culture and politics formed and helped foster an agit-prop mentality amongst some of the performers, fresh from fringe theatre and their diminishing funding. The realisation of the threat that the Thatcher government and its rightist ideology proposed gave alternative comedy a justified target. The state of comedy itself in the late 1970s and early 1980s cannot be ignored in this contextualisation.

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<sup>19</sup> Wilmot, 1989, p. 32.

## **Racism and Comedy.**

Racism became a serious issue and British television comedy from the 1960s onwards reflected this, culminating in a rash of programmes in the 1970s that depended on racial stereotypes for cheap easy laughs, most notably Mind Your Language set in a night school class with all the racial stereotypes on the market in one basket. Other programmes displayed a considerable complexity, however. The popularity of Johnny Speight's Alf Garnett character in 'Til Death Do Us Part, presents an interesting case. First broadcast in 1966, by 1972, 'Til Death Do Us Part had gained 16 million viewers.<sup>20</sup> Although intended as satire, Alf Garnett, in fact, proved to be a potent and misunderstood folk hero with whom many people identified. The Garnett character is a classic comic character: he is intolerant but expects people to tolerate him; he is hypocritical, obviously foolish and disempowered; inadequate, he sides with those he feels are his superiors; his ill-informed opinions resound like the pub bore who interrupts conversations with "I'll tell you my philosophy in life". Many of the programmes focused on the relationships between Alf and his wife, daughter and son-in-law, the latter three usually siding against him in their claustrophobic East End front room. Speight indicates that the wife is in firm control despite all Garnett's fury and bluster and he usually ends up looking stupid and contradictory. He would have a go at Prime Ministers Wilson and Heath (in the 70s), immigration, the left, the working class (despite his own social standing), the unemployed (the Labour supporting son-in-law had no job) and the (tedious and anachronistic) 'battle of the sexes'. The programme attracted much criticism for its frank language and subject matter incurring the wrath of the hopelessly morally dated (and would-be hegemonist) Mary Whitehouse, herself as out of step with the changing world as Alf was. The supporting cast, although intended to be antithetical to Garnett, were the series' Achilles heel; although set in opposition to Garnett's right-wing opinions they often ended up as inadequate foils; compared to the strength of the Garnett figure, it was difficult to compete. Husband writes:

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<sup>20</sup> According to a BBC report in 1975. Husband op. cit. p. 160.

“Like Enoch Powell after him, his great attraction was that he said what others thought. Against this there was no clear model for an alternative system of values to be found in the ranks of the other characters.”<sup>21</sup>

Garnett is in a power position as central focus and despite the attempted undermining, he is always back next week, he is ‘superior’ to the others - he is the funnier husband, the father and the main provider - and his position remains constant. ’Til Death Do Us Part and Alf survived through various permutations (he is still going) and became firmly lodged within the English psyche, not as a lampooning of racist idiocy but as a spokesman, almost as an eccentric uncle who we all tolerate because he has always been there and probably always will be. It is difficult to say if the programme worked effectively as satire or if it reaffirmed these beliefs in others. This illustrates a risk, an ambiguity; comedy becomes an open text where it becomes difficult to define the effect on those watching. An open joke denies the listener a finished product and forces them to listen and construct an opinion on what is going on. And Alf certainly located opinions: you were either with him or against him, or couldn’t care less. Being a national institution, Garnett could be read as making racist views respectable through context, by being on the television and because he got all the best lines and was the main character. He had the most sympathy and the actor Warren Mitchell admitted that many did misunderstand the point and congratulated him for legitimising their racist views. Comedy can be too easy when the comedian massages the audience and treats them to their own prejudices. There is little engagement and the jokes become spoon-fed entertainment. The open joke can unsettle the audience. The open joke is not irony, where we expect or are told one thing and the underlying intention is its opposite. It is a joke with an ambiguity that forces us to think in two directions: is s/he serious; do I agree/disagree. The open joke involves decisions on behalf of the audience and performer. The performer decides to convey the ambiguity and the audience decides what they feel. Harry Enfield’s ‘Stavros’ character on ITV’s Saturday Live in the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 158.



mid 1980s also received similar criticism due to its 'open' status or ambiguity. Was he a talking cliché, the kebab shop clown with a funny accent, or was he a clever, funny and streetwise wag who would always end up better off than his detractors? When something is as well drawn as Garnett or Stavros, it is difficult to dissect the reactions and questions spring to mind: do people realise he is being a buffoon or does he shore up the beliefs already there? You can be offended or see it as it is. Is it the 'fault' or the writers or the 'readers'? This would appear to be an irreducible law, in dealing effectively with characters like Garnett, there appears to be the choice of dumbing down the comedy to make the point obvious or of retaining an ambiguity wherein the viewers makes up their own mind. The difference between 'Til Death Do Us Part and a host of other more minor sit-coms dealing with similar subjects is that the sheer quality of the writing, the strength of character and the comedy has lent Alf considerable longevity.

Love Thy Neighbour featured the vicious Eddy Booth continually at war with his black neighbour, Bill, whom he constantly referred to as "Sambo".<sup>22</sup> There were similarities with 'Til Death Do Us Part but unlike this, Love Thy Neighbour featured regular black actors: Love Thy Neighbour seems a weaker version in a different suburbia. Although Eddy may have been proved wrong for his racist beliefs, Husband points out the problems of situation and context, for "the same content may have different meanings for different audiences."<sup>23</sup> Depending on where you were standing consolidated a viewpoint. It is worth quoting Husband at length. He says Eddy could be viewed as:

"the average working man embattled in his own house with the constant sniping of a pushy black man ... For many whites living in multi-racial areas, this reflected their feelings and resentments; for whites in pristine areas of Caucasia who know of the immigration problem and the threat of blacks taking over, this was the shape of things to come ... its likely impact must have been to reinforce racist assumptions."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Love Thy Neighbour was screened by ITV through the early to mid 1970s.

<sup>23</sup> Husband, Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

One of the better sit-coms to survive the 1970s with any credibility is Rising Damp, re-screened on ITV in January, 1998. The beliefs of the working class aspirant and thoughtlessly racist landlord Rigsby (Leonard Rossiter) are clearly proved wrong by his tenants who act in opposition to his rigidity: Alan the hippy medical student; Philip the black medical student, would be Lothario pretending to be the son of a chief; and Miss Jones the romantically frustrated 'office girl'. The characters are all losers in a way, except Philip (who it turns out is from Wolverhampton after all): Rigsby the crushed 'Little Englander', failed by his own expectations, his values shot through by the others; Alan the good willed though hopeless naïf; and Miss Jones, played at high pitch by Frances De La Tour, romantically disappointed and busy rebuffing Rigsby's advances preferring Philip's fuller trousered exotica. The programme had a sharper political edge dealing with, amongst other things, Labour/Conservative class representation, the obsession of saving money and physical and racial superiority. Although the racist humour is strong - Rigsby gets the best lines and it is hard not to feel that the audience is laughing along - it is also absurdly funny (and interestingly dated) because Rigsby constantly ends up humiliated. Like Garnett, Rigsby trumpets his imagined superiority and how he is definitively British, yet he is stingy, small minded, inexperienced, ignorant, seedy and forever undermining himself by virtue of who he is.

The differences between Alf, Eddy and Rigsby are worth clarifying. Alf is involved in a more open text than Rigsby and we could go either way, as Mitchell pointed out. The earlier black and white series remain strongest in the sense of reflecting a changing Britain, the beginnings of a multi-ethnic society, the programme's focus (working class, East End) is the antithesis of the 'swinging sixties'. Alf is still in the austerity years, having difficulty with the dismantling of the empire and hanging on to a political mindset that would not change. Which is why people identified with him: society was changing quicker than they were. Alf is an idiot, caught out of time. We could forgive him his excesses, as they are excessive, often considerably erroneous and there is a vulnerability to him that is lacking in the snide Eddy. Eddy

is shown to be a fool, often led on by the other characters to absurd conclusions. But taking Husband's point, Eddy is under siege, the 'Little Englander' mentality undermined by the superior and 'pushy' Bill, who is obviously more successful and at ease than the hyper-tense and awkward Eddy and he could reflect the fear of suburban encroachment. It is this 'Bill' character against whom Eddy personifies his angst, a personification that is lacking with Alf whose bluster is more general. Rigsby's imagined superiority is shown in stark contrast to Philip, who is urbane, intelligent and successful with women. The others constantly undermine his views which are as dated and seedy as the environment of the bed-sit house over which he hawkishly presides. It would be harder to empathise with Rigsby as it would be for Alf or Eddy, he is clearly a fool with few redeeming features. Empathy is not extended. Alf, Eddy and Rigsby all cling on to some misguided concept of Empire from which they were disenfranchised and received little benefit, though used as a means of self elevation. They refuse to change with the times and are anachronistic despite being involved in those changing times through their relationships. All three are intolerant, ignorant and stranded.<sup>25</sup>

### **The Comedians Revisited.**

"The pies have come, but they've come on their own so put plenty of pepper on 'em." Bernard Manning's mock M.C.<sup>26</sup>

Throughout the mid 1970s, the diet of stand-up comedy appeared to be a divided between the mainstream TV Royal Commanders and the so-called Northern working

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<sup>25</sup> Also of note was It Ain't Half Hot, Mum which featured a World War Two concert party in India, complete with Punkah wallah entourage. It dipped into music hall limp wistery - the lead character was outrageously effeminate - and all the others wore make-up and camped about admirably. Although featuring several Indian/Asian actors, the lead character was played by Michael Bates in lamentable black-face with an "oh yes very blimey" accent: the Indian characters did not move far from typed restraint. Written By David Perry and Jimmy Croft (Dad's Army, Hi De Hi, etc.) the white characters were admittedly strong and the Bates character usually proved to outsmart the insanely apoplectic Sergeant Major, played by Windsor Davis. The other Indian characters proved merely decorative.

<sup>26</sup> Manning is actually taking a rise from Colin Crompton, one of the other performers on the video, and the "Wheeltappers' and Shunters' Social Club" variety series in the 1970s. Manning and Crompton swapped M.C. duties in this and Manning also displayed a fine singing voice. The Comedians: Star Vision, undated.

men's club comedians. The video compilation of The Comedians<sup>27</sup> is a retrospectively fair cross section of this latter style from around 1971-4, especially for the Northern English and Irish contingent. The programmes consisted of cheaply produced, straight stage to screen transfers of their club acts. Defiantly prole and traditional, the funniest thing about most of them is the width of their sideburns and their cheesy velvet suit lapels. The comedians, framed in head shots, perform in bright studio lighting with wisps of cigarette smoke drifting behind them, their jokes are toned down for television. Many of the comedians appear nervous or restrained, apart from Manning who despite the unusual (for him) context of television is remarkably assured. The perennial Frank Carson's energy is, at times, astounding, the jokes less so. Manning kicks off events with a take on a Northern club Master of Ceremonies ("Pies have come", etc.<sup>28</sup>) so specialised as to be practically obscure. The comedians are all regional: Welsh, Irish, Liverpoolian and Mancunians.<sup>29</sup>

It is hard, in times of post-alternative comedy, to assess such an anachronistic style of comedy, so dated and so context bound. This is not to say that this style of comedy does not still exist: it will exist as long as there is a demand for it in the clubs. The jokes are interestingly superannuated and conjure up images of donkey stones, coal scuttles and outside toilets. The far superior Les Dawson, who came from a similar though earlier background, springs to mind, with his fat overbearingly bosomed gossips and domineering mother-in-law. The repetition of type usage begins to form post-joke images in the mind: composites of the wives and grotesque mothers-in-law are detailed slowly. There are 'doctor', lunatic/asylum and semi-smutty/risqué jokes; "this fellah ..." and "Englishman, Irishman, Scotsman" gags; and touching antiquities such as "a smashing bit o' crackling", "this Irish fellah...", the GPO, cork-tipped cigarettes and skinheads; as well as Carson's "It's the way I tell 'em" and Ken Goodwin's "I'll talk to anyone, me" style catchphrases. Goodwin

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> The polar opposite of alternative comedy who not only tried to re-write the political agenda but also the class one, with new sets of references. A social change as well as a generational and political change.

is of note and manages to transform the most obvious joke into a new experience (the sign of a good comedian). Charlie Williams is an interesting case: a black Yorkshireman with a thick accent (like Brian “Tetley tea-bags” Glover) delivering sub-standard material. It is hard not to think of the paradox of this comedian performing in a milieu where he would be the target for many of the jokes. The majority of the jokes are ready-mades, passed on, easily communicated and transferable in factory, school and bar-room. Many comedians in the past - from Tommy Cooper to Morecambe and Wise, Bernard Manning and Chubby Brown - used script writers or picked up jokes from within the community. It is this latter source that is most apparent in The Comedians: all the jokes seem to have been widely circulated or transmuted from jokes heard many times previously. It was the state of stand-up comedy, in the Northern clubs at least, that spurred Trevor Griffiths to provide an interesting counter-point in a play he wrote in 1975.

### **Comedians.**

“Samuels: You’re always saying it. ‘A comic draws pictures of the world’. The closer you look the better you draw it.” Comedians.<sup>30</sup>

“We can say something or we can say nothing. Not everything true is funny and not everything funny is true.” Comedians.<sup>31</sup>

According to Poole & Wyver,<sup>32</sup> Griffiths’ play developed after a group of comedians (who worked on the TV programme discussed previously) discussing a workshop run by a comedian above a pub:

“There seemed to be this split”, Griffiths has said, “between what they thought of him ... and what they actually did in their lives to earn their money.”<sup>33</sup>

The play, set in a night class for potential stand-up comedians in East Manchester, shows a selection of types: the Ulsterman; the Irish catholic; the flash Jewish comic; the bad music hall brother act; and the maverick Gethin Price. The play, in three acts, has them prepare, perform and analyse their acts, witnessed by the talent scout,

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<sup>30</sup> Trevor Griffiths, Comedians, London: Faber, 1976, p. 20.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>32</sup> Powerplays, Eds., Poole & Wyver, London: BFI, 1984.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p106.

Challenor, a former adversary of the teacher Waters. Within this context the ex-comic Waters explains the mechanism of jokes that exploit ignorance and use other people as a source of humour - the mother-in-law, racist/sexist jokes - and tries to explore opportunities for making humour that reaches beyond these. He is searching for the truth about people: “about what’s hard, above all, about what they want.”<sup>34</sup> We see the acts performed and Challenor inevitably selects the most commercially viable of them - the Jewish Samuels and the Ulsterman, McBrain - who are prepared to go against everything that Waters has taught them. Challenor presents an opposite view of Waters’s ‘what people want’, and is looking for jokes about “the wife, blacks, Irish, women.”<sup>35</sup> Challenor’s angle is “someone who sees what the people want and knows how to give it to them.”<sup>36</sup> Which is a marked contrast to the ‘truths’ that Waters thinks they want. Griffiths states that the conformist challenging comedians are the ones destined to commercial success, which has changed with the success of post-alternative comedy. The play is an attack on artless comic pandering but also a shout against commercialism and the easy cashing in on stupidity. But, despite its hard hitting insight, throughout the play, according to William Cook:

“Griffiths dare[d] not address the theatre’s endemic problem, that a large proportion of its potential audience was drinking in the pub next door. Alternative comedy wasted no time trying to coax those people back into the theatre.”<sup>37</sup>

It would not be hard to accuse Griffiths of being didactic at times but, on the other hand, it would be difficult to be too dismissive. Griffiths wrote a play that was depressingly accurate and approached a problem in dire need of confrontation. Whether the play Comedians had as much effect on the national psyche as the eponymous TV series would be an arguable point. Despite what Challenor says that “people don’t learn, they don’t want to, and if they did they won’t look to the likes of us to teach ’em.”<sup>38</sup> In the final scene, Price and Waters confront each other and

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<sup>34</sup> Griffiths, 1976, p. 20.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p58.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p33.

<sup>37</sup> William Cook, Ha Bloody Ha: Comedians Talking, London: 4<sup>th</sup> Estate, 1994, p. 10.

<sup>38</sup> Griffiths, 1976, p. 58.

Waters reveals that he lost the will to do comedy because of the atrocities he had witnessed during the Second World War: “And I discovered ... there were no jokes left. Every joke a little pellet, a final solution.”<sup>39</sup> The comedy that deals in hate can only dehumanise and it is the first step away from the truth and towards repression. The statement “there were no jokes left” is also an echo of Theodore Adorno’s “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.”<sup>40</sup>

The play almost predicts alternative comedy and there are some interesting parallels with the style of some comedians. Price’s devastating and surreal assault at the climax of the second act precedes the violence and mania of Alexei Sayle and Keith Allen’s early performances at the Comedy Store, with its pre-Punk energy, aggression, and dismantling of comedy standards. What influence Comedians may have had on alternative comedy is difficult to clarify: it is tempting to posit that, being from a fringe theatre background, many of the alternative comedians would have been aware of it. Influence is always hard to divine but the play must have had some effect, either demonstrating the need for a re-think of stand-up comedy, the nascent possibilities of the form or even if only contributing to a minor consciousness raising. The TV series being broadcast each week on ITV was infinitely, and unfortunately, more accessible despite the play’s transferring from Nottingham to London and screenings on television. Change is a result of a confluence of events within any culture and it may be safe to say Comedians contributed to those changes that allowed alternative comedy to occur when it did.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>40</sup> From Theodore Adorno, Prisms. Quoted in Appiganesi & Garratt, Postmodernism for Beginners, Cambridge: Icon, 1995, p. 125.

## The US Influence.

“It seems quite easy now, but there was no tradition of rock stand-up comedy in Britain, no one like Richard Pryor or Lenny Bruce so people didn’t understand what you were doing and things could get out of hand fairly easily.” Alexei Sayle on early comedy performances.<sup>1</sup>

Although this thesis deals with British comedians and those influenced by the alternative comedy moment, certain American comedians cannot be overlooked. Their influence has been acknowledged mainly by the earlier comedians and their work in stand-up comedy set precedents for performers on this side of the Atlantic. What the alternative comedians tapped into was a thread of subversive stand-up comedy already developed in America through the groundbreaking critiques of consumer society by Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce in the 1950s and ’60s, and later, Richard Pryor and Robin Williams in the 1970s and ’80s. Both Bruce and Pryor came from socially deprived backgrounds and developed a disenchantment with the political and social mores of the American dream. Bruce and Pryor worked their way through the night-club circuits to varying success and eventually discovered a voice of their own essentially at odds with the ‘everything is great’ style of many commercial comedians. Both shunned gag-telling and developed an easy flowing semi-anecdotal style that explored everyday life and politics whilst revealing both anger and vulnerability. In late 1970s Britain, the alternative comedians drew on the English satire and surrealist strand of comedy and filtered it, via a left based political critique, through stand-up comedy in the confrontational style developed by the American predecessors. As with most iconoclastic movements, the alternative comedians acknowledged little previous influence, although both Tony Allen and Arnold Brown acknowledged the influence of Lenny Bruce on the earlier work.

America is as rife with unchallenging stand-up comedy as Britain has ever been but some of the most influential stand-up comedians of this era have come from America. Parallel to Britain, America has also had a stronger line of radical comedy

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Wilmut, Didn’t You Kill My Mother-In-Law?, London: Methuen, 1989, p.22.



in the post-war era, but unlike Britain the best of it has occurred in a stand-up context. From Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce in the 1950s and early 1960s; early Woody Allen, Richard Pryor and George Carlin through the late 1960s; Robin Williams and Saturday Night Live in the 1970s; Denis Leary, Sam Kinnison and Bill Hicks in the 1980s; and, consolidating the Punk connection Stateside, the more overtly political monologues of Jello Biafra (ex-Dead Kennedy's) and Henry Rollins (ex Black Flag, the Rollins Band). American stand-up comedy has explored radical potential as well as achieving widespread acclaim and popularity.

Since the Second World War, America has seen the varying fortunes of a sub-culture of smaller metropolitan comedy venues - existing in opposition to the Catskills comedy circuit and the burlesque and vaudeville hangovers - which have served as the proving ground for much interesting work. In the 1950s, Mort Sahl and George Carlin had started off their careers in the coffee houses of the beatnik/hipster areas of San Francisco and New York's Greenwich Village, places that specialised in folk protest and poetry. In 1960s San Francisco there had been the 'Hungry i' where Sahl and Lenny Bruce performed; in the 1970s the original Comedy Store had been established and later The Improv. These clubs, however small and few, at least provided a framework or context for experiment and development, something which Britain had until recently lacked.

In America new comedians and young audiences had become bored with the standard subject matter of comedy: established forms of stand-up did not speak to a post-rock and roll generation. Comedians, given the space, could discover the possibilities within the form and construct a new comedy that spoke to and about themselves, not about mothers-in-law they did not have and experiences they did not know or relate to. Thus new laws were invented to govern a stand-up comedy that can be typified through several elements: involvement with 'youth culture', especially rock and roll; taking or talking openly about drugs; discussing politics from a more liberal/left perspective; television and film referencing to varying

degrees; and discussing sex and sexuality without recourse to the 'dirty joke'. This new style of stand-up comedy focused on being a consumer of popular culture and it is this consciousness that connects rock and roll and comedy and that also differentiates between 'alternative' and 'mainstream' comedy: the divide is the language used and the discussion of specific subject matter. Despite recent speculation that stand-up comedy was the new rock and roll, William Cook wrote that "comedy feeds off pop's subject matter, and reinterprets it onstage."<sup>2</sup> It is in the role of consumers that the connections between audience and performer lie. Lenny Bruce was probably the first 'rock and roll' comic, developing the style that Sahl had initiated and taking it elsewhere, embracing the counter culture whilst investigating the dominant political ideology and its associated mores. This continued with George Carlin, the Saturday Night Live crew and Robin Williams to Hicks, Leary and Kinnison: comedy dealing with everyday life from the same angle as the audience, with the same obsessions and interests within that audience - music, politics, drugs, sex - but without the elevated status and detachment from everyday life as rock stars.

### **Mort Sahl.**

"Having smashed with a single blow the long standing taboo against introducing political themes into night-club comedy, Sahl went on to radically alter the public image of the stand-up comic by introducing a whole new rhetoric of relations between audience and performer." Albert Goldman on Mort Sahl.<sup>3</sup>

"Humour is derivative of the irony in serious work ... but I don't think it's a form on its own."  
Mort Sahl.<sup>4</sup>

Mort Sahl's comedy started working the San Francisco student coffee houses in the early 1950s and developed a neat line of consumer conscious, anti-conservative comedy much involved with a critique of the commodity culture, the Cold War and its surrounding figures. Sahl launched his comedy career in San Francisco in 1953 - after deciding to stop writing "serious plays" and start performing live - and he

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<sup>2</sup> William Cook, Ha Bloody Ha: Comedian's Talking, London: Fourth Estate, 1994, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Albert Goldman, Ladies and Gentlemen, Lenny Bruce, London, Penguin, 1971, p. 277.

<sup>4</sup> BBC Today programme, 19/7/61.

developed a unique stand-up satire style rather than ‘bits’, sketches and gags. At the time, stand-up comedy was dominated by post-war burlesque, Catskills club style comedy and the “Take my wife ... please” tuxedo buffoon style comics. Sahl appeared in street clothes, snickering and edgy, delivering sharp edged political comedy, which had not been done beyond the odd mock and dig at the President’s wife or the Russians. Sahl was literate, informed, caustic, nervous, Jewish and satirical. His satire could be hard, accurate but not without compassion: “I couldn’t operate in the world if I did not have compassion for human frailty.”<sup>5</sup> However, Sahl may have been limited to speaking solely to his own audience, despite television coverage. There is a highly informed quality to his material and the audience needed to have at least read the paper.

“Do you have any difficulty in finding targets for your satire?”

Sahl: No [laughs], they’re all too abundant.”<sup>6</sup>

It is hard to access material by or about Sahl (except deleted Archive recordings, late night clips on TV) to get a feeling of context and effect.

### At the Hungry i.

Sahl recorded a performance in San Francisco At the Hungry ‘i’<sup>7</sup> and rather than taping a specially prepared gig (for chart purposes, *sans* teeth) he recorded an average home turf, late night affair to document style and content. It is straight political comment; there are few jokes, except telling some of those currently in circulation to illustrate a point. They are long raps and direct criticism, partly political broadcasts. It is in a stand-up comedy format: he is standing in front of a club audience making them laugh but his style is neither ‘clever’ satire nor straight comedy. Sahl inserts himself into the event, how it effects him and, therefore all of us, in order to make the point. To the contemporary listener, it is practically obscure. Even with a competent knowledge of post-war American politics and history some of the references sink without trace. Sahl comes across as very informed and

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Mort Sahl, ‘At the Hungry ‘i’, (Verve, 1967).

illustrates his ad lib's with a barracking, short staccato laugh. He is no beatnik or hipster drop-out. He is a pro-active consumer concerned with the way things are going (badly) and frustrated at the absurdity and lack of communication. Communism, Kruschev, the Cold War and Russia (the political thermometer of the moment); Senator Kennedy, Nixon and Eisenhower (who he never seemed to tire of criticising); Cuba, Gary Powers's U2 ("Espionage is never fun" <sup>8</sup>) and nuclear missiles; Civil defence procedures, capital punishment, the FBI and anti-Semitism; all are blasted by his comedy: "I hope you pardon my bias but I feel strongly about these things." <sup>9</sup> Sahl's vocabulary is broad and he illustrates his raps with "which is spurious", "which is novel", probably the closest he would come to a comedy catch phrase. He does not do any 'bits', except possibly a spying on communists piece. His language is clean and, in this recording at least, practically sex free, apart from the odd reference to 'chicks' and an alarming "I'm going to destroy women", <sup>10</sup> referring to the content of his show later that night. Sahl does seem to ramble, but not like Bruce (who sounded stoned, losing the thread) but by piling digression upon digression, usually preceding it with "Did I tell you about ...". He strings it together, with no eye on apparent order, but developing it in the way a discussion would develop, often idiosyncratic but still to the point. He seems to have a theory about everything and his approach is so normal, so quotidian. The micro-world he inhabits is just the same as his audiences; his day to day life is as fraught with political concern and paranoia as the next person. If anything his plea is for tolerance and compassion, a cooling down of ideology and a replacing with a contemporary morality: he is moral but not indignant, almost resigned, too full of energy to not have his say. Sahl is the first post-war, alternative comedian: he just stood up and said what was on his mind and discussed politics as if he had just got up from a particularly animated conversation in a bar.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

## Lenny Bruce.

“There is only what *is*. The what-should-be never did exist, but people keep trying to live up to it. There is only what is.” Lenny Bruce.<sup>11</sup>

Lenny Bruce presented a persona wholly identifiable to those disenfranchised by political and social structures of late 1950s, early 1960s America and he developed an act around a critique of the society in which he lived - a Cold War, consumer orientated, sexually repressed America. He spoke to a post-war generation, on the tail end of rock and roll, about to experience the growth in awareness of a burgeoning drugs and sex orientated cultural shift. Bruce's life has often eclipsed his achievements and his notoriety, particularly his drug use, has made him a lasting icon. But like James Dean and not Elvis, a dead icon unable to make mistakes and become a parody of himself,<sup>12</sup> and like the truest icons he represented no ideology but a flawed and vulnerable persona. Bruce started off as a night-club comedian, as M.C. at strip joints and burlesque in the late 1940s. It was not until the late 1950s that he hit his full creative stride and began to make any serious indentation in stand-up comedy and on the prevailing American culture. He moved away from a reliance on gags to develop a rambling critique of contemporary society: he discussed film and morality and sex and sexuality, racism and the relations between Jews and Gentiles as well as the political events of the day. He always retained his own moral tone, although it is possible to criticise his often misogynist stance.

“I know a lot of the things I want to say; I'm just not sure exactly when I will say them.” Lenny Bruce.<sup>13</sup>

Although he had written a number of ‘bits’, sketches he would do and re-do over and over (and which were recorded), Bruce but did not like to stick to a rigid script. It was this improvised feel that gave Bruce an edge and he was the first comedian to acknowledge this stream of consciousness approach. However, his over-documented

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<sup>11</sup> Lenny Bruce, How To Talk Dirty and Influence People. St. Albans: Panther, 1975, p.266.

<sup>12</sup> He did actually become sad and fat. Feeling persecuted he sought refuge in drugs and junk food, a carbon copy of Elvis in fact.

<sup>13</sup> Bruce, How to Talk Dirty, 1975, p.74.

(especially by Goldman)<sup>14</sup> drug abuse may be that which caused him to ramble, but this style is one successfully revitalised in Britain by Billy Connolly, Eddie Izzard and Dylan Moran. Bruce's improvisation made his comedy a live entity, whereas as many comedians would stick to the script Bruce would improvise, essentially building up a comic idea into a full length 'bit':

"I never sit down and write anything out ... I will ad lib a line on stage. It'll be funny. Then the next night I'll do another line, or I'll be thinking about it ... If I do an hour show, if I'm extremely fertile, there will be about fifteen minutes pure ad lib. But on an average it's about four or five minutes. But the fact that I've created it in ad lib gives it a complete feeling of free form."<sup>15</sup>

This method of development lends the material an elasticity, possibilities to change and mould itself to the moment. It stops the comedy becoming fixed and gives it a looser feel. Bruce would play with the material to see where it would go, something which Pryor echoed later. By writing his own material in this way, instead of using gag writers, Bruce could emphasise the personal in performance and maintain control over quality and authenticity of the persona projected.

It was Bruce's subject matter and the lifestyle that he represented that set him apart from the majority of comedians working at the time. His performance language was a bizarre mix of Yiddish, hip slang, and 'obscenities' that framed ideas not usually discussed by comedians (and he did not really see himself as a comedian in his later career but, almost megalomaniac, as some kind of hip priest). He began to be taken seriously through the depth of what he was discussing: politics in a time of Cold War, sexuality in a time of emotional repression and censure, censorship and morality in a time of Protestant conformity. Lenny Bruce began to open up further possibilities (after Sahl) within stand-up, using comedy as a method of debate to express complex ideas within a populist format. He succeeded in rewriting what language is and is not permissible on a comedy stage (usually through litigation<sup>16</sup>)

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<sup>14</sup> In Ladies and Gentlemen, Lenny Bruce, Goldman unwisely narrates the story as if he was there, shadowing his heroically doomed Bruce, needle in arm, and almost sensationalises the sordid and the trivial. It's a great fictional read.

<sup>15</sup> Lenny Bruce, The Essential Lenny Bruce. St. Albans: Panther, 1975, p.191-2.

<sup>16</sup> Bruce described the court cases on stage and both "How To Talk Dirty ..." and Goldman also covers these in some detail

and displayed a willingness to establish political and social truths using a mix of the surreal, quotidian and fantasy 'What If' sequences. He worked to expose the gap between appearances and how things really are: "There is only what is." <sup>17</sup>

Lenny Bruce became known as a 'jazz comedian' through his performances amongst that milieu, the shared audiences and references. His link with the jazz fraternity consolidated earlier through his 'playing to the band' when in burlesque, bringing on strippers: the musicians were the only ones there who were keen to his humour, observations and lifestyle:

"That should have been my first hint of the direction I was going: abstraction. Musicians, jazz musicians especially, appreciate art forms that are extensions of realism as opposed to realism in a representational form." <sup>18</sup>

Bruce was not the first comedian to come out this context: there had been others, from the antics of Cab Calloway in the 1930s to more contemporary examples:

"there had always been a thin though vigorous line of Jazz comics in American night-clubs ... clowns like Harry 'the Hipster' Gibson ... Slappy White ... Slim Gaillard or Babs Gonzalez." <sup>19</sup>

It was perhaps his extremism in stance that set Bruce apart from these precedents. A contemporary of Bruce, Lord Buckley, performed in similar clubs in New York's Greenwich Village, but never found a wider market as Bruce did. Buckley was a master of a "verbal jazz that dealt with political, social and religious subjects" <sup>20</sup> but his appeal was limited because he was too abstract for the masses. It was Bruce who had the insight and ability to move beyond these parameters into a more centrally focused area to appeal to the rising Playboy bachelor culture, the jazz appreciating (rather than specialising) crowd, the weekend hipsters and the occasional pot smoking, swinger sports car owners and their 'chicks'.

"The substance of Bruce's dissertation was primarily based in denouncing religions, God and the police in general, in that order." <sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Bruce, How to Talk ..., 1975, p.266.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 63

<sup>19</sup> Goldman, 1971, p.225-6.

<sup>20</sup> Jeff Rovin, Richard Pryor Black and Blue, London Orbis, 1983, p. 49.

<sup>21</sup> Bruce, The Essential ..., 1975, p.133.

Bruce, to some extent, patched into Sahl's ready made audience although drawing in aspects of his own, particularly the East Coast jazzers. Sahl, although iconoclastic and dealing with topical issues, was still too West Coast coffee house, laid back: Bruce was more urban, more tied in with the illicit side of jazz culture, with drugs, with sex and with his own separate moral rather than political criteria. Bruce's attacks on hypocrisy, sexual mores, morality and drug use began to attract unwanted police attention during the mid 1960s. Despite television appearances (extremely tame by comparison to documented live work from tapes), sell out gigs and hit recordings of shows, his performances began to be monitored by the police, resulting in arrests for obscenity. These arrests indicate a general decline, the court proceedings taking up more of his time and energy: performances began to document what was happening to him in court, verbatim transcripts constantly justifying his case.

As with much comedy of this nature, the more extreme material is not documented, except in the published transcripts but these are fond wanting: "Something had to be lost, of course, ... his intonations, his accents, his rhythms, speeds, pauses and gestures." <sup>22</sup> The comedy basically. But the transcripts give an intimation to his general discourse. The few available clips from television are, of course, moderated considerably, little of his specialised use of language remains and the subject matter is watched over. When he did appear on national and network television the material he could perform was diluted and far removed from the live performances. Ironically, Bruce was at his peak in the peak of the TV age but could not access it in a genuine context, without much futile compromise. The examples available show his language and reference points to be almost wilfully obscure and not funny. His style and language did not successfully translate to television shows, like Steve Allen's. For someone with such a cult status - his photograph as totemic as a counter-culture Elvis - he comes across as small and slight, a little twitchy and with a slightly irritating JFK nasal drawl. Bruce's records are mainly 'obscenity' free and

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.9.



they appear to have been edited: those available mainly feature his 'bits', his constantly reworked sketches and spoofs - prison movies, screen clichés and so forth - and as static form do not give the elasticity of his later, more influential, performance style. The records are marketed with a target audience in mind and, hopefully, to gain some converts who may be put off by the language.

### Live at the Curran Theatre.

"Respectability means under the covers", Lenny Bruce from Howls, Raps and Roars.<sup>23</sup>

Bruce recorded many of his concerts himself as with the records there was always a degree of censorship involved, polished commodities for the semi-adventurous. Howls, Raps and Roars,<sup>24</sup> a compilation of West Coast beatnik poets contains excerpts from several of these including Live at the Curran Theatre.<sup>25</sup> Bruce comes across as stoned (and for all his morality he never came clean about his drug habit, he always denied it). At times he sounds like a drunk, desperate to convince himself and others that he is, in fact, sober by explaining something simple, extremely pedantically. At times he is obscure, losing the thread, sounding like he could do with a lie down. He pauses, is not smooth: his fantasies serve as a reason to not stick to the script but also to explore the possibility of a situation, taking this as far he can and then a little further. He switches back and forth between characters, surprisingly dramatic, and uses many voices and intonations, his own tone nasally camp, like a laid-back Jerry Lewis, only funny. He does one-liners and gags but inserted into the general discourse, he is hard to isolate and quote. The material is involved with itself and he builds this onto a central idea. He is witty and involved with language, meaning and obscenity; this mix of hip and Yiddish, slang and swearing is very exclusive and, at times, the combinations collapse languages into one, into babble, incoherent. Bruce is concerned with morality and slowly unfolds his point. Although he says we should deal with the 'what is', he prefers to perform in the realm of 'what if'. He gets revenge by proxy on the cops, judges, straights and 'chicks' who stand

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<sup>23</sup> Sleeve notes from Howls, Raps and Roars, Fantasy Records, 1993.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Lenny Bruce, Live at the Curran Theatre (19/11/61) from Howls Raps and Roars.

opposed to his central plea for tolerance to other's lifestyles and moralities (i.e., "leave me alone to get laid and stoned"). He argues that an older judge should not condemn a lifestyle that does not harm him or others and with which he is unfamiliar. He is cool and confident, hip and a little cynical: it is hard not to see him now as iconic.

Bruce's main focus was on morality and taboo busting, that if something is not discussed it needed talking about. Bruce's line was thus: he was discussing what was already there, he did not have the problem discussing it and if offence was found in the subject matter then it was clear that the problem lay with the listener's inability to deal with it. But this was not the view shared by authorities of the various cities in which he was arrested and banned from. He redefined the function of comedy by assaulting the sensibilities, the barriers, clearly drawn by the 'other side'. Bruce pushed the parameters to see how far they could be pushed. He experimented with verbal and improvisational performance techniques, brought out into the open that which was repressed and constantly took an iconoclastic stance: he made accessible a discourse that continues today, i.e., boundaries of taste and what is 'allowed' in everyday life.

### **Sahl and Bruce.**

Topical satire fades fast and contributes to the reason that Sahl has lacked the longevity and acclaim of Bruce. Bruce seems to have appealed to a wider audience to Sahl's intellectuals and students but also the jazz drug fringe element and Playboy bachelor lifestylers. Bruce's longevity was secured when he was adopted as an icon for the hippy politico's and 1960s drugsters. Sahl was not a hippy reference. Sahl, compared to Bruce, is relatively obscure beyond his generational and contemporary political scope; when mentioned he is seen as a slighter influence and there is considerably less information about him in comparison with the latter. If he exerted any influence on British stand-up comedy it is through his influence on Bruce. What Sahl had achieved, however, had similarities to what the Comedy Store comedians

were to achieve: he was iconoclastic not iconic (Bruce became an icon), tuned into the media representations of politicians and issues and was an avid consumer, a cynic and an antithesis to the dominant tuxedo club comedians. He wore casual clothes on stage (even Bruce wore sharp Italian suits for a long time, although to sugar the radical pill), looked and spoke like his audience, was not 'slick' and was into jazz music (a radical measure in the era) and he was young. Sahl was more intellectual and studied, obviously collegiate, whereas Bruce was hipper, sharper, druggier. Sahl can be citric and concise, Bruce often ramblingly accessible.

### **Richard Pryor.**

“Whether he’s using fantasy, tragedy or any other means, he manages to pin-point what is absurd or comical in human behaviour.”<sup>26</sup>

More familiar to the alternative comedy generation and beyond is Richard Pryor, through his stand-up comedy records and videos and his ill-starred performance in the Superman III movie.<sup>27</sup> In the mid-1960s, Bill Cosby was probably the best known black comedian working in America, but his success was also based on his accessibility to predominantly white audiences. He was college educated, easy going and had significant cross-over appeal. Unlike the lesser known but more militant Dick Gregory, Cosby did not feel the need to comment on the problems that black people faced at the time. At the start of Cosby’s success, the civil rights movement was in full swing with Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam, and non-integration policies still continuing in the south. Cosby was neither hostile or angry and consequently did not alienate any section of his audiences: Gregory, on the other hand, was high profile and regularly seen on protest marches.

Richard Pryor had been performing stand up comedy in the early 1960s and the success he had achieved used material much in keeping with Cosby’s line of ‘non-political’ comment, although he still talked about fundamentally black experiences.

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<sup>26</sup> Rovin, 1983, p.59.

<sup>27</sup> Of course, there were other black comedians dealing with similar material but they lacked his success, influence and cross-over appeal.

Pryor had been born in the ghetto in Peoria, Illinois, and it was the life he experienced here that informed many of his best stand-up comedy characters and observations. His own success in the 1960s was limited by Cosby's success: Cosby had defined black comedy by being its most successful comedian and he had cleared the path to success by doing distinctly 'non-racial' material. Pryor, sometimes touted as the "next Bill Cosby" felt his material limiting and constrained, dishonest even. Pryor emulated Cosby's comedy in the hope of emulating its success but he did not come into his own until he eliminated the Cosby elements from his act.

By 1970, success notwithstanding, Pryor junked his safer Cosby inflected material and began to redefine his approach. At a Las Vegas gig, declaring his dissatisfaction with his career, in a characteristically cathartic gesture, he walked off stage offering a clean and public break from his former style and disappeared for a while. Pryor wanted say what was on his mind and crystallise his experiences and political thinking into comedy, reflecting on the actual through the possible. He did not want to depend on gags but on truths. Similarly he did not want to fall into the Dick Gregory category of militancy. According to Rovin, Pryor became "more concerned with giving black s entertainment and insights about themselves than with political or social movements."<sup>28</sup> As Pryor had begun to realise that duplicating Cosby's success was pointless he simultaneously realised the gap that Lenny Bruce had left after his death in 1966. There are parallels with Bruce, particularly in Pryor's lifestyle that, like Bruce's, has at times overshadowed what he was saying within his comedy. Pryor, like Bruce, talked about sex and drugs but he injected black ghetto experience into the comedy and developed characters through which he could talk about other subjects. Pryor's appearances on television have sometimes been dogged by censorship problems due to the near the knuckle subjects and use of language and, like Bruce, he was criticised for being language appropriate. Pryor was bringing his comedy back to the everyday life that he, and millions of others, knew and it was material that was hard hitting compared to that heard previously: overtly liberal use

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<sup>28</sup> Rovin, 1983, p.81.

of 'motherfucker' and 'nigger' offended some, despite their appropriateness to the situation. The authenticity of that discussed becomes diluted if language is inaccurate, particularly when characterisations are forced to use false language. Although Pryor balked at being called the 'black Lenny Bruce' like he had at being called 'the new Bill Cosby' (or the black Bill Cosby), he acknowledged that what he and Bruce had in common was "a history of persecution. They had both lived some life....paid some dues."<sup>29</sup>

### Is It Something I Said?

Pryor recorded Is It Something I Said?<sup>30</sup> in New Jersey's Latin Casino, after refining the material in the Los Angeles Comedy Store for six weeks beforehand.<sup>31</sup> The language is shocking at first, with the force rather than the actual words, although repetitive 'motherfuckers', 'bitches', 'faggots' and 'pussies' on record are still a bit of a surprise. But he swears well, beautifully even and no one can say 'motherfucker' like his disenfranchised character Mudbone or any of his other street crazies. He is best in character: his stage persona is edgy, uncertain and in between his lines (rather than gags) he nervously snickers to himself. Pryor often talks as himself, using the language he would use in everyday life. He talks to himself as "Rich", using his 'white voice' to comment on the content of the material. Criticisms over the Vietnam war, sex, racism, justice, religious characters and street life are delivered with almost cartoon like intensity and an array of voices. He is especially good on the destructive elements of cocaine use : "\$600 a day just to get my dick hard. "<sup>32</sup> He has expanded on his habit here and elsewhere, the frightening delusion of feigned non-addiction and the increasingly enclosed existence. It is in these areas of extreme living that Pryor acts for us, looking into the dark side, often taking it too far, but unconsciously acting as a warning. His descriptions are not enticing, however funny.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p.80.

<sup>30</sup> Richard Pryor, Is It Something That I Said?, Reprise, 1975.

<sup>31</sup> Rovin, 1983, p.116.

<sup>32</sup> Reprise, 1975

Pryor is wide open for the liberal critic who could easily attack him over subject and language. What he does is create and direct a catalogue of characters and put them on a stage, using comedy to make us look at the 'what is' of this urban black existence, angry and disenfranchised. He is polar opposite to Cosby. In his reaction to the latter, he could not have gone more extreme and more for the reality nerve than he did. Pryor's material is outstanding as both comedy and social observation and for sheer originality. He did not do the 'Uncle Tom's' but the Black Panthers, the junkies and the low life. It is a frightening world. Like Sahl, he can put himself in the situation and shows how it affects us: in court, the street, in jail, on drugs or having sex he makes the point, deliberately or not, that urban black existence is constantly defined by racism. It is a bleak picture and unsparing. He uses fantasy to make his point, usually one of unfairness, and puts Nixon in jail with a group of black homosexuals, re-enacting their dialogue. Racism is always the sub-text, his driving force at times venomous, the laughter comes from the painful truth of what he describes. The recording is marred by the large size of the audience: the amount of time the material takes to translate into laughter interrupts the flow of the material. Ideally, Pryor should have recorded in a small club rather than the stadium sounding environment of this recording.

After redefining his act, with huge success, Pryor unfortunately went more into films, taming the radical stance somewhat. Many outstanding comedians have inevitably been sucked into low standard, crass commercial movie-land, draining much political or comic clout and anger from subsequent performances. The list is depressingly familiar: Billy Crystal, Whoopi Goldberg, Chevy Chase, Steve Martin (guilty of some of the worst sentimental movie misdemeanours) and especially Robin Williams, the eternally hairy man/boy. Inevitable as the advert voice over in England, it seems comedians possess an ignoble desire for commercial success at any price to their (often imagined) integrity.

Whether Richard Pryor had any direct influence on alternative comedy is difficult to establish. Indeed, he is rarely mentioned by many in this context, but his work contributed to a restructuring of boundaries and a continuation of the critical/socially aware vein in stand-up comedy wholly at odds with mainstream comedians. He continued Bruce's project - the representation and use of language in stand-up - and the redefinition of what is and is not possible in stand-up comedy. Pryor's redefinition of the black stand-up comedian from Uncle Tom or 'Amos & Andy' stereotypes into an angry, urban, articulately political role is the most significant achievement. Pryor performs little now, suffering from multiple-sclerosis, but his previous material is still powerful, his outlook still relevant, and his delivery still geeky, vulnerable and beautifully foul-mouthed.

### **Saturday Night Live.**

Saturday Night Live was America's prime television showcase for a new generation of comedians. First broadcast from New York on October 11, 1975, on NBC, it later went on to win several 'Emmy' awards helping further the comedy careers of Steve Martin, John Belushi, Dan Aykroyd, Bill Murray and Chevy Chase. Satirical in content, it utilised the host and sketch format with guest stand-up comedians, and had an edgy live delivery: the initial format proposal referred to That Was The Week That Was.<sup>33</sup> The programme developed through its successive series and included parody commercials, guest hosts, music, news spoofs, drugs references and featured the Muppets and Chevy Chase's "Weekend Update" in which he impersonated the then President, Gerald Ford. Its guest hosts included post-Lenny Bruce comedian George Carlin, Raquel Welsh, Gerald Ford himself and Richard Pryor. Initial reluctance to have Pryor on the second show centred around fears of his use of the word 'fuck' on live television; a six second delay was installed in order to bleep him should he let one out. Recognising Pryor's position as their precursor, the Saturday Night Live producer, Lorne Michaels, said that "it would make a mockery of their

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<sup>33</sup> Bob Woodward, Wired: the Short Life and Fast Times of John Belushi, London: Faber, 1985, p.70

new comedy mantle to veto Pryor. He was Mr New Comedy.”<sup>34</sup> Like Pryor, Saturday Night Live perpetuated a rock and roll consumer connection: there was the hedonistic lifestyle of some its members: the post-counter culture politics and references and it featured contemporary music acts. Woodward, in his biography of John Belushi,<sup>35</sup> alleges that many of the writers and performers were involved in heavy drug use and maintained a serious party lifestyle (something that would be difficult to envisage at the Morecambe and Wise Show or Sunday Night at the London Palladium). It was precisely this lifestyle that set them apart and gave them their ‘counter cultural’ appeal. Despite its initial popularity with the student population the programme later pulled in twenty eight million viewers.<sup>36</sup> It has become as much an institution as, perhaps, Monty Python’s Flying Circus is in this country, albeit slightly more addled and rumour-rife. Saturday Night Live provided a context in which the comedy - started by Sahl, Bruce and the jazz circuit comedians and consolidated by Carlin and Pryor - could be expanded and perpetuated. Williams and Martin went on to refine a more absurdist style of stand-up comedy and many others went on to create film careers for themselves, to varying degrees of success. The other significant achievement was that it also launched The Blues Brothers, a soul band with Dan Aykroyd and John Belushi that went on to produce several million selling records and the eponymous cult film. Although Saturday Night Live was not the result of a specific, historical moment in comedy - rather a distillation of what had preceded it - it attempted to bring this new comedy, with its own ethics, politics and lifestyles, across to the mass consumer market and provide a context and consolidation of style.

### **Robin Williams.**

Williams had left Juilliard and begun his stand-up comedy career in 1976, at The Improv in Los Angeles, performing a routine on masturbation.<sup>37</sup> He eventually

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p.84.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p.84.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p.164.

<sup>37</sup> Guardian, 15/1/94. This is a something he has returned to time and again.



appeared on the Richard Pryor Show and in a cameo in the trite, 1950s revivalist Happy Days television series. This 1978 cameo spun off into the series Mork and Mindy where Williams starred as an extra-terrestrial visitor who moves in with a two-dimensional female foil. The show, especially the seemingly improvised scenes by Williams, met with considerable success, although its power dwindled to that of a gassed badger by the end of the final series, in its fourth year, when the principle characters had married and had a child, played by ageing comedian, Jonathan Winters. It was Williams's erratic and energetic appearance in UK screenings of Mork and Mindy that gave an inkling that something lively was bubbling in the bowels of American comedy.

#### Live At The Met.

Williams recorded a show at the New York Metropolitan Opera House<sup>38</sup> and he is in full flight. The hour or so demonstrates all of Williams's skills at straight stand-up comedy. He showcases his brilliance in front of an audience of thousands. Live At The Met is a commercial tour de force if nothing else. Williams is a sweaty faced, manic Gurner, hyper-kinetically switching from character to character, running through the gamut of voices and accents and his trademark improvisations. His ego just about fits into the gigantic hall. He connects disparate concepts, developing fantasies, like Bruce (and there are several Bruce gags resonating through the set: Jesus returning to the modern world and the confining <sup>of</sup> homosexuals in prison). The English Royal family, politics, gun laws, sex and sports are all lined up and scatter-shot. He is good on drinking culture and criticises beer commercials for their falsehoods (although asking for honesty in commercials is like asking for modesty in comedians). Williams is good on drug usage: his own experiences drawn on, usually the bad ones (too stoned to remember the good ones); dealing with cops, spending too much money and losing too many friends; wrecking relationships and the debilitation process of excess cocaine. Film, television and pop cultural references resound throughout: The Wizard of Oz, Deliverance (especially the anal sex scenes)

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<sup>38</sup> Robin Williams, Live at the Met, Vestron Video, 1986.

and Star Trek amongst many others, complete with appropriate voices. He references screen heroes like John Wayne, Jimmy Stewart and Rambo, attacking the macho mythology of Hollywood iconography. He is anti-macho but a full on male ego maniac and the idea of being in a bar with him for ten minutes would subsume one's entire personality. Disney, Laurel and Hardy and the Marx Brothers are drawn in and he has Gadaffi clowning it up as one of the Three Stooges. He comments through his pets, though not relying on it as a mainstay - anthropomorphology lite. He jumps around some of the ethnic make up of America: he has Italian crotch grabbing Vinny's brokering peace talks with Reagan and Gorbachov; a black agony aunt advising women how to deal with prematurely ejaculating men; and large, black footballers called the Fridge steamrolling the white, opposing team members. US foreign policy, the UN, South Africa, the environment and Chernobyl all come under fire. It is here that his ego takes a back seat and he gets right to the absurdity and dangers of the issue, and never without getting a good gag from it. It is when he submerges to crotch level that he becomes obvious and undermines his own creative energy. An extended penis monologue, to which he returns too many times, logically evolves into a set piece on pregnancy - "10 to 15 hours of sheer bliss" - and subsequent fatherhood.

At times, his wild free associations do not so much inspire laughter as awe at the gigantic ego spinning out of control into a mess of bizarre funny voices and breakneck speed comedy. His improvisation often resorts to cheap innuendo and obvious penis gags but at best expands into further realms. He is politically liberal and a 'good cause-r'. His observations on drug abuse are rarely matched but these are not his strong points. He can invent good one-liners for appropriate situations but it is his improvisation skills, the free association, that set him apart from most other comedians. As stated, Billy Connolly, Eddie Izzard, Bruce, Pryor and Williams all utilise this improvisation and free form rather than tightly constructed scripted jokes. This indicates an elasticity that comes with time, acknowledging the freedom and

space often granted to comedians, in which to play, explore and expand on themes and possibilities.

It was the energy that was picked up on by the alternative and post-alternative comedy generation, if anything, the feeling he was approaching stand-up with a different imagination. His is a world of rapid fire, improvised comedy, wild voices, intelligent concepts and drug fuelled enthusiasm. He has been known to take it past the limits and acknowledges this himself. He has no danger now: expectation removes it; we know what he can do. He is a 'smart ass' and lacks appealing vulnerability; the vulnerability of 'then'- the drink/ drug/ fornication excess - is before. It is not to do with this comedian. It is the third person represented. He gives nothing away but occasional sentimental pictures and glimpses of him and his son in a car or perhaps watching television. The end monologue of Live at The Met, a 'Save the Planet from the multinationals for whom I work' set piece, has him walk away with his invisible son into the stand-up comedy sunset: it is so sentimental and politically weak as to be practically emetic.

It is easy to dislike Williams for his tedious egotism, his crass commercial ventures in movies are lamentable (although he answered the time-honoured/compulsive call to don the dress of comedy in Mrs Doubtfire). To semi-feasibly stretch a metaphor across ocean and generation: Williams is like Monkhouse, both have produced some outstanding comedy yet there is the feeling that little is *really* given away for it is hard to empathise with either. We know they are both now very rich and experience little that we do in everyday life. Modesty is not part of Williams's stage make-up. The idea of pulling back is a non-concept. The abysmal sentimentality of his Hollywood movies transplant his hyper-manic egotism into set-piece cockle warmers, diluted in comedy and limited in space for what he feels he does best - to free associate and spin off from the script in a live context. Williams's global fame now removes any possibility of intimacy and communication in his performances, although he does appear unannounced at open mike nights. He can only play large

venues - the Metropolitan Opera House being the biggest - which denies much of stand-up comedy's potential communication and reverts to spectacular status. However he is best remembered for his abilities in improvisation, his hyper fast style and his broadening of subject matter and appeal in stand-up.

### **Conclusion.**

This strain of American comedy has been expanded and continued by many comedians since Williams: Eddie Murphy took Pryor's style into the eighties and crash landed into mediocre movies, despite his exuberantly confident stand-up; the 'comedy of hate' school of Leary, Hicks and Kinnison excelled in provocative and challenging political comedy in the 1980s; and the more subtle comedians like Will Durst, Jimmy Tingle and the less political but no less observant Rich Hall have to some extent widened its scope again. Most notable amongst the absent here are George Carlin - still going, still angry, still obscure over here - and the earlier Whoopi Goldberg. This is of course, a different thesis. However, despite brief summation, the above fed directly into the alternative comedy moment, consciously or less so. These comedians all contributed to the decision to open the Comedy Store in some way, but also inspired some of the principle performers to perform, acknowledged or not. These American comedians all explored the darker edges of everyday life and the political dimension of urban living in their own unique ways. They uncovered possibilities for stand-up comedy, that it can be challenging and go further than the joke to present genuine, authentic moments for their audiences.

## Alternative Comedy.

“I’m an alternative comedian - which means I’m not funny.” Alexei Sayle.<sup>1</sup>

It is difficult to assess the Comedy Store initial performances and early alternative comedy in retrospect when there remains little documentation. This lack of documentation and the way that comedy material mutates through the process of performance means that hazy memory and conjecture are continuous problems. What little of the initial moment of alternative comedy remaining, or what few comedians got onto television or film, are considerably moderated in terms of language. One of the first comedians to get across on television, Alexei Sayle, appeared on OTT, an Carlton TV production that went out on Saturday nights;<sup>2</sup> the strong language that powered his live material was trimmed away. It may be true to say that, by the time this new comedy had gained acknowledgement in the public televised arena, the initial moment of the Comedy Store had passed and the road towards mainstream infiltration had been embarked on. However, we can look at the effects it had on comedy, the way the subversive strain fed directly into it and how it influenced, and was influenced by cultural events around the moment. Alternative comedy also played a crucial role for the way it bound the surreal and satirical elements (as purveyed by That Was The Week That Was, Monty Python’s Flying Circus, etc.) of British comedy into the more traditional stand-up comedy format, injecting it with a new politics in response to the reactionary agenda <sup>of ?</sup> The Comedians club comics.

The stilted state of stand-up comedy (dominated by the great white male with a repertoire of racist, sexist or unchallenging gags), the coming together of several performers under one roof with similar ideas, the political and social upheavals of the day and the cultural ructions that surfaced via Punk and fringe theatre were all

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<sup>1</sup> Alexei Sayle, Celebration, Granada 1980.

<sup>2</sup> OTT was an ‘adult’ version of the successfully chaotic Tiswas programme. Hosted by Chris Tarrant, it went out in early 1981 and featured Lenny Henry and Bob Carolgees, who had become famous for his ‘Spit the Dog’ puppet, as well as ‘chaotic entertainment’ and some lamentable penis cartoons. Alexei Sayle performed a five minute stand-up routine which went over the heads of many. But on reflection it was probably the only notable thing of the series.

crucial elements in the formation of alternative comedy. Clearly the significant effect it had on comedy was the direct result of the political currents flowing through the popular culture at the time. It is preferable to look at alternative comedy - what it represented and what some of the reactions were - and some of the key players who developed different ideas within the form rather than the many individual comedians involved, Wilmut having adequately covered the personnel history, it is pointless reiterating.

Just as we need pop stars to be drug crazed and slightly smelly (and not well turned out to save the planet) so, too, do we need comedians to be at various times risky, iconoclastic and even dangerous. The comedian is in the position to explore limitations, search for weakness and get them in the open (and either explain or ridicule them) not to expose us in front of our peers but to expose us as individuals with the same fears, foibles and vulnerability. Comedy can become an involvement not a scapegoating. The need for a radical agenda in British stand-up comedy in the late 1970s arose because the traditional comedian excluded younger people through subject matter in the same way the more established rock acts had alienated a newer generation of teenagers, hence Punk. The subversive strain had only perpetuated through repeats of Monty Python's Flying Circus and Not The Nine O' Clock News before alternative comedy made any noticeable impact on the national comedy psyche. The dominant trad-com agenda dealt with values, jokes, and subject matter more relevant to a previous generation, like rock and roll in reverse. Although younger people could watch and laugh (although there was a limit to how much Ronnie Corbett the average under-18 could cope with) their actual, everyday life was not reflected back at them. Inclusion in comedy is through shared references, political attitudes and beliefs. There was a visible gap in the arena of comedy and with cuts in grants to fringe theatre, Punk permeating the wider culture and a significant political crisis within everyday life, alternative comedy came into being. Many comedians have been hostile to the term alternative comedy but it is the convenient identifying term for the comedy that grew from the Comedy Store in the

late 1970s and the term 'new comedy' seems somewhat anachronistic. It visibly developed through a rapidly expanding cabaret scene and ventures into television such as The Young Ones, ITV's Friday Night/Saturday Live in the 1980s and various other one off programmes. The criteria for alternative comedy were not solely that of having appeared at the Comedy Store: it is the comedy influenced by the political ideas alive within that moment and which has shared several iconoclastic attitudes towards the more outmoded club comedians and the parental generation of laughsters. The non racist/sexist agenda was to have a significant effect throughout the performance and perception of the new comedy. Alternative comedy unfortunately remains linked with Ben Elton-esque anti-Thatcher rants, Saturday Live and hectoring monologues spattered with swearing. It is as easy to reduce it to a spittle spraying cliché as it is to reduce the previous generation of stand-up comedians as a bunch of right wing, tuxedo wearing comedy-pensioners (however close to the truth this may be). Alternative comedy in this context is that which shared some of the same politics and organisation as Punk and fringe theatre.

### **The Comedy Store Opens.**

"I had never been to a comedy club in London. In the late seventies there wasn't one. Where did you go to laugh in London?" Peter Rosengard.<sup>3</sup>

"Q: The Comedy Store has become mythologised. Was it really that autonomous?"

"Yeah, it was. It really was an extraordinary place ... It was everything that people pretended it was." Alexei Sayle.<sup>4</sup>

On 19<sup>th</sup> May 1979, shortly after Margaret Thatcher came to power, entrepreneur Peter Rosengard opened up a comedy club in London. In an echo of Peter Cook's earlier thinking, after visiting the Comedy Store venue on Los Angeles (which had featured, amongst others, Richard Pryor and Robin Williams) Rosengard wondered why there was no similar place in London. In a further echo of The Establishment, the Comedy Store launched above a strip club accessible only via an elevator in Dean Street in the, then seedy, Soho area. Bored by the traditional style of stand-up

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<sup>3</sup> Roger Wilmut, Didn't You Kill My Mother-In-Law, London: Methuen, 1989, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Alexei Sayle, London 12/3/97.

comedians Rosengard wanted to present an arena for a more dynamic and original comedy, without all the compulsory mother-in-laws and sexism. He placed an advert in Private Eye asking for the acts that he eventually got after auditioning many hopeless hopefuls. Rosengard did not know what to expect from the comedians and he did not know what to expect from the audience, and neither did they and this gave the Comedy Store an important angle.

The Comedy Store, in its initial period offered an autonomous space in which experimentation with form and content could take place. Autonomous space is a context sometimes limited by demand but not expectation: there is a demand for something interesting or stimulating but no other rules and parameters. The Comedy Store provided the opportunity to invent laws on arrangements: stand-up comedy is one of the few disciplines that can only test out what works and what does not in front of a live audience, what is funny rapidly replaces what is not. It is a harsh trial and error. Autonomous space becomes sidelined with the demand to make comedy venues successful and, subsequently, the right to fail turns into the right for the audience's embarrassment.

Space becomes autonomous when suspended from the demands of the commodification of everyday life but is not unaffected by what goes on within it. It grants itself space to look at what everyday life is in order to deal with it from this context. It is difficult to find examples of autonomous space given the nature of requirement. Spaces cannot hope to continue without cash injections and few survive unless offering a fixed menu of expected acts. Perhaps the most notorious autonomous space was the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich in 1916 run by the Dadaists. Cabaret Voltaire was a defining moment in itself that subsequently inspired a strain of wider activity, not just 'art' or 'literature', whose influence continues through various manifestations.<sup>5</sup> Though by no means comparing the London Comedy Store

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<sup>5</sup> For more details of these manifestations, see Stewart Home, The Assault on Culture, AK Press: Sterling, 1994.



to something so influential and historic (although not to underestimate the Comedy Store's local or national influence) some interesting parallels did exist, mainly the lack of parameters and the possibilities for experimentation and audience antagonism. Rosengard claims that, unlike the Establishment Club for example, the Comedy Store attracted a wide range of interest and its relatively low scale setting (unlike the dinner crowd at The Establishment) meant a less exclusive audience. It is also important to see the Comedy Store not as some warped talent show but a place where a significant future effect on British comedy formulated, albeit not deliberately. Given the time and place, London, 1979, the Punk connection also becomes clear: some Punk clubs were, to an extent, open to some degree of experimentation with form and content, attitudes and politics. <sup>6</sup> The Comedy Store provided a context for exploring possibilities and play.

“People were genuinely experimenting with the form”. Alexei Sayle on The Comedy Store. <sup>7</sup>

Play is the withdrawing of influence to create a free ranging environment in which desires become feasible and not fantastic. To play is to engage in activity without fixed parameters: it is questioning, enquiring, a method of exploring a situation or an idea. Jazz musicians improvising contain elements of play: there is a basic structure or starting point and the destination is revealed through play, improvisation. Play is the willing exposure to sensation and revelation: possibilities present themselves through the combination of various elements, no matter how disparate, and combine in any way felt desirable. Play is the exploration of the imagination, combinations and their developments into possible new ideas. In play there is a de-emphasis on product, a finished thing, a punch-line.

In improvised comedy and comedy given to exploring boundaries, there is some attempt at closure but not an emphasis. The audience engages on the journey just behind the performer and knows slightly less about the destination than s/he does.

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<sup>6</sup> See Short Circuit: Live at the Electric Circuit, Virgin Records, 1978, where reggae, Punk and poetry mixed with some dubious politics.

<sup>7</sup> Alexei Sayle interview, 12/3/97.

The hit or miss nature of improvised comedy lends it an interesting tension, its 'now-ness', the feel of the new unfolding right before our ears and eyes. There are elements of risk, further tensions that generate from this. It is arguable that the economic demand for the polished product of stand-up comedy sidelines risk unless the risk itself turns in on itself and is used as the marketing ploy. Slickness kills any sense of danger inherent in comedy (Bob Monkhouse kindly climb the scaffold). It is within the autonomous space in which we can explore risk and play and where we find comedy's inherent possibilities to take ideas beyond the initial premise. Before any ideological stipulation became cemented at the Comedy Store, an element of free play (a de-emphasis on comedy as marketable product) had become possible: whether exploited or squandered is difficult to say but the opportunity was there. The tolerance of the audience and the risk of being gonged off notwithstanding, the Comedy Store existed without the expectations of a more formal comedy venue.<sup>8</sup>

The Comedy Store offered an autonomous space for experimentation starting with only vague parameters - although with the former Rosengard stipulated a non racist, non sexist gag ban that underscored a liberal agenda. Alternative comedy, although a moment in itself, was a continuation or manifestation of a previously established strain, though very much alive in a new context. It is in the ideas that inspired the moments as well as the moments themselves that we begin to see the parallels of the previous comedy: the desire to change or destroy the established order and to reinvent the meaning of the pieces. For alternative comedy, the defining moment started when Alexei Sayle got up to introduce the first act at the Comedy Store and ended with the realisation that this new comedy could be packaged and sold by 'outside interests'. The moment was a confluence of small events, energies and manifestations that acted as a catalyst for a redefinition of stand-up comedy before

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<sup>8</sup> In stand-up comedy, the delivery of a 'finished' performance is paramount and thus eludes the opportunity for improvisation and the right to fail. However, over the last few years spaces have opened up within stand-up comedy following the success of improvised comedy in Channel 4's Whose Line Is It Anyway, the 1 Word Improv tour and similar packages. Improvisation and playing with an idea to see where it goes continues, thanks to the success of Eddie Izzard, Stephen Frost and cohorts and recent Perrier Award winner Dylan Moran.

the injection and hardening of any ideology. Ironically, it was only after this comedy had developed this agenda - consciously or not - that it could effect any serious change within comedy itself, when it had developed an identifiable coherence. In its initial state, it remained a half chaotic enterprise. Affecting change requires some kind of infra-structure. As Dada was diluted into surrealism, post-Cabaret Voltaire, by the Bretonistas, their mystical babble and their ideological constraints, so too did the Comedy Store draw in thicker parameters and limitations - thus making it more recognisable - on a potentially (i.e. not fully explored) open space.

It is easy to misconstrue the Comedy Store as the first possible space for disparate elements to come together and develop their ideas. Tony Allen, Jim Barclay, Alexei Sayle, and others were doing stand-up/cabaret before the Comedy Store opened: the Store gave them the context to develop simultaneously under one roof. But it could have happened anyway.

As the Comedy Store 'moment' developed, Peter Richardson opened the Comic Strip club nearby, in October 1980. This was to offer a more professional showcase for the best of the Store's acts and make them more available - 8.00pm, five nights a week - than a midnight gig in a Soho strip joint. Alexei Sayle felt it was less dangerous than the Store and that "it was quite a calculated move for us to enhance our careers." <sup>9</sup> The Comic Strip received more press coverage and was to represent the opening up of alternative comedy along with the Alternative Cabaret tour and eventually smaller excursions into television. The Comic Strip put together a larger tour in 1981 (which also went to Australia) and later developed into film production. London's cabaret circuit had also begun to develop (and is still doing so), enough to warrant a comedy/cabaret column in Time Out and the now defunct City Limits. Television began to feel the increasing presence of alternative comedy with shows like Boom Boom Out Go the Lights and Kick Up the Eighties which featured Rik

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<sup>9</sup> Wilmut, 1989, p. 71.

Mayall's character Kevin Turvey.<sup>10</sup> By the start of 1982 The Young Ones, which was to be alternative comedy's biggest impact on the national psyche, had gone into production. By this time, many more had developed the ideas.

### **Alexei Sayle.**

"I used to do comedy to be irritating." Alexei Sayle.<sup>11</sup>

Of all the comedians to come out of the late 1970s it is perhaps Alexei Sayle (born 1952) who is the definitive (or according to Sayle, the original) alternative comedian. His ballistic mix of surrealism, political referencing and scatology almost defined what was to follow. He established himself as M.C. at the Comedy Store, after answering Rosengard's advert in Private Eye, where he fully explored his unique, aggressive style. Before the Comedy Store Sayle had been working in a fringe theatre group closely aligned to the Communist Party following which he formed a cabaret group with two others performing an hour long show with sketches:

"It was quite complex, it interwove, there were sketches and prototypical stand-up and stuff like that. That was where I worked out the basic building blocks."<sup>12</sup>

During this he began to develop an antagonistic style of stand-up comedy that tended to be met with mixed reactions. Presenting this in the open context of the Comedy Store, Sayle attracted similar performers who developed a framework for exploring similar ideas. Sayle toured with Alternative Cabaret with Tony Allen and Andy De La Tour, amongst others, and in 1980 performed at the Edinburgh Fringe festival with Allen. According to Sayle, they were the only stand-up comedy there and, subsequently, can be credited/blamed for the wealth of talent/critical mass of mediocrity currently populating/polluting that particular scene. On his return to London, Peter Richardson asked Sayle to M.C. at the Comic Strip and he finally broke with the Comedy Store. This led to the Comic Strip touring England and Australia after which he split away from the milieu to establish his own direction

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<sup>10</sup> A Kick Up The Eighties went out on BBC2 in 1981 and showcased the nascent talents of Mayall, Tracy Ullman, Robbie Coltrane and writer Lise Mayer, writer of The Young Ones, amongst others. Wilmot, 1989, p. 49.

<sup>11</sup> Wilmot, 1989, p. 49.

<sup>12</sup> Alexei Sayle, interview with writer, 12/3/97.

culminating in the Cak! tour of 1985. He also performed stand-up comedy in Central TV's much criticised Saturday night after the pub programme, OTT, and BBC2's The Young Ones in the early 1980s with various other members of the circuit. In the latter he mostly appeared as self-written members of the Bolowski family who invariably had some kind of mental defect or aggressive psychosis. This latter affliction seems inherent in most of Sayle's comedy persona and characters. The Cak! Tour proved to be a successful crossover of alternative comedy into the pop arena. Performing at universities and rock venues, Sayle attracted a larger cross section of audience that included Punks, skinheads (he appeared as a skinhead) social workers, politicians and students.

The original Comedy Store crowd appears to have split into two groups by all accounts: those who moved to the Comic Strip, who were more performance/character based comedy (except Sayle) and the politically orientated comedians - Allen, De La Tour, Jim Barclay - who developed a more informal, chatty style. Sayle went over to the Comic Strip because he felt the latter group were "too bitchy". It is here we begin to see an interesting paradox: Sayle was always political (implicitly not explicitly) but preferred the more experimental comedians; and although Sayle seems to represent the definitive alternative comedian to most, the closer we look the more untrue this appears. The lingering idea of the alternative comedian is young, university educated middle class with a liberal/socialist agenda and faint aroma of pseudo-street credibility (Mayall, Edmondson, Elton, French, Saunders et al.) with some kind of fringe background. Sayle appears as a working class skinhead, clearly Marxist, who attacked both left and right; he kept a distance from the majority (despite The Young Ones) and after the Comic Strip endeavoured to go his own way.

"I was the first person on the stage at the Comedy Store. It wouldn't have got past the first week without me." <sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Interview, 12/3/97.

The fact that he claims to have both 'invented' and 'started' alternative comedy probably consolidated this 'definitive stature'. There is a difference between the two terms, however. Invention is "create by thought; originate";<sup>14</sup> to start is "begin: commence" and to "set (proceedings, an event, etc.) in motion."<sup>15</sup> There is absolutely no doubt that that he set the alternative ball rolling because he was the first on the stage at the Comedy Store, but he did not originate all the ideas. Sayle's aggressive, politically fired stand-up style at the Comedy Store was a style to which others found parallels (Allen, De La Tour, John Dowie, Jim Barclay) but which also had clear precedents in the US - Lenny Bruce, Richard Pryor and the Saturday Night Live crew. Sayle did develop a character/persona that served to display all the elements of what alternative comedy came to represent and by being the first alternative comedian sketched parameters *for others to operate in*: he "invented new rules on that arrangement." If others had not found these parameters of importance, Sayle may well have disappeared taking the Comedy Store with it, although he admits "it would have happened in a different way."<sup>16</sup> Acknowledgement for consolidating an anti trad-com agenda should centre on Sayle.

"Every comic there's ever been wants to be liked by the audience - except me". Alexei Sayle.<sup>17</sup>

Sayle does not present an authentic persona in his stand-up comedy but several facets of a complex character. When pressed on which aspect was closest to him he has said: "I'm not the man on the television - not any more than Kenneth Branagh wears tights at night"<sup>18</sup> and "The guy on the stage is the reverse [to me] - he's fearless."<sup>19</sup> It is awkward to define Sayle in either persona or character terms as he can rapidly change through various aspects. Certainly, he is no comic character, we do not laugh at him or at the Bergsonian sense of inelasticity. The complexity of his language, the aggression and control of his performances and his total rejection of any notion of

<sup>14</sup> Oxford Compact English Dictionary. Oxford: University Press, 1996, p. 523.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 1008.

<sup>16</sup> Interview, 12/3/97.

<sup>17</sup> Wilmot, 1989, p. 49.

<sup>18</sup> The Face, January, 1994.

<sup>19</sup> Independent on Sunday, 29/9/91.

'liking' lends him a slightly superior position to the audience. It is not a shared experience, "people have to come on to my territory."<sup>20</sup> The rejection of 'liking' is a further distancing from the political section of the alternative comedy scene; they generally presented likeable personas to get the heavier points across.

Sayle furthered the paradox by perpetuating an intriguing ambiguity: whereas many of the comedians from alternative comedy seemed to embody or promote a 'cosmopolitan', left based agenda, Sayle attacked it. He favoured targets such as the yuppie-fication of Stoke Newington, social workers ("Help a London child - kill a social worker!"),<sup>21</sup> the Arts Council, art galleries, the political left and liberal institutions, amongst many other things. Attacking the values of a section of potential audience is interesting, to say the least, but it also served to widen his appeal further than many of the other comedians. There is also a difference between attacking the politics and attacking those who purport to represent these politics. Sayle has always maintained a Marxist/scientific analysis of this whilst simultaneously perpetuating an ambiguity through attacking the same area. When criticised by a left winger for "saying what twats the left are" instead of attacking Margaret Thatcher, he said "Why? I don't know Thatcher. She hasn't annoyed me at dinner parties."<sup>22</sup> Sayle has always maintained that he does not preach politics (and is critical of Ben Elton for doing so) and he seems content to attack it all or refer derisively. Listening to some of his work at the height of his stand-up career is like listening to a rapidly delivered semi-organised stream of consciousness: it is full of references to structuralism, art, political terminology and violence. Like his programmes - packed with detail, reference and allusion - it is, at times, too much to take in.

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<sup>20</sup> Wilmot, 1989, p. 49.

<sup>21</sup> Secret Policeman's Other Ball, 1982, Columbia TriStar Home Video, 1992.

<sup>22</sup> Interview, 12/3/97.

Alexei Sayle's 1981 performance in The Secret Policeman's Other Ball<sup>23</sup> is fairly typical of the early material he was performing. With few acts representing the alternative side of comedy in this video recording he stands yards apart from the usual Monty Python's Flying Circus/BBC satire crowd. Sayle appears in a tight suit, shaven headed and sweating and continues to rant over two five minute segments. He is manic, threatening and looks like a lunatic as he rampages through Stoke Newington, shouting in bus shelters and seething diatribes. It is difficult to isolate 'jokes' as such that can be taken out of context although there are plenty of punch-lines. It is in the bizarre twist of cultural references where the humour lies; there is a dense quality to the performance. He attacks almost everything, returning time and again to Stoke Newington, attacking the values of his (potential) audience. It is not a cross-over appeal performance but almost a deliberate intimidation - like this if you dare. It is classic stand-up Sayle. He lambastes the drug culture, hippies, liberals, the bohemian 'alternative' vegetarian lifestyle and chokes civil servants on Quiche Lorraine. It is remarkably fast switching from subject to subject using inflections, voices and bizarre mimes. He hates the middle class and it is obvious. Their values are not ones he shares and he does not proffer an alternative credo, which is where the difference between him and Ben Elton lies. However, his political background denies him the opportunity to be a full-on nihilist. In stand-up few have shared the depth of reference, volatility and complexity of Sayle, even though Keith Allen's aggression, Gerry Sadowitz's scatology and Eddie Izzard's surreal narratives have touched on areas.

On Cak,<sup>24</sup> recorded on the eponymous tour, the stream of high energy offence is punctuated by several unfortunate songs, complete with 1980s synthesised drums and corny keyboards. As usual, the comedy songs amount to little more than repetitious space fillers and one joke cowboys ("Dr Marten's Boots", "'Ello John Got A New Motor", etc.). Once again, he visits the trendy left in the guise of a bus

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<sup>23</sup> Secret Policeman's Other Ball.

<sup>24</sup> Cak! Springtime Records, 1982, CAK 1.



stop lunatic and sends them to horrific holidays in Turkey and makes their houses collapse in Stoke Newington. The performance is remarkable and uncensored and it is probably the only record in the world which says “Jean-Paul Sartre? Fuck off, you cunt!”: comedians had not generally said that on their records. It is this juxtaposition of high brow culture and profanity that defines much of Sayle’s earlier work. Critics attacked the use of swearing in alternative comedy and many comedians adopted this to assume added street credibility. Sayle took this beyond its logical conclusion by inventing a character called ‘Mr Sweary’ who delivered a torrent of abuse, an exploration of the sheer joy of profanity although ostensibly a critique of the poverty of working class communication. He always refused to censor his language and did not exclude the words ‘cunt’ and ‘twat’ from his material: this furthered the ambiguity through not toeing the general left line and which separated him further from the dominant alternative comedy agenda. Although accepting that the use of language, especially gender and race based language, can be repressive, Sayle also sees the censoring of language as similarly repressive of means of expression, particularly of working class forms of expression by middle class ideologies.

Sayle has remained disparaging about most from this scene and was critical of those seduced and embraced by show business and its questionable trappings. He ruefully explains: “I thought we were different. And then it turns out we’re not.”<sup>25</sup> He maintained a distance from the majority of his contemporaries and developed his own ideas. He professes to despise ‘show business’ and seems disparaging to much contemporary stand-up comedy. His mixture of the surreal and the everyday has many echoes through post-alternative comedy, particularly his creative use of language and refusal to follow much of alternative comedy’s ‘dumbing down’ in his act as well as the ferocity and energy of his performances. His Cak! tour and album placed him on a national scale and the possibilities of such comedy tours developed. This move into the rock milieu from the enclosure of London’s small circuit has echoes in Tony Allen’s tours with the fringe anarchist band the Poison Girls.

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<sup>25</sup> Independent on Sunday, 24/9/91.

## **Tony Allen.**

Tony Allen, like Alexei Sayle, was at the epicentre of the seismic shift in stand-up at the Comedy Store. A self-styled “anarchist squatter from Ladbroke Grove”<sup>26</sup> he had, prior to the Comedy Store, worked for six years with the fringe group Rough Theatre, performing at festivals, community venues and arts centres, as well as street theatre, eventually honing the format down to a three man enterprise with few props and costumes. Following their demise, he began to perform straight stand-up comedy - “I was immersed in Lenny Bruce really” -<sup>27</sup> compering at benefit gigs and turning up to argue at Speakers Corner in Hyde Park. The opening of the Comedy Store was concurrent with these early performances. Allen says that the early Comedy Store based itself on the Gong Show, where people were gonged off if the audience took a dislike to them until he and the earlier performers “started laying down the law, moralising and worrying people.”<sup>28</sup> He cites Keith Allen (no relation) as injecting much of the early energy and politics into the Comedy Store. The earlier audiences were a mixture before moulding into a left/Time Out clique. Allen, as well as some of the other regulars, was also performing a purer political comedy in other venues like The Elgin pub in Notting Hill to a different audience of local bohemians and radicals: “You had left wing paper sellers going round the audience.”<sup>29</sup> Allen went to Edinburgh with Sayle where he detected the first over-commercialisation of alternative comedy. Shortly after his return, the original group splintered into the Comic Strip and Allen succeeded Sayle as compere at the Comedy Store.

Allen later joined up with the anarchist band The Poison Girls, following their split with Crass,<sup>30</sup> and began supporting them on tour:

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<sup>26</sup> Tony Allen interview with writer, 15/5/97.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Crass were an anarchist/pacifist collective living in Epping Forrest. They performed monotonous buzz saw guitar/military drumming Punk with heavy political lyrics. A significant influence, post-punk, they encouraged many other bands who hovered round the squatter/festival scene. Crass were not always preaching to the converted and there were altercations at some gigs. These cheap gigs attracted many from the punk/dole fringe culture and a significant diet of cider, glue and amphetamines was prevalent (though not for the bands). Many bands were substandard, given to a

“I just used to go out and argue with these young Punks, half of whom had the NF regalia, which meant as much as the A’s [anarchist signs] did.”<sup>31</sup>

Keith Allen has pointed out elsewhere that although the popular perception of alternative comedy was dangerous or risky, the only person who takes a risk is the one person who isn’t part of a gang, who is on their own. Tony Allen, going out to challenge this kind of audience was more radical, risky and (physically) ‘dangerous’ than any cheap shot comic ranting to a Time Out audience about Thatcher in a safe London environment could ever be. Although, to some extent, Punk was rewritten and fetishised, the post-Punk, anarchist scene has been largely over-looked by those who would document the culture. The anarcho-Punks grew as the squatter movements, the free festival scene and 1970s post-hippies collided with the anarchist bands circulating on the Crass label and the disillusioned third wave of the urban Punk scene. The anarchist contingency existed in opposition to the suspect rightist Oi! Scene. Much of the audience was involved in “hard-core politics: peace campaign, anti nukes and sexual politics”<sup>32</sup> and Allen has likened some of the straight edge (no drink no drugs anarchists) gigs to “evangelical meetings with studs and black leather.”<sup>33</sup> Not all attending the Crass-ite gigs were necessarily sympathetic to the causes espoused and confrontations with the hard-core fascist element could occur. Many of the gigs did not dissolve into violence and Allen feels he achieved something by doing them. Touring the smaller venues of provincial cities, Allen would perform, question the audience's attitudes and receive much abuse: “I used to come off stage covered in gob.”<sup>34</sup>

Following his stint with the Poison Girls, Allen continued to perform stand-up comedy, re-launched International Times in 1986 and remained a constant on the

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reiterated mire of copyist Crass song rants - government, peace, meat - and delivered these humourlessly with the notable exception of Flux of Pink Indians “I Love Tube Disasters” and the Poison Girls lighter moments. This area of post-Punk polemics is deserving of more in-depth coverage, the continuation of the DIY ethic and the propagation of anarchist ideas creating or bolstering a growing sub-culture.

<sup>31</sup> Tony Allen interview, 15/5/97.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

festival/radical scene. Allen's comedy has always been about questioning attitudes and politics, attacking assumptions, and trying to reflect the truth within "what is going on for me personally, what's going on in my lifestyle and what's going on in the bigger sphere." <sup>35</sup> He performs on stage as himself, "heightened": "If you do something that isn't you then it'll lack authenticity." <sup>36</sup> Allen is unique: he has retained his political commitment, never ceased to question and made radical steps in comedy. Performing with the Poison Girls was certainly radical: addressing a potentially violent audience who stood in opposition to what was being said and who may have exploded when questioned over their particular stances. Allen has remained committed to his anarchist politics - which is, perhaps, why he is little known, i.e., not been on television with the nauseating regularity of some from that particular coterie - has helped start clubs and other comedians and remains an interesting figure within stand-up comedy's history. He has retained a considerable degree of integrity and has a significant belief in himself as an artist as opposed to an entertainer:

"I think the whole planet's finished: 25 years will see it out. But then 25 years sees me out so that's given me quite a nice angle on it." <sup>37</sup>

### **Jenny Leacock.**

Before the alternative comedy boom, women operated within the confines of the male defined comedy world and were themselves defined within that. Although there were several significant performers around, the political aspects of performance were curtailed. As was the subject matter. Jenny Leacock, like Tony Allen, has been consigned to relative comedy obscurity by not maintaining a high television profile or standing at the helm of a self written series (like Sayle, Elton or Mayall). She was, like Tony Allen, a crucial part in the development of alternative comedy because she was one of the first women to perform a politicised stand-up routine, as herself, in the early days of the Comedy Store. Leacock had originally began performing in

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

comedy with the intention of expressing a political agenda. After working with a fringe theatre group, Moving Parts - "trying to change the world by coming on with plastic buckets shouting I am inflation" - <sup>38</sup> she began appearing on the London cabaret circuit in the early 1980s. Leacock openly called herself a 'feminist' comedian, although she stopped this when 'feminist' began to be used pejoratively. She had appeared in de rigueur 'feminist' gear - short hair and Doctor Martens boots - but toned it down considerably "so that men in the audience would not just be able to dismiss me as some stroppy lesbian." <sup>39</sup> Although much 'anti-men' material seems dated (Jo Brand has continued to modify the strain to counter the reinvention of the 'lad') it had simply never been done before. Leacock followed Victoria Wood in establishing territory not through overt strength, skill or dynamism but because no one else was there: "It was my market wasn't it." <sup>40</sup> No one had stood and criticised men and their sexual misdemeanours in a stand-up comedy context, from that political angle and been funny before: like Sayle, she was the first one to stand-up and do it. Wood had begun to establish live performance space through, or secondary to, her television appearances but she used a different performance ethics and language to the up and coming alternative comedians. Leacock's skill was in saying what women said about men and politics when men did not dominate the discourse with their political presence; she spoke of the everyday political situation in everyday language.

Gray discusses some of Leacock's material: she says Leacock makes "women the in-group and men the out-group whose behaviour is ridiculed." <sup>41</sup> Leacock asserts her right to centre stage and writes "herself into the story ... asserting her right to set the tone of discourse, etc." <sup>42</sup> She has changed the emphasis, inevitably, of her act - times change, radical events need radical address - and she says "I'm a comedian first, not

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<sup>38</sup> Wilmot, 1989, p. 132.

<sup>39</sup> Morwena Banks & Amanda Swift, *The Jokes On Us*, London: Pandora, 1987, p. 28.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>41</sup> Frances Gray, *Women and Laughter*, London: MacMillan, 1994, p. 152.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

a manbasher.”<sup>43</sup> Her emphasis is on being honest, presenting an authentic persona that she herself believes and this led her to delve into newer territory:

“the contradictions within modern women’s lives: being ‘right on’ and actually being fucked up, being a right on feminist and reading the right books and crying because you’ve put on five pounds.”<sup>44</sup>

This is interesting territory; the gap between how we would wish to represent ourselves and how we acknowledge our failure. The political reality clashing with the personal dimension.

Le Coats performed at the Donmar Warehouse, London and was recorded by the National Sound Archive in 1986.<sup>45</sup> The show is a mix of stand-up and surprisingly agile music. Le Coats has always used music to convey her points: the songs are witty and tightly constructed rather than joke songs; they are songs that enhance the stand-up performance rather than centralise it. She has a good relationship with the audience, brushing off their heckling with ease of control, and she likes talking to them. She attacks Guardian readers, royalty, female representation, contraception, girl’s magazines, Cosmopolitan, the shallowness of dinner parties and Terry Wogan. Le Coats is at her best when she explores the down side. Her subject matter is usually failures and disappointments, be they men, herself, families or the more biological aspects of depression, weight watching and menstruation. She chimes sweetly: “Anyone remember their first period? ... sorry boys, I’ll deal with you later.”<sup>46</sup> She is bitter at the bad deal, men letting her down and all the adverts, neuroses, depressions and susceptibility to media representations that women are subject to. Where she is expert is on relationships and their inevitable failure; her songs are resigned to the fact men will always let her down and when they do not, she can do it for herself - “you got me thinking it’ll be different this time” transmuting into “it’s not going to be different this time.”<sup>47</sup> The material against men is relatively mild; the

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<sup>43</sup> Banks & Swift, 1989, p. 30.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Jenny Le Coats, Live At The Donmar Warehouse, NSA Tape, c24014, 1986.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

chat-up nightmares expressed in song; men slow on the sexual uptake when women become assertive; dishonesty and inappropriate sexual behaviour and failing badly to charm: “perhaps you’d like to come back to my place and fuck? Where’s he gone?”

<sup>48</sup> There are detailed observations on the hopelessness of romance and many references to drinking (and the two are usually equated). She sings a song about hungover Sundays, regretting being unable to function properly, beached on the coach, exhausted. She is very sex oriented but painfully honest and her best subject is herself, for whom she spares little sympathy: she is no ‘girlie’ whining. LeCoat makes a point funny rather than doing jokes that have a point. Her ideas are funnily expressed but very accurate. She pushes to gross extremes at times; urinating in horrific pub toilets with no seats or in the countryside - “no sense of aim”; <sup>49</sup> gynaecologists, contraceptives and applying spermicides - “I felt like Mr Whippy” - <sup>50</sup> and makes the point, resorting to the extreme in order to give weight to the idea. LeCoat uses a bit too much self-deprecation, something Jo Brand would excel at later, she uses things common to us all, instantly recognisable. She is in the middle of the everyday and seems mystified by much she observes, though resigned. She sounds like a ‘nice girl’.

Much of the material remains resilient and relevant; her non-reliance on gags gives her space to talk rather than deliver one-liners (like Brand) and the material deals sufficiently with the universal to retain a lasting appeal. Listened to now it seems ‘too 80s’, like Elton, as political comedy slides gradually out of view in light of commercial interest for many comedians. The performance language, the style, words and approach are all handled skilfully, effortlessly and she sounds like she enjoys herself. LeCoat uses the full show format, taking her time and detailing her outlook. The songs don’t seem like fillers - like in Sayle’s Cak! - but an integral part of the performance, using a different mode of expression that adds dimension to the overall show. Like with Sayle, the recording was made before the ubiquitous video

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

reached critical mass and became the general mode for representation of comedy. These solo shows condense and showcase what the performer is driving at, the consolidation of the micro-world, fully mapped and cornered. Although in live stand-up, the twenty minute set is usually the best material, the longer shows demonstrate their performance stamina and test the strength and durability of material. The longer shows can explore in depth, whereas the twenty minute set can afford little time wasting, it has to be immediate. There is an intensity to some of these early recordings (Sadowitz and Sayle) but they also suffer from the same problem as televised comedy - we are not there, only eavesdropping.

### **Rik Mayall.**

Rik Mayall represents another side of alternative comedy - the more performance/fringe side as opposed to straight stand-up and the more politically focused in the scene. He is also a clear demonstration of career in comedy-ism. He is, perhaps, the most successful and famous of the original grupuscule and also typifies what Crowther & Pinfold called the “spittle spraying pop-eyed” alternative comedian to an irritating degree.<sup>51</sup> Mayall’s success began with his Kevin Turvey character in A Kick Up The Eighties and continued through The Young Ones, the Comic Strip movies and later to film (Drop Dead Fred in Hollywood), his characterisation of Alan B’stard in the New Statesman and appearances on stage in the West End.<sup>52</sup> Mayall began working with Adrian Edmondson at Manchester University in the late 1970s improvising round fringe, absurdist performance ideas. Relocating to London, they continued performing at the Woolwich Tramshed and the Edinburgh Fringe festival, developing their various characters as Twentieth Century Coyote. After the Comedy Store opened in May, 1979, they eventually became regular performers as part of the “second wave” of comedians and comics, following Sayle, Keith Allen and Tony Allen and the more stand-up oriented performers. Mayall and Edmondson’s characters usually appear as over the top, excessive and

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<sup>51</sup> Crowther & Pinfold, Bring Me Laughter, London: Columbus, 1987, p. 133.

<sup>52</sup> The play Cell Mates and a version of Waiting For Godot with Ade Edmondson.



psychotic, whether as the Dangerous Brothers, in The Young Ones or the long running BBC2 series Bottom.<sup>53</sup>

The Dangerous Brothers characters were Mayall and Edmondson in violent, confrontational mode and, as Mayall acknowledges, closer to Beckett than straight stand-up. They would argue and bicker and eventually succumb to violence on most occasions. Well scripted despite the improvised feel to this, the performances, both unorthodox and experimental, went down well. Mayall has commented on the atmosphere of the Comedy Store's earlier days:

“In the first year, when I think it was at its best, the audiences were as experimental as the performers were... It was a much more artistically experimental place.”<sup>54</sup>

Mayall, however, also worked solo at this time as Rick the angry poet, riddled with bedsotten angst, a character he further developed in The Young Ones. However, it was as Kevin Turvey in the BBC series, A Kick Up The Eighties in late 1981 - which was to be the first hint of alternative comedy in the ITV regions - that he met with any success. Turvey was an amateur ‘investigative reporter’ from Droitwich, whose reports would inevitably end up in misunderstood and often violent situations. Turvey recounted his monologues in an annoying, Midlands accent and was the only real standout in the series. It was with the broadcasting of The Young Ones - written by Mayall, Lise Mayer and Ben Elton - that alternative comedy chickens came home to roost in the barn of BBC Light Entertainment to eventually give cause for significant comedy rethinking.

### **The Young Ones.**

“Neil: Everyone knows that sleep gives you cancer.”<sup>55</sup>

The Young Ones may not have been ‘comedy classic repeat it at Christmas ad infinitum’ material, and it may have seemed slap-dash, chaotic and juvenile (which

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<sup>53</sup> Comedic psychosis appears to have been a pre-requisite for some of the earlier comedians like Sayle, Keith Allen, Mayall & Edmondson and Gerry Sadowitz. Perhaps it was just a mix of surrealism and Punk aggression. Perhaps not.

<sup>54</sup> Wilmot, 1989, p. 66.

<sup>55</sup> The Young Ones: “Oil; Boring; Flood.” BBC Enterprises, 1991.

was its appeal for many) but it was the first real successful exposure to the possibilities presented by alternative comedy. Like Punk, it was good because parents hated it and The Young Ones exposed the new post-Punk strain of comedy that had been developing in London. Despite occasional forays on tour by some of the comedians many people simply did not go to see stand-up comedy then, as now, partly due to the fact that alternative comedy venues took time to manifest in the satellite cities. Apart from Kevin Turvey, Alexei Sayle on OTT and sundry small BBC2 late night ventures, The Young Ones opened up a new audience, from school kids to Punks and post-graduates and, eventually, beyond. It was the first programme to root itself within experiences common to those, then, under thirty and, despite its relatively small viewing figures, its influence, though more unquantifiable, is probably greater than any subsequent venture. The Young Ones does not really stand the test of time - surpassed by many of those involved - but its bravado, experimentalism, detail and energy made significant impact.

The Young Ones is easy to criticise, being of a specific moment and using a relatively uncertain, experimental formula. The simple premise was four obnoxious, layabout students in a decrepit house: Mayall's already established Rick character fleshed out in wider context; Edmondson as a Punk version of his psychotic Dangerous Brothers character; Nigel Planer's manic depressive, put-upon hippy character; and a weird non-sequitur delivering midget, Mike. They are a nuclear family - daughter, older brother, mum and dad, respectively.<sup>56</sup> Rick is extremely irritating, childish and lacking in anything remotely positive and Mayall plays him in full on brat mode. On the occasions when he goes further back into the poet character there are flashes of genuine comedy control. Rick the poet is a great character marred by the fleshing out into an annoying little 'girly' type and is the best written figure; Mayall writing it up from an established character helps this. Neil is a boring, time-locked manic depressive hippy who everybody hates. Nigel Planer's sullen down in the mouth resigned demeanour justifies their antipathy. Although

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<sup>56</sup> Mayall interview, Observer, 12/2/95.

everybody hates each other, Mike and ~~Vyvan~~ have the closest albeit most partisan relationship. ~~Vyvan~~, the psychotic, violent and deranged medical student sides with Mike to further frustrate and damage ~~Rick~~ and to a lesser extent Neil, it is an older brother/father routine. Mike is just strange and still doesn't seem to sit right, he appears to have been added to balance the relationships, give it some equality. He is still puzzling but being played by an actor and the last character to be written could well be a significant factor.

~~Vyvan~~: What's the best thing for a hangover?

Mike: Drinking heavily the night before."<sup>57</sup>

The Young Ones shows a twisted student life, seedy and masturbatory, ultimately unlikeable, full of stained underpants, squeezed spots and virginity's unbroken. They are not sit-com favourites or even anti-heroes: the idea was to write horrible characters it would be impossible to like. They continually bicker and bitch and the humour is puerile and quite lavatorial (something from which neither Mayall nor Elton have subsequently strayed far). It is a fairly brave show with many experimental techniques explored: innovative and heavy use of animation and techno-trickery has statues coming to life and talking vegetables and household implements enact an Upstairs Downstairs spoof. There is violence and chaos: skewers, pens and pick axes are stuck through heads; ~~Vyvan~~ assaults Neil and ~~Rick~~ with a cricket bat; there are fires and explosions when Neil has an incredibly violent sneeze and ~~Rick~~ gets blown up from the cooker. The context is natural disasters, oil leaks, floods, plane crashes and riots. We see jump cuts to apparently unconnected action and parallel worlds: plagiarised Beckett characters on spying duty and shivering Chekhovian characters next door; a Cromwellian execution features comedian Arnold Brown on his knees delivering one liners in the mud and rain. Lion tamers live in Mike's bedroom and Buddy Holly hangs from the ceiling eating cockroaches; two unexplained men drift on a raft in the cellar. There are film references to The Shining and Monty Python's Holy Grail (deliberate or not); Narnia

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<sup>57</sup> The Young Ones, "Oil, Boring, Flood", BBC Enterprises, 1991.

lurks the other side of a recently added wardrobe and ~~VYUYAM~~ argues with a dwarf called Shirley over his bad breath and their gender bent names. There is a cutaway as they watch a TV sit-com, called "Oh Crikey!", which shows a man losing his trousers whilst straddling the dog (innocently) as the vicar enters the suburban front room - "Oh Crikey!" they all say. It is a well constructed and tight critique to what they perceived they were setting themselves in opposition.

Bad taste, bad gags and sign-posting corny jokes abound; literalness - "Get the phone ~~VYUYAN~~", he does after wrenching it from the wall; ~~Rick~~, "I'd like to shake his hand" - he is given a severed hand and he shakes it; "there's money in the kitty", cut to cat. The language is rich in insult with runny bottoms, Fascists!, Hippy!, Tebbit! and Thatcher! flying freely with playground juvenilia bravado. It is very detailed: small incidents in the background (an old woman being dragged from her house as they walk past); cutaways and talking to camera with good links a la Python; captions and cartoon strip action - ~~Rick~~ 'he people's poet saves the kids from the fascist pigs! Alexei Sayle appears as the entire Bolowski family. He performs bastardised sections of his act, steps out of character at will, gives a half time match report on his axe wielding maniac persona and comperes a benefit in the front room for the oppressed worker (Neil) in Oil.<sup>58</sup> There is no respect for logical parameters or physical laws: it is similar to The Goon Show but realised visually (and not standing the test of time as well), time and location hopping is prevalent. There is no logical progression or overall narrative and it would be difficult to describe because of the cutaways and boundary leaping. There is no sense of closure and the shows seem to suddenly stop, again like The Goon Show. But it was not The Goon Show of a subsequent generation: the Goons existed as a singular phenomena; The Young Ones was a logical extension into television, albeit tenuously, by alternative comedy as it developed and the commercial pay back could be realised. It is chaotic but not too scrappy. There is tightness and economy to the writing and a high gag count with many going over the audience's head, establishing new reference points as they go

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

along. It is more manic than funny and it is this that does not stand the test of time, like some Punk records now sounding so like rock records only badly played. And like Punk it is the energy that was seductive, that and the fact that there was little else since Not the 9 O' Clock News that appealed to anyone with a non-suburban based, juvenile sense of humour. There are relatively few time bound references apart from Manpower Services Commission and the amount of student grants. It will probably not be remembered for so much detail than for the time it represents for the many who first saw it. The shows are full of the then-hip: Madness and Motorhead perform and various shows featured many from the burgeoning alternative scene; Tony Allen, Arden and Frost, Jim Barclay, Arnold Brown, Pauline Melville (as ~~Vivian's~~ mum), Robbie Coltrane, Ben Elton, Ronnie Golden and the overtly ITV friendly Hale & Pace.

The violence, frenetic energy and absurdity of The Young Ones was hugely popular in the school yards and canteens of academic England and the team made a second series and toured the country in rock venues and universities. This frenetic violence is something that Mayall and Edmondson continued with the rightly underrated Filthy, Rich and Catflap with Elton and Bottom: extensions of the puerile and obnoxious, pointless and absurd. The dependence of the Mayall and Edmondson characters, despite their antipathy, is reminiscent of Laurel and Hardy's mutual need of each other, however calamitous the venture.

### **Ben Elton.**

"Who invented magnetic fruit? What a bastard. Shall I pay the gas bill or shall I stick it to the fridge door with a plastic banana?" Ben Elton.<sup>59</sup>

It would be absurd to talk about alternative comedy and not include Ben Elton. As chief cheer leader in the ranting and raving club, Elton - whilst by no means subversive - represents the second wave of alternative comedians (post-moment) and the successful boundary leap from London cabaret to national television, primarily

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<sup>59</sup> Ben Elton, A Farties Guide to The Man from Auntie, BBC video, 1993.

with The Young Ones (as writer) but also through his compering of the Saturday Live and Friday Night Live shows in the mid 1980s. He is also the only alternative comedian to have his surname tagged with the adage -esque (as in Python-esque). Unlike many of the first wave, Elton came straight out of Manchester University into stand-up. He did not have the fringe experience of many (Mayall, who was at the same university toured with certain theatre groups as well as Twentieth Century Coyote), however he had written and staged a number of plays at the University.

Although he had written for The Young Ones and done several tours on his own, it was a regular appearance on television in the mid 1980s that cemented his reputation as the user friendly alternative comedian, usurping Sayle as he was moving away from stand-up. Elton established himself in the Saturday Live and later Friday Night Live on ITV.<sup>60</sup> This presented a truncated (relatively) swear-free slice of London cabaret life. Many rocketed from this launch-pad (some suffering Icarus like consequences), from the truly great to the gruellingly trite: Harry Enfield's 'Loadsamoney' was digested whole by many, leaving the side salad of irony with which it was served; the woeful Stephen Fry and Hugh Laurie, making careers in post-Oxbridge comedy and various other comedians from the circuit.

Elton is known for his high-intensity speedy rants, in growled vowel fake Londonese, mixing political critique, sexual politics and 'nob gags'. He has been criticised mainly for this overtly political commitment that remains firmly rooted in the earlier alternative style but which has since been transcended with more personal/less political material by many. Such is the changing face of comedy. For Elton, the politics are more explicit whereas for someone like Alexei Sayle they are implicit; the two have been compared many times despite radically different approaches, politics, ideas and lifestyles. Sayle attacked those like Elton, the good cause espousers, bastardised concerns for middle-class, liberal consumption; Sayle's

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<sup>60</sup> Saturday Live was like a comedy Top Of The Pops, all mobile camera links between acts and shots of the audience laughing instead of dancing. It was successful if only through showing that there was more to stand-up than Jim Davidson.

was an attack on the lifestyles of those people who supposedly represented the politics he was close to.

Elton's material is dense and packed with detail: he is a highly skilled stand-up comedian and his writing is both prolific, accurate and original. He is topical but universal too. His lifestyle critiques are from a student/post-student perspective, all shared fridges and substandard sex. He is politically informed, honest and clever, but perhaps we resent the cleverness. It is a standard ruse for comedians to underplay their intelligence in order not to threaten the audience, with Elton, the opposite is borne out, we may resent his intelligence and moral superiority. This is the problem: his material is brilliant but he is irritating. Elton is not radical but conformist, as his support for Red Wedge tour and promotion of Green politics show. He is not hostile but is dogmatic at times and can be heavy handed with the points: he gets a subject and jokes it to death. He is right with what he says and the audience applaud all the right points. But his correctness shows us as too grubby and passive. He, like Swift or Orwell, shows us as animals, which makes us resent him for pointing it out. Comedians may say what we dare not say, they go out on a limb: Elton says what we ought to say/do but do not. His hands are clean and in this we may prefer someone a little more edgy, less affirmative.

“Sincere 1 free from pretence or deceit. 2 genuine, honest, frank.” OED. <sup>61</sup>

Elton has faced criticism over giving it out too straight. He takes his opinions seriously and comes over as too sincere. Sincerity, like sentimentality is used in the pejorative. Nostalgia is a hankering for the past: sentimentality is a fetishisation of that; a desire for the passed event or thing. Sincerity, like sentimentality, is at odds with this era, the 1990s, which has become shaped, or defined, by irony and cynicism. ‘Sincerity’ represented on the public stage is used as a tool by professional entertainers, from Hughie Green’s appalling “and I mean that most sincerely, folks”, through to Des O’ Connor’s couch guests and Michael Barrymore’s My Kind of

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<sup>61</sup> Oxford Compact English Dictionary, 1996, p. 959.

People. MPs use ‘sincerity’ as an unguent, an oil to grease the PR machine. It has become a commodity, a selling point that grates against public perception. Sincerity has elements of vulnerability within its honesty. MPs and celebrities deny vulnerability that would undermine their power base and, therefore, do not seem genuinely sincere. Where now, much experience is a spectacle, simulation is the overall experience; anything remotely sincere grates against the quality of that experience and experiencing it, like with Elton, is an unusual thing.

Elton’s video, The Farties Guide to the Man From Auntie,<sup>62</sup> a compilation of the best monologues in his The Man From Auntie series on BBC, clarifies his world view. He says the ‘farty’ is you and I, but it is not, it is him. He deals with a projection: the little people continually frustrated within everyday life, those who worry about things that have no real, serious consequences rather than those for whom each day is a struggle (and Elton rarely speaks of work). The ‘farty’ is class bound, inadequate in the scheme of things, non-lad and over sensitive, scared of commitment and the big boys, be they British Rail or Big Brother. It is a class difference. The farties cannot maintain their lifestyle, ignore the washing up and bills and are confounded and confused. He discusses issues from this viewpoint: the greenhouse effect and sexual politics, motorway service stations and public transport and the ‘reality gap’ between advertisements and ‘real life’:

“from the cradle to the grave, we’re all trying to live up to images and values we cannot possibly fulfil.”<sup>63</sup>

Later, he deals with language and how the taboos surrounding the naming of the parts reflect the gender difference and prejudice within the wider sphere. Men’s euphemisms - nob, todger, willy and plonker - are in the clear, out and about in the language, whilst those for women - fanny, twat and others - are not on the menu. (Ironically, this is reversed in pornographic representations.) He calls it a media sex conspiracy and presents a plea for honesty:

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<sup>62</sup> Ben Elton, A Farties Guide ..., 1993

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.



“The more we stop playing God and remind ourselves how small and inadequate we are, the less damage we’re likely to do. Nothing like justifying a load of good nob gags with a bit of politics is there?”<sup>64</sup>

Which is a clearer summation of Elton’s comedy as any.

### **Political Correctness: A Brief Aside.**

“political correctness n. the avoidance of forms of expression or action that exclude, marginalise, or insult certain racial, cultural, or other groups” OCED.<sup>65</sup>

In order to affect change from the dominance of the mediocre, right wing comedians and their ideas, contrary positions were taken by the alternative comedians and consequently the main criticism was that of being too ‘Politically Correct’. The term Political Correctness, PC, is mainly seen as an import from liberal America, it is the opposite of the terminology formally known as ‘ideologically unsound’. This was a censoring tactic employed by the organised left in Britain and often used with Stalinist intensity; consequently the extremism demanded of articulation alienated people from ideas. PC is the non-sexist, non-racist angle, taken to extremes by hard-liners, imagined to extremes by detractors: an over-sensitivity to minor prejudice. It is a struggle with language and the inherent ideology within it. Language does oppress and maintain power relations: it describes the world and the relations within it and conveys attitudes within everyday life. Admittedly, some naïve, politically correct endeavours were lambasted by the tabloids (the notorious ‘Baa Baa White Sheep’, etc.) and rightly so, but the criticism these received misconstrued the intentions with the way they were manifested. The ideas may be laudable but the people who would implement them, the way in which they do this and where they draw a line is at fault (Alexei Sayle’s criticism, again). The term Political Correctness is used pejoratively and has reduced the language debate to a joke and has obscured its intentions.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Oxford Compact English Dictionary, 1996, p. 774.

“The ideological war of Political Correctness ... has created a climate where anything with the faintest whiff of racism and sexism is dropped into a bag and left outside the door for the dustbinman to haul away.” Jon Wilde on Bernard Manning .<sup>66</sup>

And surely that should be dustbinperson. This tabloidal affront has changed the concept of ‘the politically correct’ and has led to the transformation of a group of ideas, alive within the discourse of everyday life, into some shadowy horde of killjoys. Over-sensitivity can be tedious and pedantic, it is true, but calling someone a ‘nigger’ is not ‘politically incorrect’, it is racist. The accusers of Political Correctness have recuperated the ideas: Bernard Manning is called politically incorrect, he is not, he is a right winger. PC has become part of the lexicon of the right and has influenced and become apparent within common day language. The right has transformed them into harmful entities. The accusation of PC is the accusation of conforming to a set of ideas that are in some way contrary to the anyone having any fun at all, ever. Politically Correct has become a by-word (or phrase) to put down and confuse left wing ideas of equality with oversensitive liberalism and inappropriate censorship. But of course, over-monitoring of language leads to denial of expression or expression only within a rigid framework, a framework imposed rather than organically developed and it is up to the individual to decide on appropriate behaviour. However, ‘Politically Correct’ comedy does not mean safe and unfunny: Tony Allen, Eddie Izzard, Elton, Jo Brand and Mark Thomas could all be criticised of being too ‘politically correct’ PC because they have left sympathies, but all of them have presented challenging comedy that continues to question assumptions yet does not use ‘whipping boys’ (or whipping persons under the age of sixteen) to focus their material on. The way around accusations of ‘non-PC’, especially in TV comedy has been through the use of irony and allowing laughter within a cultural framework. Alf Garnett and Men Behaving Badly are good examples, they allow us to laugh at something we may find ‘ideologically unsound’ but provide a context for doing so. Finally, it is interesting that the majority of

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<sup>66</sup> Loaded, Sept, 1994.

accusations of PC come from the right of centre media, dominated by the middle class, middle aged, white professional male.

### **Gerry Sadowitz.**

“Life is fucking shite.” Gerry Sadowitz’s ‘catch phrase’, Gobshite.<sup>67</sup>

One comedian who threw ideas of politically correct alternative comedy into confusion was Gerry Sadowitz. In an all out assault to be as offensive as possible, Sadowitz questioned all the assumptions that had become quickly institutionalised in the new comedy. Refusing to censor his mouth, like Sayle, Sadowitz’s attacks were misconstrued by many who thought he was some bastard reinvention of Bernard Manning throwing a spanner into the ideological works.

A skilled magician and comedian, Sadowitz started performing on the streets of Glasgow in the early 1980s, busking magic. Later, moving to London, he refined his offensive comedy style, attacking the political assumptions there enshrined. Accusations of misogyny are justified which unfortunately overshadow his achievements as a comedian. His style was so at odds with the prevailing political stand-up that it continued the subversive strain, almost dialectically. He influenced as many as he irritated with his provocative style. Many were confused whether he was serious about what he was saying, but although driven by negativity and an apparent bitterness it is difficult to say either way. His notorious opening lines, like “Nelson Mandela? What a cunt!” were deliberately offensive: it is a clever gag whatever the opinion of Mandela; Sadowitz vexing the twin and sacred issues of racism and sexism in one go. Shocking the uninitiated, Sadowitz is closer to the later US comedians Denis Leary, Bill Hicks and Sam Kinnison than to the politicised and increasingly bourgeois milieu from where his notoriety bloomed. Whilst some comedians were constructing a positive, political comedy, Sadowitz was busy assembling the opposite.

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<sup>67</sup> Gerry Sadowitz, Gobshite. Live Album, Assembly Rooms, Edinburgh, 1987.

“**Nihilism.** absolute denial, a viewpoint rejecting any positive ideals.” <sup>68</sup>

“**Nihilism.** Any view which contains a significant denial can be described as nihilistic, but when the term is used there is often a suggestion of loss of despair.” <sup>69</sup>

Sadowitz attacks comedy as either cathartic or stabilising. He confuses rather than confirms. He is a nihilist. Sadowitz advocates nothing and hates everything (even Manning is a Rotarian or similar) and he refuses to reassure. Much stand-up comedy we see confirms our world view, we relate to the performer and know that their micro-world is one we would choose to recognise and dwell in. Sadowitz destabilised any notion of this. Hostility being his main driving force, by infiltrating the safer alternative comedy context he questioned the values and their relevance, presenting not an opposition but a negation of any kind of moral or political standard. Although some of his gags hovered closer to Manning’s territory <sup>70</sup> Sadowitz’s material lacked the reassurance or cathartic element of this porcine comparative. There was more cleverness and undiluted bitterness in Sadowitz that flooded out on stage and was genuinely authentic. Whereas Manning in everyday life is quite personable, Sadowitz is erratic and contradictory. <sup>71</sup> This is not to celebrate his views but the way he represented them and the context that he presented them in. Just as Sayle, Keith Allen and Tony Allen had been provocative, challenging the audience’s tolerances, prejudices and expectations variously, so too did Sadowitz encapsulate that energy but from a nihilist point of view. Nihilism is apt to confuse because we exist morally; we define ourselves by our actions and what we deem to be contrary to those actions or intentions. Neither left nor right (and no anarchist like Tony Allen) Sadowitz confused many through his uniqueness, conforming neither to alternative comedian nor to the formal club comic. Whereas Sayle, Allen and Allen would all align to a generally left or anarchist point of view, Sadowitz’s jokes rocketed away from any reassurance of anything remotely ideological. The audience could be as confused as Sadowitz seemed to be. Sadowitz and Sayle both shared a refusal to

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<sup>68</sup> *Dictionary of Philosophy*, Moscow: Progress, 1984, p. 295-6.

<sup>69</sup> *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, p. 186.

<sup>70</sup> Apocryphal story: Sadowitz challenged Manning to an offensiveness competition, Manning said “I’ve never heard of him”.

<sup>71</sup> See Malcolm Hardee, *I Stole Freddie Mercury’s Birthday Cake*, London: Fourth Estate, 1996, p. 146. Hardee managed Sadowitz for a time and he attests to his erratic nature and brilliant comedy.

cancel their own language (and both are working class) feeling, for differing reasons, that no one should prevent them from saying what they felt compelled to say: for Sayle it was a class issue, the middle class left wing inhibiting self expression from an ideological point of view; for Sadowitz because “life is fucking shite. I’ll say whatever the fuck I want, sometimes even for spite.”<sup>72</sup> Sadowitz preserved some of his early performance on record - Gobshite - at the Edinburgh fringe in 1987. His ~~practice~~ <sup>erotic</sup> television appearances rendered him obscure for many with no access to the stand-up circuit (i.e., London).

### Gobshite.

Sadowitz sees the world through brown-tinted spectacles and he does not like what he sees. Gobshite starts with the ubiquitous self deprecation: he is “a big nosed Jewish bastard” who is the “wanker’s wanker”, something on which he is “a bit of an authority”. People are “cunts”, “spastics”, pederasts and worse. He is ultimately iconoclastic, targeting Thatcher (de rigueur then), the Gulf War, the Zeebrugge ferry disaster and Winston Churchill: “a fucking cunt. We’ll fight them on the beaches ... what do you mean we, fatso?”<sup>73</sup> Sadowitz is at his most scurrilous: surprisingly political he attacks Malcolm Rifkind, Harvey Proctor and Jeffrey Archer as well as Cecil Parkinson who is a rampant, priapic imbecile amongst others. He attacks those who deserve it - alleging Jimmy Saville is a pederast, attacking Peters and Lee singing Welcome Home - “You’re blind, you don’t know where you live”<sup>74</sup> - slightly less than those who do not. Sadowitz attacks the Edinburgh fringe as the smug-fest for comedy it really is, despite performing there at the time: “King Lear? That might be interesting ... It’s a lot of shite!”<sup>75</sup> On busking mime acts (Sayle did a similar routine) Sadowitz mimes giving them money. He mixes straight stand-up with his card tricks (not overtly convincing on record) and elements of street theatre. He is critical of Ben Elton, Jeremy Hardy and American observational comedy and says: “I

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<sup>72</sup> Wilmut, 1989, p232.

<sup>73</sup> Gobshite, 1987.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

hate all the members of the Royal family, Prince Charles, Princess Diana, Billy Connolly.”<sup>76</sup> At times he begins to give intriguing glimpses of the Glasgow life he inhabited: betting shops and afternoon drinking, a long term dole culture and a dismal place for him, not the City of Culture it would later call itself. It is difficult to define Sadowitz’s micro-world as he is so insular; he is wrapped very tight and lets little out. He gives nothing away but opinions and waves of negativity so hostile they deflect any possible insight. Whereas performers like Izzard or Harry Hill populate seeming menageries of Doolittle animals and lunatic family members, Sadowitz’s world, what we glimpse of it, is like a dank outhouse or a deserted abattoir, slightly recognisable but a little disturbing to dwell in.

Sadowitz’s style is fast and relentless, like Denis Leary’s No Cure For Cancer,<sup>77</sup> slaughtering sacred cows full of ideological BSE. However, with Leary we know there is irony involved; with Sadowitz, he means it and comes off like the street head-case. He pre-empts the US comedy of hate, almost preparing the ground for it in Britain, splicing it with a post-alternative sensibility, testing boundaries and challenging the easily adorned ideological assumptions the new stand-up was being regulated and dominated by. He is a sign post of changing comedy and acceptances within it, politically and stylistically. His ranting mania moves beyond jokes into diatribe often, and at times it is simply not comedy - we feel like Challenor in Comedians who tells Gethin Price “Don’t give us you’re hang-ups straight.”<sup>78</sup> The force of the invective often belies the quality of the comedy, the weaker jokes (of which there are several) disguised in the phlegm and malice, he seems to rant off the joke’s line of logic to silence and scant nervous laughter. His impressions are lamentable.

Sadowitz is still surprising, less so than when he first appeared like a blight on the shiny new comedy but for his relentlessness and mania. The material is furious and

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Denis Leary, No Cure For Cancer, Comedy Box Video, 1993.

<sup>78</sup> Trevor Griffiths, Comedians, London: Faber, 1976, p. 60.

deliberately provocative, like Sayle, but Sayle's older material has not lasted like Sadowitz's, mainly because of the then contemporary reference points and the fact that he has developed and we can see him now in a continuing comedy process. Now, Sadowitz may have calmed a little but the bitterness that fuels the diatribe is deep rooted and remains. Sayle's anger was more a political anger aimed at yuppies and 'trendy lefties' whereas Sadowitz's is life-angst, spewed at everyone, undiluted. Sayle can explain 'scientifically', Sadowitz couldn't care less. Again, like Sayle (and it is unfair to both to over-compare but Sayle is a touchstone) the use of language caused much problem and they were both right not to censor themselves and therefore dilute their persona/characters: it would reduce authenticity, whether you agree that language is a tool of repression or not. It is too easy (or lazy) to compare him to Sayle. Sadowitz is not surreal or 'political' but he is offensive and seethes animosity. As Wilmot points out, Sayle "always had a responsible [sic] left-wing view point somewhere in the background."<sup>79</sup> It is precisely this lack of 'responsibility' that drives Sadowitz's comedy in extremis, which is why he is unique; he was the first to perform comedy with that politics, or lack of, in that context. He says what he wants, refutes the bourgeois censor, the alternative body politic and allows himself to go out on a limb. Although he says the unsayable, he simultaneously confirms that much of the unsayable is full of contradictions.

Although he attacks everyone - the audience, other comedians, icons and political figures - he is no Bernard Manning. Manning has little energy, Sadowitz explodes in a different context. Manning owns his own context, people come to see him at a specific place. Sadowitz inhabited the newly post-alternative comedy circuit where his use of language and politics were effective and not confirming. Although Sadowitz does attack the right more than the left, he attacks pre-conceptions and givens in that alternative context, he challenges the audience's anti-prejudice head on. He invented new laws on what could be said in alternative comedy and liberated possibilities from the previous, politicised comedians. He developed possibilities

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<sup>79</sup> Wilmot, 1989, p. 23.

within the new comedy and then, although some pale imitators skulked in his wake, moved on from what he did into purer magic

Sadowitz remained at the fringes of alternative comedy, he kept his distance from the ensuing smugness and made rare television appearances: his style deemed too extreme. He may be too much for the liberal stomach, but even if his political or nihilistic stance appears extreme, the way he presented it, where and how is unique. His one television series, The Pallbearers Revue<sup>80</sup> had, as a foil, an attractive woman in some bastardised form of Bruce Forsyth's Anthea or Paul Daniels' 'the lovely Debbie'. She served to chastise his extremes and reassure the audience that 'he was only joking' or counteracted the more offensive remarks. Stand-up comedy, as usual, unless it is comedy filtered through a televisual form like The Young Ones, does not come off. Sadowitz included sketches and outside broadcast set pieces but it was his magic and the bursts of stand-up that were the most interesting. The show was not repeated. Since The Pallbearers Revue, Sadowitz, according to Loaded magazine, has done little stand-up but has concentrated on his magic.<sup>81</sup> He wrote and developed a double act with the Scottish comedian, Logan Murray - "We don't want to do anything that could be construed as entertaining"<sup>82</sup> - and has also appeared on BBC2's Stuff The White Rabbit in 1997 with John Lenehan.

Loaded <sup>asked</sup> Sadowitz "where did it all go wrong", illustrating the expected trajectory of a career in comedy: spurs earning on the cabaret circuit through to television and possibly 'acting' (Sayle, Elton, Mayall, Keith Allen) or maintaining a sturdy profile in the media (Arthur Smith, Jeremy Hardy). Sadowitz, after The Pall Bearers Revue, was decommissioned into obscurity. Sadowitz says, that if he were to come back to stand-up comedy, he would just do "gratuitous racism and sexism. I would be over the fucking top."<sup>83</sup> There are resonances of the Sex Pistols reunion in this. The Sex Pistols existed as a reaction to events and that reaction was assimilated. A comeback

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<sup>80</sup> The Pallbearers Review, BBC2, 1991.

<sup>81</sup> Loaded magazine, May, 1997.

<sup>82</sup> Independent, 15/6/94.



is just a reiteration of what has been said before. The Sex Pistols invented their own rules for pop music, as have many since then, and when they appear they have no relevance to the moment now. A situation exists in context and when the context changes so, too, does the meaning of the situation. With Sadowitz, much of what he did has since been incorporated into the stand-up lexicon and his gratuitous material would not be shocking or as iconoclastic as previously. It would be an upgraded revisit. Sadowitz was an explicit reaction to the ideological and stylistic conformity of alternative comedy (as that had been in the 'historic moment') - its predictable, liberalised politics and the ceasing of experiment - a commodity career too easy to buy into. He was of the moment and opened up possibilities. To his credit, Sadowitz rejuvenated the anger that alternative comedy had drawn from Punk (and soon forgotten) when it had reinvented the role of comedian away from jumper wearing golf playing 'celebrities' like Tarbuck and Forsyth. Sadowitz's own act is a hard act for him to follow.

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<sup>83</sup> Loaded, May 1997.

## Alternative Comedy: “Action/Reaction/Action.”<sup>1</sup>

“If they know anything about comedy, or even about life in the real world it is not very apparent. Indeed, most wear their ignorance like a badge of honour”. Crowther & Pinfold on the new stand-up comedy.<sup>2</sup>

As with any other significant event, alternative comedy provoked a strong reaction. After the initial experimental moment, the iconoclasm and energy that emanated from the Comedy Store, over the road to the Comic Strip and into television light entertainment would have to face up to the critics. Any attack on the established comedy agenda constituted an assault on values and myths that that previous comedy perpetuated. As each successive moment makes its mark on the cultural process the previous practitioners become ‘old’ through the nature of that process. Their material suddenly seems dated compared and they feel threatened. As with any iconoclast, the biggest reaction is one of outright hostility. It is only when the iconoclasts become icons that they are reappraised and the older comedians receive accolades from those who originally knocked them off their slots.

A typical demonstration of the depth of this reaction appears in Crowther & Pinfold’s Bring Me Laughter, ostensibly documenting “Four decades of TV comedy.”<sup>3</sup> Although writing a knowledgeable history of British television comedy, the writers, on reaching alternative and post-alternative comedy, display an appalling misunderstanding of an important moment (whether welcome or not) in cultural and specifically comedy history. Their suburban styled cardigans crackle like briar pipes in antipathy. As mentioned previously, this may be symptomatic of a problem in researching comedy: the many books produced in glossy format (usually at Christmas) amount to little more than fan mail to each pundit’s favoured comedian and an emphasis lies on the commercial rather than comedic analysis. A further

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<sup>1</sup> “And wasn’t it all a bit too late/ got covered up with all that hate now now/ that was nothing but reaction ... action/reaction/action.” Fugazi, “And The Same” on Margin Walker, Washington: Dischord, 1988.

<sup>2</sup> Crowther & Pinfold, Bring Me Laughter, London: Columbus, 1987, p. 132.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

problem is that comedy, especially stand-up comedy, changes constantly and many participants come and go and effect differing influences: anything written more than a year before becomes swiftly anachronistic. Bring Me Laughter is worth noting for its generalisations and its quaint nostalgia for “a world which once housed Tony Hancock, Phil Silvers, Morecambe and Wise and Jack Benny”,<sup>4</sup> a world spoiled by having to watch

“with alarm the pop eyed, spittle-spraying aggression of some latter-day comics as they yell lines which acutely demonstrate hatred and anger, it becomes easier to understand the success of 'Allo, 'Allo.”<sup>5</sup>

This brings to mind the bizarre nostalgia once evoked by ex-Prime Minister John Major with his village greens and nurses on bicycles drinking warm beer: a nostalgia for something that never existed, or, if it did, existed for only very few. Reaction aids progress and concentration, but even writing in 1987, the authors of Bring Me Laughter fail to put a significant moment into cultural perspective. Such bias confirms the notion of history as subjective interpretation. The new comedy continued the lineage of ‘subversive’ comedy and necessary iconoclasts that started with The Goon Show and continued through That Was The Week That Was and Monty Python’s Flying Circus and into the 1980s and beyond. Comedy had faltered in the 1970s in Britain to a large degree: the staid condition and lack of experimentation and risk stagnated stand-up comedy. It was still visiting the music hall with the mother-in-law speaking to a particular audience. An important moment is an important moment, irrespective of individual prejudice.

Alternative comedy came under fire for many things but principally for the transference of ‘street’ language into a post-music hall, stand-up comedy context. As with Lenny Bruce, Richard Pryor and Punk before it, the use of language was a sticking point. After all, Jack Benny never said ‘motherfucker’. Crowther & Pinfold also bring the issue up and criticise the new comedians for

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

“happily coarsening comedy [with]the mindless mouthings of the street swearer who can’t be bothered to think of another adjective - even supposing he knows one.”<sup>6</sup>

This is touching. It shares the sequined tones of an ageing and flaccid Brian Sewell criticising art about things that he knows not, or a million parents complaining about Top of the Pops. It is indicative of a hierarchy of manners that would deny dissenting voices. The hierarchy of manners referred to here is the code of conventions and behaviours, the subjects and language deemed ‘appropriate’ within everyday life. The hierarchy of manners encompasses forms of language and behaviours, protocols. It is essentially a method of social regimentation in the same way table manners are a method of organisation. The hierarchy is elusive but ever present and it deems what is and is not acceptable. Alternative comedy grated against the hierarchy of manners in its use of slang and ‘bad’ language: swearing is neither clever nor grown-up, after all.

“Swear word, n, a profane or indecent word, esp. uttered as an expletive.” OCED.<sup>7</sup>

Swearing is a taboo. A taboo is that which is known but not expressed. Children swearing is a taboo. It is also shocking, surprising and funny because it is out of context with our thinking, our concept of some bizarre childhood innocence. Swearing is not slang: slang eludes the casual listener, using substitutions. Slang develops from external facts and lives in entendre and secret meanings, whereas swearing is bodily, corporeal. Swearing is less exclusive and provokes reactions other than mystification. The power of swearing lies in the power of the taboos it refers to: the parts and all their enjoinders; the body and its fecality. Swearing is impolite, unpleasant and crude. If the mystification around sexual activity and bowel movements were to disappear the power of swearing would disappear. Those who would maintain the taboo simultaneously maintain that which shocks them.

Slang does not share the power of a well placed ‘four letter word’: nothing conveys or contains our emotions, pains and passions so well as an ‘obscenity’ hammering a

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>7</sup> Oxford Compact English Dictionary, Oxford: University Press, 1996, p. 1045.

finger or losing on the horses. There is no acceptable replacement: 'Go Away' is just not the same as the 'four letter' alternative; it does not contain the invective and passion. Although edged out by the hierarchy of manners, the preferences and sensibilities, these 'obscenities' are part of everyday language. The would be replacements are cumbersome, medical and awkward in the mouth. Part of the alternative comedy idea was to explore the taboos from where these 'obscenities' came from - sex and sexual politics.

In alternative comedy, swearing could be seen by critics as a lack of intelligence (or at least a 'dumbing down' of it). Intelligence is not solely indicated by language; elocution and precise diction can also produce empty sentences. The ideas expressed within that articulation are the things that give weight and meaning. Similarly, complex ideas can be communicated in simple and even crude terms. To rule out what is being expressed because of the method of that expression is censorious and assumes that they who would censor (Crowther & Pinfold) are the ones in possession of the 'correct' modes of communication. Witness to any impassioned post-football match pub analysis would bear this out: detailed analyses of the game occur in 'everyday' language.

"One of the attitudes the working class adopt in this country is to limit their vocabulary - polysyllabic words have been appropriated into a kind of ruling class argot ... A lot of what my comedy has been about is saying that you can speak working class dialect and express complex ideas." Alexei Sayle.<sup>8</sup>

Crowther & Pinfold confuse the use of language by Lenny Bruce, on whom they give a good treatment, the language of the new comedians and the language of the working men's club comedians. Lenny Bruce used obscene language to illustrate a point, a fact tested in court several times. At one of his eight obscenity trials, Dorothy Kilgallen, a journalist, said that although she would not use the word 'motherfucker' in her column, Bruce ought to be allowed to say it in his performances

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<sup>8</sup> Roger Wilmut, Didn't You Kill My Mother-In-Law?, London: Methuen, 1989, p. 50.

“because he is doing a scene, and he shouldn’t be made to put refined words into the mouths of vulgar people, and theatre’s a theatre, and he never uses the words as a sexual reference to appeal to the prurient interest.”<sup>9</sup>

Bruce did perform ‘bits’ where he would appear as other people and make a point through them. However, throughout Bruce’s performances there are many occasions when he uses language as himself in the same way anyone in a bar, police station, office or argument would. It is how people actually speak and there should be no apology for it. Many alternative comedians spoke as themselves, or as a persona, and used the language that they would authentically use in everyday life, although many did pile it on for added street credibility.

“One reporter claimed to have counted 50 swear-words in two minutes.”<sup>10</sup>

Alexei Sayle was, at one point, renowned for his ‘stream of offensiveness’ and got to the point where he was “scaring people away - he’d got that mod character together and he was just standing there swearing at the top of his voice.”<sup>11</sup> Sayle was, in fact, imitating a Millwall fan. He has proposed that to mindlessly swear could be deemed offensive and pointless but offence by its use as a method of articulation due to lack of vocabulary - for a variety of different reasons - reveals a cultural bias against those less articulate. James McDonald, in his Dictionary of Obscenity, Taboo and Euphemism, illustrates a similar point with a dourer figure: “As George Orwell pointed out in 1984, the scope of our thinking is to some extent dependent on our vocabulary.”<sup>12</sup> The use of swearing to make a point either more forceful or dynamic, or to describe something in the terms of those who are listening is not a case of ‘bad comedy’ as Crowther & Pinfold suggest, but of using the language of urban everyday life. If comedy reflects everyday life it must be language appropriate, as Dorothy Kilgallen suggested at the Lenny Bruce trial. Language underlines authenticity.

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<sup>9</sup> Lenny Bruce, The Essential Lenny Bruce, St. Albans: Panther, 1975, p. 149-50.

<sup>10</sup> Anthony Davis, Laughtermakers, London: Boxtree, 1989, p. 148.

<sup>11</sup> ~~Tom Allen~~ on Alexei Sayle in Wilmut, 1989, p. 47.

<sup>12</sup> James McDonald on George Orwell in A Dictionary of Obscenity, Taboo and Euphemism, London: Sphere, 1988, p. xii.

## **Assimilation.**

The worst thing about alternative comedy was not the language, of course, but how quickly it became mediocre. It could have transformed into another career move for out of work actors paying an easy lip service to inherited ideas. It threatened to become as humdrum, predictable and unadventurous as the Tarbuck-Forsyth continuum, but with slightly better haircuts. As unchallenging as those they wished to unseat, or rather now join. Ideas have to be developed but instead of seeking further radical styles and formats, many comedians lessened the tension and alternative comedy threatened to become an easily recognisable genre and the 'next big thing'. Anyone with a Thatcher gag and a foul mouth is alternative.

The presence of a developing comedy culture in London by the start of the 1980s was not unknown to one or two younger producers and programme makers in British television, Paul Jackson being a key figure. Gaining access to it, in the search for new ideas, was only achieved after the initial alternative comedy moment, when it had become defined politically and stylistically. But throughout the 1980s, alternative comedy, most notably The Young Ones, began to exert a televisual presence.

Two arguments begin to develop simultaneously: that the ideas were rapidly assimilated and marketed as a 'dangerous' commodity or that the ideas were established by the earlier comedians and became assimilated as part of a new lexicon in comedy, as a new performance style. Much radical dissent in popular culture has been at some point or other assimilated commercially, if not assimilated politically - repackaged, nicened, and smallified to fit the pockets of consumers. When something iconoclastic exists to knock established forms, the established forms seek to accommodate that critique - buying it off - and absorb it into itself to destabilise the critique so as not to seem static. Assimilation also occurs 'naturally'. Ideas become absorbed into the general discourse, as a way of doing things. Just as mother-in-law gags were ubiquitous in post-music hall comedy (and before,

obviously) now, too, is their avoidance. A post-alt-com sensibility dominates the stand-up scene, which is not that big: not many see live stand-up outside of London and the principal cities on a regular basis.

Many of the original ideas in alternative comedy were radical ones, coming from fringe theatre, leftist grupuscules, the prevailing political climate and Punk. They leaked into the mainstream of comedy in diluted form. Now, there has been a change in the wider culture: many people have become aware of 'politically correct' ideas on racism and sexism. Whether this is the doing of the alternative crowd is dubious. Comedy always grows as commentary to popular culture, rarely as the creator of it. It reflects our attitudes in a changing society. Comedy changes as society does. But it may be true to say that the earlier stance did have an effect on television comedy: compare the material presented in the 1970s to the 1990s in relation to the political changes in society. Stand-up comedy's presence on television by the end of the 1970s was strictly mainstream, and non-experimental. The new comedy has been a radical departure from this. The Comedians comedians have largely gone, been sidelined or modified and the excesses of Jim Davidson, for example, have been similarly curbed. The newer comedians began to elicit a presence on television and began to define an oppositional stance in comedy. Alternative comedy functioned as counter-presence against the dad-comedians, the bar-proppers and Northern club gagsters.

The alternative agenda is still mainly based in BBC2 and Channel 4 rather than the ITV regions. Barrymore is infinitely more popular however many advert voice-overs Alexei Sayle or Vic Reeves do. Frank Skinner has come from the alternative circuit and has achieved considerable mainstream success (Wogan, his own chat show, Fantasy Football) and Reeves and Mortimer are as well known though still living in minority TV land. Jack Dee also has met with some considerable success with his performances at the Palladium and despite this his comedy can still be sharp and antagonistic. It would be erroneous to say that this is a dominant force on television,



it is not. The presence is well known however and as a live 'scene', that initiated by Sayle and Allen is thriving still in pub basements throughout London and the principle cities.

### **Cabaret Circuit.**

Alternative comedy energised a small subculture of cabaret in London and, on a smaller scale, elsewhere. This has enabled many comedians to develop new ideas and continue the subversive strand into other areas of interest. The first inkling of the expanding cabaret circuit was, of course, the Comedy Store followed closely by the Alternative Cabaret and Comic Strip ventures (although the Woolwich Tramshed and other smaller fringe venues had preceded all of them). A gradual presence began to be established through the 1980s where 'alternative comedy', post-second wave, could be refined and expanded. Wilmut charts some of the developments and the early venues but to document the progress would be a near impossible task now. Clubs open and close with alarming frequency and there are hundreds of comedians on the circuit, some of them good, many of them appallingly unoriginal. It is easy enough: a small PA system, a room above a pub and a bit of publicity can start a small but successful venture, whether there is any longevity in it depends on many factors.<sup>13</sup> It is this continuation of the DIY principle - which has fed from Alternative London, post-hippy culture through Punk and into the new dance scene - that has helped post-alternative stand-up comedy to survive the varying trends and establish the careers of a good many advert voice-overs. The cabaret circuit gives autonomous space, with varying demands by the audiences, to develop stand-up in ways that were previously limited. Were it not for its high turnover, the London comedy circuit would be threateningly close to critical mass. The importance of this development was to create autonomous space where dissenting voices could be heard.

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<sup>13</sup> Of the two pubs at the ends of my North London street, one has had three ventures in as many years, with acts ranging from Jenny Eclair down to any number of hopeful, hopeless cases; the other has had an open mike night and a women comedians night on a weekly basis.

**“Smashing bit ’o cracklin’.”<sup>14</sup>**

“I’ve done so many interviews with people who particularly wanted to concentrate on the aspect of “Women and Humour” and “Women Comics” ... we want to be called “comics”. Jenny LeCoat.<sup>15</sup>

The history of comedy is, of course like most histories, the history of men’s achievements. It appears women have been sidelined by men who may leave them to the bits they could not do. If this thesis is male focused it is, in part, a reflection of this male dominance.<sup>16</sup> The alternative comedy movement served to redefine the identities of women in stand-up comedy, or more specifically, created space where women could define new characters and persona with an agenda beyond the previously perceived one. Women could explore the political, sexual and social complexities (amongst other things) within everyday life as they experienced it. Not all women performers chose to be explicitly political on stage but performing within this new context was an implicit political act because it redefined women in comedy and within a wider social context. It provided access to a speaking forum wherein they could present themselves as a full persona or character and not as an object of derision/desire or a cheap laugh: women could examine their everyday lives politically. Alternative comedy redefined the sayable and the not-sayable. The new comedy created a different political consciousness in stand-up comedy, generating space for others apart from the great white male and discussing a radically different world to the 1950s music hall mother-in-law inhabited one. The new comedians began to discuss sex and sexuality instead of the sex joke style using an object of derision. It changed to a subjective exploration of the meaning and various absurdities within sexual politics.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> “Hey, she wor a smashing bit o’ cracklin’.” Charlie Williams, The Comedians, Star Vision, undated video.

<sup>15</sup> Jenny LeCoat in Wilmut, 1989, p. 274.

<sup>16</sup> The brevity of this section reflects a timidity and deference to those better equipped with more relevant theories. This may hopefully lead to further enquiry into the area of women stand-up comedians.

<sup>17</sup> Frances Gray (Women and Laughter, London: MacMillan, 1994), Banks & Swift (The Joke’s On Us, London: Pandora, 1987) and, as mentioned, to a lesser extent, Wilmut, (1989) have all covered the specific personalities and their various achievements. It is profitable here to look at the meaning of these achievements. Many women had been performing comedy in this strain before alternative comedy despite the boy’s own dominance, from The Goon Show onwards. Women have tended to be, at best, sidelined roles and singing parts or, at worst, little more than tacked on glamour. Most noticeable in the subversive history have been Millicent Martin in That Was The Week That Was,

## Girls Talk.

“There are several things that a woman can’t mention ... She can do anything but she can’t mention Tampax or anything to do with the menstrual cycle and she can’t mention fart, for some reason.”

Marti Caine.<sup>18</sup>

“Fellers don’t accept comedy off a woman, and an ugly woman at that. She comes on like Mr Blobby with all this shite and Tampax nonsense and fellers throw up. She does it on telly too.”

Bernard Manning on Jo Brand.<sup>19</sup>

Stand-up comedy, like much else, has been defined in relation to male performance techniques. The history of theatre has been implicit in this. The history of women in theatre can be, and is, covered in better detail than here. Women have only relatively recently managed to insert themselves into theatre, even more recently into comedy and relatively late into their own context where they can discuss freely subjects in the way they wish, as much as the boys. There is still resistance to women on stage talking about their lives and their experiences. Whilst a whole career can be forged from masturbation jokes for some men, it is difficult for women to claim the same, not that many may want to. The quotes from Caine and Manning confirm the depressing conventions and taboos previously applied, but things are changing. Previously, women’s voices were somewhat restricted; there would have been few shows like Jo Brand’s Through The Cakehole or opportunities for Eclair to work in radio and television. The ground-breaking work of Victoria Wood, the early alternative comedians and post-alternative Eclair and Brand have led to a higher visibility of women performers on the London circuit and beyond. The strength and success of Donna McPhail and Rhona Cameron testify to a broader taste in comedy, they are both sharp and claim territory for themselves, to discuss their agendas on their terms. Although the term ‘feminist’ is employed pejoratively to many strong

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Eleanor Bron at the Establishment Club and Carol Cleveland’s blink and you’ll miss her roles in Monty Python’s Flying Circus. More recent and prominent have been Pamela Stephenson’s underrated impressions in Not The 9 O’ Clock News and Victoria Wood. Alternative comedy produced a (relatively) large number of women comedians: French and Saunders, Jenny LeCocot, Pauline Melville, Helen Lederer, Sharon Landau, Clare Dowie, Kit Hollerbach and Josie Lawrence to name but several. Post-alternative comedy has seen the rise of Jo Brand, Jenny Eclair, Linda Smith, Hattie Hayridge, Rhona Cameron and Donna McPhail amongst others.

<sup>18</sup> Marti Caine in Banks & Swift, 1987, p. 20.

<sup>19</sup> Bernard Manning in Sunday Times, 1/2/96.

female comedians (men recuperating women's terminology of strength), it is an implicitly political statement to stand and talk of the things that affect oneself, discussing without intimidation, to make a stand in a male dominated context. Hecklers heckle but perhaps out of fear of empowered women encroaching on trad-male turf.

### **Maintaining Difference.**

“Humour remains a male construct which women have borrowed, rather than a new framework for permanent and joyful change.” Frances Gray .<sup>20</sup>

Women have a choice: they can represent their experiences speaking as themselves - as women - or speak like men, speaking through male voices. Minx magazine<sup>21</sup> and the ill fated Girly Show<sup>22</sup> - utilising shock tactics and fake-lad girls - demonstrate the ‘speaking as men’ problem. The latter attempted to counter dominance and aspire to equality by acting up to male excesses but this does not assume equality, it negates it: equality is only equality when both parties are accepted by each other on their own terms as themselves. It is playing in the dressing up box of boys and lacks substance. It is a male ideal - a girl who can match or out-drink/out-Vindaloo him and one who would be as non-committal as he would be: they are redefined on his terms again. ‘Speaking as men’ is inauthentic and little more than ventriloquism; speaking a male agenda in a female voice. The ‘Girlies’ contribute to the force that would oppress them by taking on the values of those who would oppress them, instead of setting their own terms to maintain difference and an autonomous space to explore that difference. Brand often uses shock tactics but has developed her own agenda and language. To subvert the standard male comedy voice of shock or undermine it and use it to communicate women's (and men's) experience whilst simultaneously altering it is a parallel strategy: Eclair's super-bitch reinvention allows her to say things she could not say normally. She empowers herself through the persona and

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<sup>20</sup> Gray, 1994, p. 35.

<sup>21</sup> Minx magazine began publishing in 1997 as a ‘girly’ version of the Loaded lager and label lads.

<sup>22</sup> The Girly Show began broadcasting in 1996 on Channel 4 to mixed response. It was similar in content to the later Minx. Magazine with a focus on drinking, casual sex and acting up like the lads.

liberates desires. She has found freedom and audience, like Brand, to explore and discuss what she wants to discuss.

### **Difference.**

It is possible to look at authenticity through difference without having to “grant ‘equality in difference’ to the *other* sex”<sup>23</sup> or utilise Derrida’s *differance*. We can see a different difference, where something can exist as itself, one that corresponds to the sense of authentic self in a historical context, replacing ‘other’ and ‘difference’ back into the context of identity and authenticity.

The structuring of group identity immediately throws up the question of the other. Although the establishment of identity requires something to define itself against - what we are not - the imposition of the status of other defines an inferiority. Put simply, difference is a fact, otherness is a myth. An other is inferior, whereas ‘what we are not-ness’ can maintain an equality (as in “I support Manchester United, I am from the North” which differentiates me from a local Arsenal fan but not on an unequal basis). It is the maintenance of difference that grounds my identity, not necessarily to a group but as an individual. To know who we are in relation to ourselves is the basis of authenticity.

It is an intrinsic part of identity to establish characteristics of individuality and sub-groups of common ‘individualities’, but there is a contrast between maintaining difference and the creation of the other. The former maintains an equal grounding, an equality of difference; creation of the other is to alienate, to create a false sense of distance, an ‘out-there-ness’. We can maintain difference ourselves, but are deemed other. Women as other is a false difference: it is the maintenance of a power relationship, encoded within social relations. Women are physically and biologically different from men (women can give birth; men can shout louder and urinate up walls) and it is these physical and biological differences that have led to socially and

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<sup>23</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, London: Vintage, 1997, p. 23.

culturally defined differences and roles, invariably subjugated ones. This has been backed up by the false argument that women are 'naturally' subservient: women are not 'naturally' different, not that it is a 'natural' world we live in, sitting in concrete segregations, watching satellite images refract on cathode ray tubes. If anything, the main difference between women and men is their history: for men a history of dominance and for women this history of otherness.

“ To call me anti-feminist is ludicrous. Some people have said that I'm setting women back thirty years ... Women aren't like men. They can do things that men can't do.” Madonna.<sup>24</sup>

Difference can be the basis for separation but it can also empower. It is a question of turning a history of oppression (otherness) into a point of strength (difference), to celebrate and negate differences simultaneously: negate the otherness of inequality, but maintain the difference of individuality. It does not necessitate perpetuating otherness: Madonna saying women can do things men cannot reverses the emphasis. It is the difference that maintains identity. Difference can empower through a strengthening sense of individuality. Changing the facticity of gender is as difficult as changing the facticity of class background but it is possible to change the social relations that govern that facticity and direct its consequent repression.

Maintaining difference is generated from creating autonomous space, the other from alienation and denial of authentic representation. The maintenance of difference is important not only to find what defines each of us but to celebrate it and point out that, despite difference, there is a commonality of experience and a simultaneous lack of authenticity in everyday life. We can see the same thing from different angles, especially in sexual politics. To absorb the criteria of men, like the 'Girlies', is not to gain equality, as has been said, but to be granted space as 'not-man', 'not-man' who has been temporarily okayed with a day pass to men's world. There is, perhaps, an interesting example in Madonna who has used her sexuality as

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<sup>24</sup> Madonna quoted in *I Dream Of Madonna*, London: Thames Hudson, 1993, p. 8. Madonna has been reduced to a pointy-breasted post-modern paradigm for many pointy-headed academics with scant attention to what she actually sings.

confrontation instead of allowing herself to be subjugated or held back by it. She has reversed the male “what we are not” into “what women are”. It is a deliberate empowerment and demonstration of the possibility of accessing autonomous space.

Maintaining difference is a driving force for much comedy: the establishing of a unique performance persona/character and the exploration of the world from that point of view. Brand exposes both individual differences and enforced differences of otherness by exploring the gap between the way women are and the way they are represented. Women are targeted for certain foods and lifestyles and simultaneously presented with impossible and contradictory images to live up to; Brand shows the way these (male invented) representations contribute to repression and refuses them. Looking at the same things - shopping, sexual politics, football - from many different angles allows us to see new dimensions to previous phenomena: we can expand discourse and counter the dominant commodity view and get a clearer idea of how things are. We need the multiplicity of micro-worlds: if there was no maintenance of difference stand-up comedy would revert back to one-size-fits-all jokes, attitudes and ideology of so many redundant music hall jokesters, or worse, The Comedians.

We define ourselves through our relation to the world and our understanding of that relation. We explain our relation to that through interpreting experience; women comedians interpret these experiences through comedy. Women comedians can determine subject matter and they can redefine the terms in which they are represented to some degree. Performing comedy has given women the ability to discuss sex and sexuality on their terms and attack men’s image of women as sacrosanct. The comedy taboos are pointed out by Marti Caine and, unwittingly, Manning: women should not speak about the way men speak of them; women should not speak the same language as men; women cannot joke about their bodies in the way men can; women in jokes are innocent and sex happens to them or they are low and ‘deserve’ it. These taboos have been broken to some considerable extent. This is not a massive step forward for feminism but it is a considerable change, effected

through the reactions caused by alternative comedy, manifest within much live stand-up comedy today and a cause for some optimism.

“Freedom lies in our capacity to discover the historical links between certain modes of self-understanding and modes of domination, and to resist the ways in which we have already been classified and identified by dominant discourses. This means discovering new ways of understanding ourselves and each other, refusing to accept the dominant cultures’ characterisations of our practices and desires and redefining them from within resistant cultures.” Jara Sawicki.<sup>25</sup>

### **Conclusion.**

Alternative comedy had its detractors, without doubt but it has survived and transmuted and the ideas have permeated much of contemporary stand-up. Many critics were protecting their own comedy prejudices and icons from assault. Alternative comedy became assimilated by being incorporated into a comedy lexicon or from being bought off by television as the ‘next big thing’. However, the cabaret scene has thrived and many performers began to experiment beyond the polemical style of the early comedians. As alternative comedians were succeeded by younger guns, the politics became toned down and a more personable style began to emerge; less combative, less polemical, more commercial even. But the first waves of alternative comedians had created space where dissenting voices from the traditional male in comedy could be developed and heard. Post-alternative stand-up comedy has become a significant presence through the 1980s and into the 1990s.

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<sup>25</sup> Jara Sawicki, Disciplining Foucault, London: Routledge, 1991, p. 43-4.



### The 1980s And Beyond.

Women comedians began to make their presence felt on the circuit, benefiting from the space created. Two women who have utilised this space to differing ends are discussed: Jo Brand and Jenny Eclair. Brand with her politicised/feminist one liners has an uncompromising stance. Eclair with a more hedonistic agenda, more indirect, Eclair is no girlie comedian; she is fully prepared to take on anything and say what is on her mind. They represent just two ways women have found to express themselves in the competitive male game of stand-up comedy and are no less funny or challenging for it.

#### **Jo Brand.**

Jo Brand stands out as the main man mauler to survive alternative comedy and create some significant commercial appeal, although by no means the first female alternative comedian. She had been well preceded by Jenny Lee and Claire Dowie who can be credited with firmly and successfully redefining what women could and could not say on stage in a comedy club. Subject to much heckling and abuse - for the way she looks more than what she is actually saying - Brand has always given more than she got. Much more than cakes, cigarettes and clitorises, Brand's references are wide, varied and politically informed. She is no blowsy old man-hater, her gags are razor sharp, concise and well thought out. She questions assumptions, is self deprecatory and her targets are attacked from a clearly informed viewpoint. One of her main targets is the representation of women: Cosmopolitan, adverts, eating disorders and fashion are all attacked with precise wit. She talks about unwanted pregnancy as easily as football and drinking.

Brand maintains control over the way she represents herself on stage as well as product, voice and language. She dictates her own agenda and puts forward an authentic persona, believably quotidian, and one that is lazy, angry, tired and emotional by turns. Brand speaks about her own experiences, or jokes through those

experiences: it is not difficult to perceive her, depressed, lying in bed, smoking and covered in chocolate cake crumbs. She may be lumped with the usual anti-feminist, or misogynist, clichés by her critics and detractors - fat ugly feminist - which are remarkable only by their obviousness and lack of imagination. Brand also empowers herself by taking the stage and not the put downs. Her responses to hecklers are well turned, she has had much practice. She has commanded her own autonomous space where she can develop ideas within her comedy. Brand refuses the taboos of women in comedy: she discusses how men speak of women; it is her body to joke about; it is her sex life to discuss; and she talks about the biological and social implications of being a woman in the Cosmopolitan commodity culture.

Brand uses the time-honoured comedy tool of self deprecation to pre-empt heckling although not always successfully - a drunken, loud-mouthed misogynist will air his views whatever she has said beforehand. She also turns this into an attack on the notion of 'girlie-ness' and the weak, disempowered position of women in society and men's perception and maintenance - or collusion in maintaining - such. It is easy to attack Brand: she is still deeply connected with the post-alternative, 1980's political ethos, benefit friendly and solidly left wing: an easy target for anti-feminists but surely a role model for those they would wish to attack.

### A Big Slice Of Jo Brand.

"Feminists tend to be portrayed as fat, with short hair, wearing dungarees. Now that's not a feminist, that's a plumber." A Big Slice Of Jo Brand.<sup>1</sup>

Brand appears predictable now because her minimal effort style is so recognisable but although by no means the first 'feminist alternative comedian' no one took it to the extremes she has been prepared to go. LeCoat was quite hard line but later pulled back, Brand is fully prepared to be as gross as the boys. She does not pull any punches: periods and depression, abortions and weight worry, sexual failure and

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<sup>1</sup>A Big Slice of Jo Brand, Comedy Box BNG Video, 1994. Filmed before a studio audience A Big Slice ... lacks the vigour of her more hand to hand stand-up performances.

lousy relationships. She makes no apologies. Her punch lines can be abrasive, overtly direct:

“When I heard about the David Mellor thing on the radio, I went ‘hurrah’. Because I thought if he can get a fuck then so can I.”<sup>2</sup>

It could be easily off putting and it is not hard to see why she inspires such loathing amongst some male journalists. Her comedy is unsparing: men are lambasted for being pathetic stereotypes, macho or wimpy ‘new men’; women for being girly and not empowering themselves. Social relations collude to maintain these static polarities. She exposes the difference in male and female sexuality and is good on language, exposing coy penis euphemisms and male masturbatory rites. Brand laments the lack of female alternatives and invents some of her own: Kit Kat shuffle and gusset typing for masturbation; fairy hammocks for panty liners; and “I’ve got the painters and decorators in” and “Arsenal are playing at home” for menstruation.<sup>3</sup> She is her own trade mark though: she is unmistakable in appearance and style and she admits, even revels in, being a “rude and horrible person.” She is contradictory comedically: sexually desperate but preferring to humiliate her partners in bed; strong and determined but feeble with confectionery; joyous and hedonistic but vulnerable and over-emotional; she is empowered but prepared to acknowledge weaknesses and the necessity of “running home crying to have a cake”. It can be repetitious, herself the perpetual target, which is often tempered by the quality of the jokes. They are well written, precise and economic. She varies between tightly constructed gags and more relaxed yarns about being a psychiatric nurse and the perils of travelling (ever) alone, either in London or further afield in Italy. She is good on loneliness and the fear of being alone at night. Tales of being pursued or abused at night re-occur. Men are often seen as a threat, when not being mauled for being brainless stereotypes or feebly liberal. The menu is heavily political: Bosnia, Tory scandal, bulimia and anorexia, Edwina Currie, Europe, food, the media and parents are all derided with savage charm. Smoking, drinking, sex and violence are

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. She wants control over language describing her body and has also come up with “velvet tardis” for vagina in her series, Like It or Lump It, Channel 4, 1997.

celebrated. She invites heckles but the television studio audience are quiet, unlike at many of Brand's gigs. She bates them but they do not take it.

Brand does not appear to have moved on or experimented with form; like most comedians she sticks with the tried and tested. She sticks to the fat gags and often drowns the point. She is an 'un-reconstructed', 1980s style left/feminist, still on the benefit circuit and dishing it out. She still seems to live the same way and her comedy reflects this: fags, booze, unreliable men, disappointing sex and loafing around the house all day fantasising about Richard Whiteley and Countdown. Jack Dee's comedy has reflected the changes in his life, from being young and cynical to being older and cynical, but with children. His jokes revolve around his experiences as a father, as a 'breadwinner', and he is firmly rooted in everyday life. Brand appears in a cake addled stasis at times. However, like most politicised stand-up comedians from the this era, the question arises whether Brand can constructively criticise the new Labour government, at the moment in its early days, and produce the same style material but with different targets. Mark Thomas and Rory Bremner have both accepted this challenge with glee and fury. Ben Elton has slammed Blair's 'Cool Britannia'. But as Brand admits to her laziness, maybe she will not bother with the government and look elsewhere. The need to address the representations of women and female sexuality remains though and if Brand continues along that line it is only because the issue remains ever constant. As her latest television outing Like It Or Lump It shows Brand has not moved on at all<sup>4</sup> On her provincial tour, she stands on stage, dispensing acidic one liners, interspersed with topical and geographical gags. It is no radical departure from A Big Slice... and her jokes appear to be repetitious: self deprecations, bad sex and cream cakes. It was met with some derision from the critics but no more so than her usual detractors, The Sun's Gary Bushell and Evening Standard's Victor Lewis-Smith. Bushell and Brand have had a long running battle, the basis being that Bushell does not like her because of her appearance/politics and she does not like him because he is a populist, right wing

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<sup>4</sup> See above.

buffoon. Lewis-Smith, reviewing her Like It Or Lump It series was most vitriolic. The series was by no means classic; the comedy repetitious and the 'on the road' scenes banal. Comparing Dennis Potter's struggle over language on air he says "Every sentence was larded with profanities" at which he is "appalled."<sup>5</sup> But Brand's stand-up comedy is a different form in a different context and a different culture with a different agenda to Potter. Language on television has rapidly changed and ideas of the 'acceptable' have altered. Lewis-Smith also calls her "an ugly, unfunny comedian".<sup>6</sup> This is blatantly misogynist. The fact of ugliness is just not mentioned with most male comedians (although Sayle and Sadowitz made comedy capital out of it); appearance is not an issue. Unfunny? Funny is subjective and it needs to be pointed out why something is unfunny generally rather than personally. It is too easy to say Brand's critics do so because she is a large woman; the series was not that good. But in personal attacks there is a marked difference between criticism and vitriol.

### **Jenny Eclair.**

"What I know most about is talking about sex and being as dirty and as rude as possible on stage."

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Eclair's boozy, libidinous slapper character/persona is perhaps one of the most radical departures for post-alternative comedians. The peroxide hyper manic 'super-bitch' is an unstoppable comedy force. There is no one like her. At times she is an amphetamined Kenneth Williams-ette, confrontational, almost out of control but in control of her desire and wants: she knows what she wants and who she wants it from. The drive of the comedy is in its energy and ferocity: the jokes are savage and she is unrelenting in her ridicule of the audience; men, women and herself. For her, there are no sacred cows, only fat ones.

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<sup>5</sup> Victor Lewis-Smith, Evening Standard, 29/9/97. Lewis-Smith is the Standard's 'controversial' columnist and part time prankster on various radio stations.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Jenny Eclair, The Guardian 28/8/95.

Eclair started off on the alternative scene reading comedy poems in the early 1980s - alongside Jenny Leacock - which she later phased out in favour of straight stand-up.<sup>8</sup>

“Jo Brand came on the scene and seeing her was the biggest kick up the butt I’ve ever had. For the first time there was a woman coming onstage as if she had a right to be there, without apologising, without making excuses, without being girlish or coy.”<sup>9</sup>

Unlike Brand, who has a significant political element in her comedy, Eclair is more like Sadowitz with PMT (“pre-meditated tension.”)<sup>10</sup> She is demanding, likes sex, dirty sex especially, and wants to be pampered and not asked to cook things like breakfast. The character is “based on fragments of my past. Eclair is the living fiction of what I would have become.”<sup>11</sup> The Eclair character/persona is intriguing. At times it is hyped up character, at others closer to persona. It gives her plenty of things to talk about and more variety from a choice of views. The ‘Top Bitch’ element allows herself to say whatever she wants but the comedy can be based on personal experience.<sup>12</sup> She believes in equality but equality in behaving as appallingly as men. If anything, Eclair is the come back to the lads, the Men Behaving Badly who think it’s all over. They would go nowhere near her, resplendent in anti-passivity as she is. She dispels a few myths: women like sex as much as men and women speak differently about men when they are not around, although Eclair does this when they are around.

“I do resort to the gusset. It’s a lucky bag: a good rummage in there and you’ll find a few tricks.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Performance poetry and the development of alternative stand-up comedy have run in close parallel since the early 1980s. Punk performance poetry started with the likes of John Cooper Clarke, as mentioned, Patrick Fitzgerald and, later, the less Punky Martin Besserman who performed at fringe gigs. The “Ranters” movement began in the 1980s with Attila the Stockbroker, Seething Wells, Joolz and Porky the Poet (now stand-up comedian and DJ, Phil Jupitus). This counter-culture area is deserving of further documentation. Most of these are still performing, often with stand-up comedians and there is several good ‘comedy’ poets on the stand-up scene, most notably John Hegley. This Punk/comedy/poetry crossover echoes the American spoken word work of Henry Rollins and Jello Biafra.

<sup>9</sup> William Cook, Ha Bloody Ha: Comedians Talking, London: Fourth Estate, 1994, p, 131.

<sup>10</sup> Guardian, 30/10/95.

<sup>11</sup> Observer, 24/9/95.

<sup>12</sup> Top Bitch is the name of her 1995 video, filmed at Her Majesty’s Theatre, London.

<sup>13</sup> Observer, 24/9/95.

There are no taboos for Eclair: if it gets a laugh, fine. And in this there is the problem. Repetitious as Brand's fat gags or David Baddiel's penis is Eclair's gusset. She limits herself in this. While it is refreshing to hear it, there lurks a feeling that she is taking the easy route, like the residual 'nob gag', the 'gusset gag' has its limits after shock value and outrage has dissipated. The delve into neurosis and depression is interesting; her show Prozac and Tantrums so named "because these are the two main options for women who are depressed."<sup>14</sup> With this show Eclair became the first woman stand-up to win the Perrier Award at Edinburgh in 1995 with this show and she has gone on to some considerable success.<sup>15</sup> Her television appearances have been less successful: she needs time to develop and for the audience to adjust to the assault. Her performances on Packet of Three and Packing Them In,<sup>16</sup> with Frank Skinner, were lamentable. Neither she nor Skinner - and there is a symbiosis between the two, we love to hear them say what we dare not - looked comfortable in the music hall style show. Both Eclair and Skinner are skilled in class filth, television performance clips this and the energy and authenticity of the material fails. Most of her television appearances have been when she is well established. People are familiar with the persona and need little adjustment. On stage, her humour takes a little getting used to and it is not suited to five minute spots. The character is a complex one: sexually active but neurotic about her appearance; full-on energetic yet maniacally depressed. It is an exploration of extremes and desire. It is in these extremes that we may relate to her, despite her grossness. She would find trouble in a nunnery. She is the archetypal bad girl.

Eclair appears in short, two minute spots on Channel 5's Comedy Network programme; she is the only woman on it, surrounded by Boothby Graffoe, Jim Tavaré and Stewart Lee.<sup>17</sup> Seated in an armchair, Eclair precedes comment with

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<sup>14</sup> Sam Taylor, Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> "Over the last 15 years, only 8 of the 75 nominees of the Perrier short-list have been women and Eclair is the first to have won." Robert Yates The Guardian, 29/8/95.

<sup>16</sup> Packet Of Three and Packing Them In, Channel 4 series in the early 1990s.

<sup>17</sup> Lee and Herring rue the day they left college, as do we. Lee can be acidic and cynical at times; Herring, a cuddly softy, is less preferable.

“You think I’m a horrible old cow. And I am.”<sup>18</sup> She revels in it and reinforces the audiences perception of her so she does not have to fight them to convince that she is something other. She comes onto their territory gladly, reinforces the belief but gradually infers something else. In the extreme we begin to recognise the truths and myths of sexual and social behaviour: she makes no apologies for being sexually voracious and she refuses to perpetuate the myth that women do not like sex; she shows she has a better time for it. She is a hedonist, but so would we all be if we did not have proper jobs and could afford it. Eclair testifies to the power of peroxide: dyed blondes have much more fun and the message is: “Can’t cook, can’t type but I’m a great shag and you can find me in the dark.”<sup>19</sup> Eclair refuses sex and drinking as the lads preserve: the lads have taken it over, she recuperates it and in this she is strong. But we also recognise weakness, or vulnerability, lurking, and we recognise the facade, the characterisation and the persona begins to leak out. The audience empathises with this; the regrets, anxieties and depression (although this does not come out in the short spots). Eclair also hosted Jenny Eclair Squats on Channel 5, a cosy round the front room chat with other comedians and fringe celebrities.<sup>20</sup> She veers between the role of presenter and stage persona and it is an uncomfortable shuttle between the two. She is at her best high velocity with her scripted gags. Eclair is an original however and there can be few imitators. Her forte is her hyper-bitch comedy when she can say or do whatever she wants. On television the restraint is obvious.

### **Mark Thomas.**

Mark Thomas is a progression from 1980s alternative comedy and has caused some rancour to those more ideologically stiffened along the way. Despite his television appearances on Saturday Zoo<sup>21</sup> and his own Mark Thomas Comedy Product,<sup>22</sup> he

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<sup>18</sup> Comedy Network, Channel 5, 17/11/97.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Jenny Eclair Squats, Channel 5 from November, 1997.

<sup>21</sup> Saturday Zoo was a Channel 4 comedy/chat showcase launched and hosted by Jonathan Ross in 1993. It featured Thomas in a short slot commenting on the week’s news, usually getting straight to the point. It also showed MTV clips of US comedian Denis Leary commenting on recent events in America. Short, jump cut and black and white, these diatribes delivered amphetamine fast where



regularly performs at low key comedy clubs throughout London. His comedy has a loose structure and employs improvising and arguing with the audience. His material starts with a general idea and pin points absurdity or inequity within it. He attacks power structures that exclude. Thomas came after the second wave of alternative comedy, first performing in 1985. His background was in performance groups within the Socialist League:

“We used to write shows for all sorts of things: TUC Women’s Day, British Cuban Resource Centre, Miners Benefits. We wrote the history of Cuba in two days flat, and performed it in twenty minutes.”<sup>23</sup>

Despite the agit-prop seriousness and political commitment, Thomas is a very able stand-up comedian, intelligent and funny, scatological and satirical. He is no po-faced PC paratrooper but a cheeky, likeable persona as puzzled and denied by political machinations as the rest of us. He is no superior moralist chiding us for our inadequacies.

Margaret Thatcher and her ideology gave something for alternative comedy to define itself against in opposition. During the 1980s a significant percentage of the audience would be sympathetic to the anti-Tory politics of the comedians. The new Labour Government, as yet untried over a significant period, can be harder to attack due to the comparative relief of a change after so long. Thomas is no parliamentarian however: he attacks the government because they are the government and do what they do; he does not want to “Rock the Vote” or Wedge Redly. It is harder to criticise those with whom you have *some* sympathy, harder yet to be funny and make a point. And this is Thomas’s skill:

“The laugh is the most important thing because you actually get people to think by making them laugh.”<sup>24</sup>

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something of a revelation to the wider comedy audience in Britain. The show also shot Steve Coogan to fame in his Paul ‘Bag of Shite’ Calf character. It went out on a Saturday night and although it covered an excellent crop of contemporary stand-up this placing failed to reach more than two million viewers (*Observer*, 7/12/97). Coogan’s phrase, ‘bag of shite’, however passed into contemporary playground and university parlance.

<sup>22</sup> *Mark Thomas Comedy Product*, Channel 4, 1996. Thomas mixed topical stand-up recorded that week with filmed pranks. See conclusion for details.

<sup>23</sup> Cook, 1994, p. 99.

His attacks on the new Labour government prickle some of the audiences consciences. Thomas's material is often been a mix of the political and the sexual. He sees no difference between the two and maintains they are inseparable. Thomas's passion in his intelligent, political critiques often clash with the boyish delight he takes in his sexual bits. He can tease out absurd bedroom behaviour and cause groans of recognition.

### Sex Filth and Religion.<sup>25</sup>

Thomas recorded his showcase, Sex, Filth and Religion, in the relative close comfort of the Banana Cabaret, in Balham, South London, as opposed to Robin Williams at the Met or Eddie Izzard at the Albery. He precedes matters by welcoming the audience on a journey to "Filthyland". His agenda is clear from the start of the journey: the joy of sex and swearing, the oppression of religion and the state. Thomas defends the use of swearing: "it's imaginative, creative and I think it's clever."<sup>26</sup> He denies that it reduces vocabulary - on the contrary it expands the scope of expression - and he runs through various possibilities and colourful ways of use: Shakespeare with genital names; old people who have ceased to regard convention; and his parents swearing over the breakfast table. In revelling in the joy of swearing, he reduces the taboo or power of swear words through their (over) use. Constant use, he seems to suggest, drains any etymological meaning from such words and they become like other words - means of expression. "Fuck" becomes like any other word where the passion with which it is expressed usurps any sexual origin. Admittedly it borrows some of its power from these origins but when we use it, we are not usually thinking of sex, except on some deep sub-conscious level not dwelt upon during casual conversation. Thomas talks about terms for female genitalia and either their inadequacy or their use in derogation: the clinical vagina - "you know there's a course of penicillin coming up" - and the insufficient "fanny, muff and minge - they

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

<sup>25</sup> Mark Thomas. Sex, Filth and Religion, Telstar Video Entertainment. Recorded live at the Banana Cabaret, Balham, London in 1995.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

just sound like Famous Five characters.”<sup>27</sup> He shies from the “C word”, seeing it as a means of oppression, however, not applying the previous logic to such usage. Unlike Alexei Sayle.

“Jesus was a chippy, he worked on site... the first thing he’d say was “whose got my fucking paper?”<sup>28</sup>

Thomas links into his next subject and attacks organised religion by imagining Jesus swearing. He links the ideology of the Catholic church with contraception and safe sex. He attacks the church for outdated morality and continually failing to understand seismic changes within society and sexuality. On condoms for teenagers - “they have sex!” - he points out the absurdity and danger of denying the facts and spirals off into fantasy, uniting Ian Paisley and the Pope in explaining how to use (papally endorsed) condoms - “the Holy Trinity packet of three.”<sup>29</sup> He expands on contraception, the lack of male responsibility, the absurdity of musical and flavoured condoms and the awkwardness of using the female condom - “I have enough trouble changing the duvet.”<sup>30</sup> On abortion and pro-Lifer’s, Thomas brings up their ludicrous concept of sperm having life on its own. He spins off into a fantasy of confronting demonstrators at a clinic with his penis in his hand threatening masturbational genocide. God is pro-choice anyway, having “only one child in 2000 years.”<sup>31</sup> He despises the church for its hypocrisy and antiquity. The Bible can justify anything, says Thomas, it is a question of interpretation and original sin is “a miscarriage of justice.”<sup>32</sup> The church “celebrates death not life”<sup>33</sup> and this is the reverse of Thomas’s credo: to live life authentically, honestly and to be responsible for one’s own actions in living life to the full. But he is no careless hedonist and is aware of the broader context and power structures at large. He dislikes those who profess to have the answers, be it the church or the Socialist Worker Party and he

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

prefers anarchist group, Class War for their “creativity in dissent.”<sup>34</sup> Thomas talks about Gay Pride marches and discusses homophobes in denial and links it, not too successfully, with misogyny. When his sister tells his parents that she is a lesbian his father reacts, probably predictably - “No you’re not ... she’s confused.”<sup>35</sup> He discusses the hetero-myths about why lesbians are lesbians, because they have had bad sex once: all they need is a good man.

Thomas’s main grist is taboo and in this he is like Lenny Bruce.<sup>36</sup> For Thomas, the real taboos are “sex and death”. Hugh Grant’s escapade with a prostitute is used as an illustration of what he means: “that’s not a taboo - that’s just funny.”<sup>37</sup> He says that taboos shock and “shock works best when you don’t expect it.”<sup>38</sup> Grant and his public school mannered ilk surprise few in their sexual proclivities. Thomas then unveils the biggest taboo - men sleeping with their mothers. There is not a single man in the audience (or the viewing booth) that did not flinch at this thought. He cites Freud and then expands further: delicacy restrains in description at this point but certainly Thomas even out-grosses himself. If it was not well rehearsed even he could well have been shocked by it. For most men, it is *the* taboo, the unthinkable and in revealing this it is a genuine comedy moment: “Shock works when you don’t expect it” indeed.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. Class War grew out of the free festivals and anarchist Punk scene and drew in dissatisfied would-be revolutionaries in the mid-1980s. It was not a card carrying membership group but more of an umbrella for anarchist activity. They utilised direct action techniques against the police, the rich and the fascist contingent. Stewart Home covers some of their fictionalised escapades in a small selection of short stories and all too briefly in Assault on Culture (Sterling: AK Press, 1994). The Class War paper later dropped its anarchist insignia and after various publicity stunts came to a close. It billed itself as “Britain’s most unruly tabloid” and for a time was compulsive reading if only for its black and violent humour and attitude.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas, op. cit.

<sup>36</sup> The cover of the Sex, Filth and Religion has a photograph of Thomas as a vicar, with horns, holding out his hand. In Bruce’s How to Talk Dirty and Influence People (St. Albans: Panther, 1975) there is a similar picture of Bruce posing as a faith healer. The two comedians look remarkably similar. There are other comparisons in their confrontational material, easy going manner and moral outrage. As well as an unholy interest in sexual congress.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas, op. cit.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

Thomas returns time and time again to sex and sexuality: post-coital manoeuvring under the duvet; secretly masturbating when his wife goes out; having secret sex in his parents house and feeling guilty. He is not like Chubby Brown in this, monomaniac and derogatory, he is just fascinated with why sex is such a taboo when we all want it, we all like it and we spend much time fantasising about it. It is interrogation rather than derogation. It is part of us and 'natural' to be so. Much of the comedy, although contained below the waistline, does make a point. Thomas does not view sex as purely phallogentric, however, although his material often is, but he can only really talk authentically about himself and his side of relations. He is inclusive and opens up areas of inadequacy and vulnerability. He speaks honestly about love and sex. He loves the sleaziness of it all but also the liberation in good sex with a loving partner. In this he is remarkably 'normal'; he reveals himself as a married family man and monogamous.

Thomas is an intriguing interface of the almost puerile, penile and political left. The persona he presents is so likeable and cheeky that it is hard to dismiss him as a raving militant. He takes delight in being graphic but retains a clear politics. He sees no contradiction in the two stances and dissolves the humourless, politically correct cliché. He is more like Frank Skinner than Ben Elton for out and out grossness, and the anal and penile material is closer to that of Skinner's discussed earlier, in its chatty, rather than ranting, style. He does not do one liners but spins ideas out ending with absurdly humorous statements rather than punchlines. He is also like Tony Allen in this, although Allen is a bit less filthy than Thomas: both are personable and intelligent, questioning attitudes and testing the audience's prejudices. Thomas is not there on his own as an entertainer but challenges the audience, asking them if they have ever visited prostitutes or used pornography. They respond with timid laughter. No matter how gross Thomas gets, and he does, often, he always has a reason for saying what he does. He explains what he is getting at between jokes.

Thomas can still receive criticisms for PC/alternative 1980s comedy. His political stance is deeply unfashionable on the comedy circuit but he is still a significant draw. He is a highly skilled comedian (he has been doing this for years) and too likeable. He knows how to judge an audience and has enough material to keep them happy, polemic, observational or plainly rude. He has had an erratic television career (an occasional presence rather than institutional one) and is, admittedly, not everyone's cup of tea. But for skill, imagination and commitment there are few like him.

In the late 1980s, post-alternative comedy ideas began to settle within the main comedy agenda and the politics became implicit rather than explicitly ranted. The likes of post-alternative Sean Hughes atomised the subject of comedy and dealt with the everyday life of the post-education, perpetually single urban loafer in the 1980s and 1990s.

### **Sean Hughes.**

“When all the kids were smoking behind the bike sheds, me? I was cycling behind the tobacconists.”<sup>39</sup>

Hughes came to prominence after winning the prestigious Perrier Award at the Edinburgh Festival in 1990 at the age of twenty four. Relatively unknown, he quickly developed a cult-ish following, through his Channel 4 programme Seans's Show, with his casual style, noticeably non-political, and his reference points of pop music and dole culture. Hughes has carved out his own unique comedy identity based on his down-beat, badly dressed permanent student image.

In Sean Hughes: Thirty Somehow, he emanates a happily amateurish aura although this careless delivery of rambling (mumbling, even), relaxed anecdotes remains funnier than his one liners. He looks ill with grey skin, floppy greasy hair and a junk shop dress sense, yet he is an arch-narcissist with little to narcissise about, chiefly

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<sup>39</sup> Sean Hughes, Thirty Somehow, Channel 4, 1995.

concerned about his age and appearance. We believe he is like this. He believes other things are probably to blame for his single status. He comments on mass murderer, Fred West:

“This evil repulsive man lured hundreds of women back to his house. Me, I can’t get anyone to come back with me.”<sup>40</sup>

He improvises and comments, chats with the audience who do not take him on, and sometimes his careless delivery lets jokes flop. It takes a while to get used to him and for him to warm up; when he is ready he is very good and his observation keen. Hughes deals with the anomalies of the OJ Simpson trial; smoking, drinking and subsequent dry heaving at parties; illness and doctors; and knowing nothing about the then situation in Bosnia: “and yet everyone of us in this room knows the lyrics to ‘Lady In Red’ by Chris De Burgh.”<sup>41</sup> Teenage masturbation in shared bedrooms; vegetarians, practical jokes and stag nights; burglars, beggars and fighting; he envies couples on the street; all are there to annoy him. His is a daytime television sponge with a fervent imagination, too lazy to do much about it. But he is hard on himself and makes himself unlikeable, unendearing; his relationships fail and he is always coming home alone to find succour in his dog <sup>and</sup> cat with whom he discovers the late night joy of ‘pet dancing’ when drunk. He has his dog making tea and divides the canine and feline into masculine (slobs) and feminine (cool). Hughes’s forte is home life, himself living alone in London but especially his depiction of working class, Catholic, Dublin family life. His girlfriend visits and his mum and dad become an airline crew - over informant father and hostess mother - embarrassing him. He is the clever one in the family who got to college but only discovered bed-sit life and Morrissey records and he always comes home at Christmas. He is still living the life of perpetual student despite the fact that he is now thirty, his friends have “got kids of our own, now Sean.”<sup>42</sup> He still has the time to live the life but not the energy and he sits out of the dancing, perhaps having a doze. Hughes despises responsibility, is insecure and secretly envious of those who can handle it. Although he sees it from a

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

particular background, what he deals with is remarkably untouched by this and we do locate many recognisable truths in his comedy. At times, it seems like he is after these truths more than laughter.

“I’m not making apologies for being serious anymore”. Sean Hughes.<sup>43</sup>

Hughes pursues a writing career - poetry, ephemera, a novel - and may run the risk of the comedians foulest fault: taking himself too seriously. Seriousness can drown out the comedy but many comedians are serious about what they are trying to evoke. The seriousness of Steve Coogan and the depth and detail of his characters, the social milieu in which they live and the sympathy which he squeezes from us despite their grossness is testament to this. Hancock moved in similar terrain, reflecting us more than we may have noticed (and Hughes and Hancock share a similar lugubrious air and pessimism). They both explored a darker, more unpleasant side that we may laugh at but also recognise sometimes in our selves. The comedian can explore this dark side but must always keep in touch with the absurdity of it whilst keeping the bizarre at a distance in order to deal with it. Critics fail to see that many stand-up comedians have more than a one dimensional talent for a penis gag. Many comedians have the ability to expand ideas that only live in a small part of their stand-up show. Hughes has the right to explore and develop his ideas in other media when the stand-up format proves insufficient for what he would want to say. He has been met with some small criticism for this, as if the stand-up comedian is only allowed to do stand-up comedy, ‘real’ writing should be a more sombre endeavour.

This irks him:

“Reviewers think it’s like stand-ups are gate-crashing the party ... it’s inevitable that a lot of comedians will write novels because it’s a larger canvas.”<sup>44</sup>

It seems the comedian should just stick to the night job. Just as it may once have been questionable for a stand-up comedian to stand on stage and discuss sexual politics, the government or police brutality, it may be questionable now for them to branch out into other media (other than adverts). If a stand-up is capable of

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<sup>43</sup> Independent, 12/8/97.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.



transforming his or her stand-up comedy into a televisual form, then it is surely possible to move into the novel or other media. The comedian sours the sacrament of the serious book. Alexei Sayle, Jo Brand, Jenny Eclair, Ben Elton, Steven Fry, Hugh Laurie, Ade Edmondson, Rob Newman, David Baddiel and Hughes have all produced books, of varying styles to varying acclaim. Similarly, Fry, Mayall, Sayle and Keith Allen all have moved into films and others have moved into the theatre - Keith Allen, Izzard, Eclair, Fry and Mayall (notoriously), even Les Dawson appeared in The Mikado. The risk is, that like pop stars 'doing acting', (Bowie, Sting, Phil Collins and Jagger have all melted celluloid at one time or other) we just prefer to digest their comedic 'talents' with several rounds of drinks and a group of friends in the informal comedy club, that their talents may be too thinly spread or that their charisma can only stretch as far as self-mockery.

Hughes's material has got progressively more downbeat - "I feel I have to do stuff that nobody else will touch" - <sup>45</sup> and it will be interesting to see where he ends up. If nothing else he appears to have whetted the appetite for many other Celtic comedians, although far from spearheading a post-alternative 'Irish wave' of comedy: Ardal O'Hanlon, Dylan Moran, Kevin Gildea and Michael Redmond from the Republic; and Michael Smiley and Owen O'Neill from the North, to name but the more renowned currently on the circuit.

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### **Eddie Izzard.**

"I don't do jokes." Eddie Izzard. <sup>46</sup>

Izzard's presence throws up immediate questions: he confounds the reductionist either/or. He is surreal and quotidian; he defines his uniqueness through an androgyny and his transvestism, yet is no handbag drag act; his micro-world is continually expanding. He offers a scope of possibilities within stand-up comedy. The attempt to fix him in relation to others makes distressed goats of his critics. He is closer to performance art than stand-up comedy. He has not just redefined himself

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Eddie Izzard: Abroad, BBC2, 1997.

but redefined the form he operates in and made it so it only fits him, irrespective of what guise he wears today. He has mentioned fitting into a history of surrealism in comedy:

“Steve Martin ... the Dada movement ... alternative comedy ... The Goons ... Tommy Cooper ... Python. Hopefully I’ll be part of that.”<sup>47</sup>

Only Merton’s grumpy old jumper wearer moves near his flights of weirdness. Harry Hill is too rigid, his micro-world fixed firmly, too adjacent to ours to transcend the expected of him. Izzard transcends most expectations.

Izzard has remained wary of television, despite occasional appearances on BBC2’s Have I Got News For You and Channel 4’s Whose Line Is It Anyway? This has probably proven to be shrewd business. He has released several video recordings of his performances and his is no sound bite, one line stand-up but demands space for improvisational flights to pull in the audience and take them along for the ride. It takes a short while to orientate oneself in his micro-world where animals are often preferable to the insane and intolerant behaviour of people.

In 1994, Channel 4 made Unrepeatable, filmed at the Albery Theatre, London, which captures Izzard in full and bizarre flight. Firmly rooted in slow quotidian dole life (he rarely makes references to working but many to smoking dope, watching television and street performing) he explores adverts and consumerism, laundrettes, bombs in London and strange people on buses. Television references float through the material casually and we know he spends much time wallowing in daytime television/long term unemployed culture: late night horror film vampires, Star Trek and One Man and His Dog; trash viewing for the underachiever in all of us. Izzard is hard to quote and his delivery relies on lots of ‘ooh’s and ‘err’s and ‘hmm’s, like Frankie Howerd, and there is a general, random improvisatory feel to his performances. Howerd opens with:

“no ... what ... what ... no, listen ... ah, now, before we start ... what ... no, don’t .. oh don’t make mock ... you’re making mock of Francis.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

Izzard opens with:

“la la la ... well ... God ... Cor ... Jesus ... so ... anyway ... err ... advertising ... yes.”<sup>49</sup>

Howerd appeared to be improvising his random, stuttering diversions but, in fact, it was a tightly constructed performance. Izzard and Howerd are campily similar in other ways: recurring gags and back references; few punchlines; essentially daft and seemingly pointless at times; and they both seem to just chat to the audience, enjoying being there (not particularly true in Howerd's case, it seems). However, Howerd's material is heavily weighted with innuendo but he appears almost toad-like and unsexual. Izzard is remarkably clean - he rarely mentions sex except in the context of animals, unsurprisingly, and the odd by-reference to the ubiquitous 'shagging' - and yet he has a certain glamour. Izzard's glamour is like that of a pop star and has become part of a package complete with flashing lights, music and lasers at the start of his show but it is no spectacle.<sup>50</sup> As soon as he starts talking the spectator and star relationship is dissolved and he just 'chats'. There is little surprise in his choice of apparel: theatre, music hall and pantomime have legitimised any shock out of it with their respective histories of female impersonation, drag queens and Dames. He is not exclusive and could only shock the backdated, shy and the conservative.

In Unrepeatable, Izzard says much with his body and without words. He runs about a lot, his street theatre background drawn on heavily to help fill the increasingly large performance spaces to pull his audience in. He comes across as himself 'heightened', like Tony Allen, only his persona at times seems so fantastic as to almost be a character. His is an enormous imagination, seemingly boundless and he has a clear, well constructed position, politically considerate for others, inclusive. He makes a point, or starts off with a point - the positive benefits of a philosophy of tolerance, environmental concerns and communication - and then gets lost in the flurry of

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<sup>48</sup> Frankie Howerd. At His Tittermost, Channel 4, 1996. This was Howerd's last big TV appearance that was a neat summation of all his entendres, innuendoes, oohs, errs and Missus.

<sup>49</sup> Eddie Izzard: Unrepeatable, Channel 4, 1994.

<sup>50</sup> The lasers and music were most noticeable on the Definite Article tour in 1996 and Glorious in 1997.

weirdness. He is pro-Europe, free health service and pro-small businesses (he owns an independent record company). If there is one overriding message<sup>H</sup> is one of coexistence. He says he is a revolutionary liberal and would like to

“storm the Houses of Parliament, kick the fucking doors in, get in there and say ‘look, we’ll pay for damage’.”<sup>51</sup>

His routines, for want of a better word (and they are anything but routine) build and splinter, he comes back to what he started talking about twenty minutes ago like Connolly, but he is very English, referencing Monty Python’s Flying Circus and The Goon Show in interviews. He is very in control despite letting himself go where he pleases. The ideas roll like snowballs at the top of a hill but end up at the bottom a completely different substance. He spins off at tangents from anywhere: Prince Charles does magic tricks, producing bunches of flowers from his sleeve; he makes underpants talk, infiltrating piles of white washing in a mesh of film references from The Great Escape and The Wizard of Oz. He is good on childhood too, remembering swimming lessons with polystyrene floats, being pursued by wasps and receiving bad fatherly advice. He gets an idea and attacks it from all angles, exploring the possibilities inherent in any list of properties, like with the phaser settings on Star Trek range from kill to depressed to left something in the oven settings. But it is on animals where he is best. He prefers them in relation to people and explores the absurdity of our behaviour by re-enacting it through his pets. It is like a wander round a uniquely English version of Gary Larson’s Far Side cartoons. When he bought his cat he bought a lot of material with it and it is probably his best investment. He takes us round cattle markets, folding in punchlines from previous dog gags; cats drill for oil behind the sofa; dogs misunderstand the stick fetching game; birds misread maps before migration; insects, bees (good), wasps (bad) and gnats are discussed whilst earwigs make chutney in an underground Tandoori; chickens riddled with road rage driving Range Rovers; and flies gamble in a Speakeasy buried in cow dung. He comments repeatedly on his performance, ad libbing “good link” at bad links, “got out of that well” when he messes up and he

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<sup>51</sup> Unrepeatable, 1994.

plays with the microphone, rambling, making mouth noise. He often uses death as a full stop to end the set pieces: there is much talk of “and people kill them”, “then they stab you ... apparently, sometimes, in America”, bread knives and occasionally elsewhere, “pokey pokey swords.”

To codily wax psychological for a moment, ‘death as a full stop’, or comedy closure could have deeper readings: Izzard’s mother died of cancer when he was six, a terminal full stop to the mother/son relationship and all the complexities and comforts that that may contain. It is tempting to speculate on the nature of his transvestism: were his early attempts at transvestism to get closer to his mother via a material representation from what she left behind? No. He has said: “I had definitely been wanting to wear dresses since I was four two years before she died.”<sup>52</sup> Others more qualified and verbose could better speculate on Izzard’s sexual and sartorial dimensions but his cross dressing resonates with Victoria Wood’s comments on Max Miller.

“He’s very magnetic and he’s very sexy and he’s also not particularly masculine or feminine, he’s a mixture. And I think that gives you a huge appeal. I think that a lot of our best comedian are not particularly one sex or the other, but a mixture.” Victoria Wood.<sup>53</sup>

George Melly comments in the same programme that

“there’s always been a sort of sexual ambivalence about comics ... most of the great comics, not all, have never come across as very macho ... he had a soft femininity about him.”<sup>54</sup>

### **Izzard/Androgyny.**

“Typical Girls ... worry about spots, fat and natural smells.” The Slits. Typical Girls.<sup>55</sup>

“The presence of one set of characteristics does not imply the absence of the other.” Wrightsman & Deaux.<sup>56</sup>

“By combining positive masculine and feminine characteristics, the androgynous person, in Bem’s view, can function effectively in a wide variety of situations that call for either masculine or feminine behaviour.” Wrightsman & Deaux.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Independent, 14/6/94.

<sup>53</sup> Victoria Wood on Max Miller: Heroes Of Comedy, Channel 4, 21/5/97.

<sup>54</sup> George Melly, Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> The Slits, “Typical Girls” on Cut, Island Records, 1978.

<sup>56</sup> Wrightsman & Deaux, Social Psychology in the 80s, Monterey: Brooks/Cole, 1981, p. 445.

Androgyny is the possession of both ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ characteristics but it is also a suspension from the usual discourse on appearance and sexuality, becoming an unfixed identity that slides between two rigidly defined poles. It confuses but also appeals through the dissolution of difference and ‘otherness’ definitions: it is not really an ‘other’, a binary defined opposition, but a ‘neither’, something which can deny such a binary. Like viruses, androgyny begins to erode certainties established by Aristotelian categorisation (and we categorise to understand and therefore control through understanding), and like UFOlogy expands the possibilities of what we can know. There is a temptation to view androgyny as strictly sexual. There are, however, modes of behaviour that are expected of men and women, socially predetermined and shaped by surrounding forces, that reinforce concepts of what is ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’. Male and female characteristics have become viewed as biological, sexual and psychological but also ideological. Elements of male and female behaviour become ridiculous on closer examination and are clearly socio-political constructs: girls ‘care’ more and are good at cooking, men dominate conversation and like sports; men should be muscular and demand sex, women should be curvy and acquiesce; emotional women ‘weep’, boys don’t cry; men drive diggers and women can do knitting. All these things maintain social equilibrium. It is absurd to define characteristic and behaviour in relation to skirts and bras and whether the zip is on the front or the back of a trouser. Androgyny is a complex of behaviours and characteristics (behaviour as what we do, characteristics as the style in which we do them) linking various elements at various times. It is not a “single dimension of personality”<sup>58</sup> but a shifting entity in a matrix of the social and psychological. It questions assumptions, roles and positions and collapses gender dictates by defying what is ‘male’ and what is ‘female’.

“Androgynous people are likely to relate to an equal number of males and females and to disclose corresponding amounts of information to either sex.” Wrightsman & Deaux.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 448.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

The comedy identity becomes transplantable and able to explore further possibilities in imagined situations and gives further dimension to the micro-world. Androgyny, for the comedian, becomes a flexible tool: it allows them to let go of defined characteristics and explore roles and plays with whatever comes to hand. They become more believable wherever they choose to go. Max Miller's androgyny was displayed through his lack of being sexually predatory but he could also camp it up without becoming a drag act handbag slinger; he could be priapic and engender mothering instincts, the lewd but loveable element. The overtly macho comedian (Sadowitz, Manning) may alienate, the androgynous comedian can be more inclusive.

### **Izzard/Transvestism.**

"Hirschfeld defined transvestism as, 'the impulse to assume the garb of a sex which is not apparently that of the subject as indicated by the sexual organs' ... although ... the term indicated only the most obvious aspects of this phenomenon." Dave King. *Gender Blending*.<sup>60</sup>

"[Izzard] likes wearing clothes that cross sexual boundaries, though he won't call them "women's clothes" because if they belong to him and he wears them they're his clothes, and he's a man. He enjoys the way they feel, but he also enjoys confounding people's preconceptions."<sup>61</sup>

Izzard has said at various times that he is "a lesbian trapped inside a mans body", joking it off. He utilises comedy's androgyny - the dissolution of fixity in male and female - and further confuses through transvestism. He is not bisexual or a drag queen, nor is he a transsexual - the cosmetic attempt to "simulate a biological state that is chromosomally denied."<sup>62</sup> Izzard is not really "blending genders", he is still obviously a man and does not assume 'female' behaviour, on stage at least. He can look, at times, sexy but also rough and overlarge; there would be little chance of mistaking him for a woman and he is not constructing himself in the male ideal of woman. He mixes clothes and there is something usually left out that belies the full-on drag queen, replete with handbag risk. He sometimes wears a dress, and then

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<sup>60</sup> Dave King, "Gender Blending" in *Blending Gender*, Eds., Ekins & King. London: Routledge, 1996, p. 82.

<sup>61</sup> Angela Lambert *Independent*, 14/6/94.

<sup>62</sup> Richard Ekins, "Male Femaling, Telephone Sex and the Case of Intimacy Scripts" in Ekins & King, 1996, p. 152.

sometimes does not. Izzard is not in disguise: a disguise invites mystery, something to hide or it indicates a hidden purpose and Izzard is too open for that. He hides little. He refuses any simplification or socially constructed handle: he is like his comedy and impossible to pin down. Though the connecting strands of influence are visible, they are combined uniquely, all his own way.

Izzard is struggling for the right to choose the way he represents himself in the public, private and political arena.<sup>63</sup> He calls for 'equal clothing rights' and says he just gets pleasure from the clothes themselves, not because he wants to be a woman. The 'equal clothing rights' line that Izzard pursues is an interesting one. Janice Raymond points out the difference of women wearing men's clothes in everyday life, in relation to drag queens especially:

"There is a false symmetry here ... they are not trying to pass as men. Nor do most of these women stage theatrical performances that call attention to their cross dressing ... a woman putting on a man's clothes is, in a sense, putting on male power status whereas a man putting on women's clothes is putting on a parody."<sup>64</sup>

It is a strong statement and subject to criticism. Drag queens and transvestites can be accused of representing a male defined construct of what should or could be, to them. Izzard is no drag queen and he certainly does not parody women; he is too bulky and obviously male; besides, he enjoys "confounding people's pre-conceptions". In a way, his clothing is another way of playing with the idea of roles. There is a strong element of play in his comedy and Izzard adopts and plays with many characters, usually animal, and he shifts through queues and zoos full of beasts and people with bodily ease. He plays with the role of the comedian, expanding further the possibilities within that, and he plays with his material, improvising and expanding. Seeing Izzard is seeing boundaries breaking within stand-up, which at time, seems at critical mass. Where we can see slight precedents to Izzard, however, is within the history of theatre. He is no pantomime dame (a parody) but twists the

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<sup>63</sup> Izzard's view is often undermined in interviews that utilise the faux shock of "cross dressing comedy star", *Evening Standard*, 24/1/97, or "he came out as a transvestite on stage", *Observer* 15/10/95. We do not get "the glasses wearing Eric Morecambe" or "the tax evading Ken Dodd".

<sup>64</sup> Janice Raymond, "The Politics of Transgenderism" in Ekins & King, 1996, p217.



compulsion of most British comedians to 'wear the dress of comedy' and pump cheap gags plentiful. This tradition is turned on its head by Izzard and he rarely refers to his choice of clothing. It is an easy gag and unnecessary. But also in the history of British theatre, the representation of women is the representation of permitted transvestism. Izzard has a difference of purpose: he is a performer who happens to wear a dress, coincidentally, it may be an intrinsic part of him but it is secondary to the performance and it would be a fairly similar event be it cardigan or blouse. For the actor, the dress is a priori to the performance.

*italics or underlined*

Izzard is proving to be both flexible and tireless. He attempted to dissolve the locality of comedy by touring abroad in France (a brave move, but what has he to lose?), Iceland, Scandinavia and America. He proved to himself that he could do this but, perhaps, proved to us that stand-up comedy is not such an Anglo-American invention designed for those softened pallets only. Imaginative flights of comedy are not just England bound and he demonstrated the universal in comedy and the collapsing of cultural boundaries in the western world. Izzard's comedy has proved to be successfully approachable, non-hostile, user friendly and appealing to many.

### **Conclusion.**

Documenting post-alternative comedy would be a strenuous task indeed. This is not the purpose of this thesis. We have looked at ideas recurring throughout comedy in the post-war era and seen them appear in a variety of manifestations, from radio comedy to television sketch to sit-com and stand-up. Clearly, there is much more to stand-up comedy than what we have outlined here. The upcoming comedians can be established relatively quickly and fade just as fast. It is a tiresome task to map shifting phenomena and it is preferable to look at the ideas. Clearly, there have been more changes in stand-up comedy since the mid 1980s than can hope to be covered here. These previous examples represent the ideas discussed, performing challenging comedy, giving more than we expect and changing the borders of subject and language in stand-up, "inventing new rules." There are others who deserve mention,

in this subversive history at least (and the performers discussed here all subvert in their own, unique and subtle - and not so subtle - ways). Mark Steel, Mark Kelly, Arnold Brown, Jeremy Hardy, John Hegley, Julian Clary, Jack Dee, Paul Merton, Donna McPhail, Rhona Cameron, Mark Lamarr, Harry Hill and Steve Coogan could all fit into this thesis in some way or another, and these are just the ones with significant televisual presence. Whilst they vary from twisted variety act to polemically driven comedy they all deserve more than a cursory glance or footnote. Time and space as ever prohibits further exploration, but continued analysis beckons.

It is like the Jorge Louis Borges story of the cartographer whose map eventually covers the territory it seeks to translate. And for this we can be grateful. This lively, shifting world of stand-up can be cluttered by those who have found their niches and are prepared to remain there. But it remains dynamically competitive as ever and there are always those who seek to experiment and uncover new ways of locating those moments and truths that can add so much to the already enjoyable stand-up experience.

### Towards A Conclusion.

It is, perhaps, difficult to draw conclusions on contemporary stand-up comedy which is forever expanding, whose cast of characters constantly changes and whose alternative and mainstream wings perpetually merge and blur. There are some things we can say for certain: that live stand-up comedy looks likely to keep going from strength to strength; that there seems to be no end of willing humiliates to stand-up and keep the ball rolling, however male dominated; that many good stand-up comedians are becoming more and more popular without becoming overtly populist; that many stand-up comedians feel the need to expand into other areas and develop ideas elsewhere; and that the circuit is expanding and becoming stronger in other areas, not just London. It is possible, however, to say what we have established here. Everyday life can be seen as dominated by the commodity form and we often exist alienated from each other. Much of our experience is fed to us, bought and sold, and our daily life is segmented into pre-determined cycles of labour, leisure and essential time. But also, within this everyday life, within this commodity society, it is possible to find moments of extremes, of vibrancy, where we can exist authentically. Despite its commodity form, despite its threatened status as mere entertainment, stand-up comedy can present these authentic moments of communication, moments that show us as we are and not just as consumer units.

It is clear that ever since the Greek classical period comedy has often performed a social function, either reactionary or satirical. So-called Great Men have tried to unify comedy into a single theory and failed, mainly because comedy grows from changing phenomena in everyday life. Comedy appears to constantly adapt. For all the dangerous combinations of pleasure and pain, tensions of frustrated expectations, incongruity and psycho-sexual sub-texts that it may be invested with, comedy remains elusive and denies tight definition. If we are to understand it, we must apply relevant theory to each individual comedy situation.

However, it has been within these varied attempts to pin down comedy that the definition of the stand-up comedian has become apparent. Bergson's identification of the comic character shows what the stand-up comedian is not. More complex than laughing stock or merely 'bloke with microphone', the stand-up comedian is a presentation of an authentic self not a character. From this we can see the difference between comic and comedian in character and persona. It has been possible to map the relation between performer and audience, the route a joke takes to work. This essential power relation rests on the exchange of confidences, a contract of consent. The audience becomes an active participant in the process, it becomes an intrinsic part of the performance and it can stop that performance by registering its dissent through heckling. The lack of any fourth wall in stand-up comedy reserves our right to do this. But we often choose not to and allow the comedian to unfurl their 'micro-world' and we explore the way they see things, recognising the commonalities in this poor theatre, this theatre of the imagination. Within this theater, comedy can serve a function not necessarily cathartic. We experience something valuable to ourselves, moments of realisation, moments of joy and moments where we live much deeper than we usually do in the commodity world. The comedian can explore the possibilities presented in the joke to uncover these moments and reverse the focus, from talking about themselves to talking about ourselves.

It is this joke that has been established as key to the performance, this micro-narrative and its host of complexities. It is clear that jokes have multiple meanings, are often dense with myths and ideological assumptions. We have seen that certain jokes propagate misconceptions and spread ideas like viruses. But they have also been shown to document opinions and attitudes prevalent within everyday life and that jokes locate opinions within the audience. Exploring the richness of the joke dealing with sex has uncovered differing strategies of understanding: the dirty joke, smut and a more honest approach have all been defined in relation to the propagation of myths and sexual repression, or timidity at least. Smut's position in the classical comedy canon has been confirmed, the dirty jokes dismissed as reactionary and

encapsulate of bad faith and a third method of expressing sexuality through humour has been identified. Examples of all these types of comedy have been analysed.

Having established the identity, methods and tools of the stand-up comedian, a subversive lineage of comedy has been traced in British comedy. A definition of what this subversive comedy might involve was offered and examples from The Goon Show in the 1950s through to the beginnings of the alternative comedy explosion of the 1980s were examined in relation to this criteria. Milligan, Hancock, the satire boom boys and Monty Python's Flying Circus, The Bonzo Dogs, Connolly and Allen all contributed in one way or another to the dynamism of stand-up comedy in this country today. The shifts and shape changes in comedy in these years are rich ones, with characters often moving from one area to another, furthering the desire and need for a more challenging (and not always standing-up) comedy that has served to influence the explosion of alternative comedy in the 1980s in some way. But it is not just this comedy heritage that threw up the 'alternative' crowd. A context has been established, a fertile mix of political opposition, cultural upheaval and climate changes in fringe theater that all fed into the Comedy Store to create the environment where this new comedy could occur. Punk, the general lack of experiment in comedy and the casual racism in the election booths and television sitcoms all contributed to setting the context where this situation could develop into a key, cultural moment. A look at The Comedians television programme illustrated the unadventurous nature of stand-up and Trevor Griffiths's 1976 play Comedians almost predicted the change in energy levels that would later occur.

The US comedy scene was briefly looked at and a healthy strain of subversion has been seen to run through it from the early 1950s right up to today. This small history and a desire for political input in the cold war tensions and beyond, has produced a significant comedy influence for change in the failing stand-up scene in 1970s Britain. All these elements displayed the dire need for British stand-up comedy to be reinvested with energy, ideas and a slimmer waistband.

That waistband was not provided by the mainspring of alternative comedy Alexei Sayle. He and his alternative cohorts gravitated to the Comedy Store in London's Soho in 1979 and developed new strategies for stand-up comedy. These comedians mixed the aggression and DIY ethic of Punk, the political slant of the American comedians, the leftist dogma of fringe theatre and the British penchant for satire and surrealism in a stand-up format to varying degrees. Defined for many by its anti-racist/sexist stance, alternative comedy presented an opposition to the dad comedians and their bar-room clichéd jokes and spoke to a younger generation of people perhaps slightly alienated by Terry And June and Sunday Night At The London Palladium. It was the political context that fired much of alternative comedy, it was defined in opposition to the Thatcher government's hard right stance. The Comedy Store's autonomous space presented opportunities to experiment, explore and play with the possibilities in form and content. Alexei Sayle has been identified as one of the key early protagonists: his mix of radical politics, aggression and 'strong language' defined much of the early style of alternative comedy. He broke away from the Comedy Store/Comic Strip crowd to perform on his own tours. Sayle quickly developed a career away from straight stand-up, giving it up until 1995 to concentrate on books, film and television. Tony Allen, more anarchist and less aggressive than Sayle, illustrated the DIY and Punk links clearly. A constant organiser and comedy risk taker, Allen has been a continuing presence at the crossroads of mainstream and alternative comedy; he has maintained his political edge, which may have caused the scarcity of television appearances that have denied him the wider credit he deserves. Jenny Leacock was identified as one of the first, key women performers in the alternative world. Although tempering her direct feminist critiques, Leacock presented an authentic persona, determining the right to present herself as herself and deal with her own, personal agenda. Leacock found space for women to develop their own voice within the alternative comedy context, define their own strengths but also to acknowledge their weaknesses. Tony Allen and Jenny Leacock represented the straight, political stand-up style whereas Rik Mayall personified more character based comedy. His comic inventions - Rick the poet,

Kevin Turvey and his Dangerous Brother characters - were all manic, deluded or ridiculous and he has rarely veered from these traits in his work, the most renowned being The Young Ones series. This series opened alternative comedy to the national consciousness. Despite <sup>poor</sup> viewing figures, it became a cult success and represented the first step to wider success for these comedians. This show appealed to anyone from teens to thirties with the desire to see comedy beyond the garden fence that was experimental and energetic, however juvenile. Ben Elton, one of the show's writers, began to personify alternative comedy in the 1980s, with his high level rants against Thatcher, his 'little bit of politics' and quintessential 'nob gags'. Elton has proved to be enduring if not endearing for many, with his perpetual interrogation of everyday life and political stance. And it is these politics that divided alternative from mainstream. Alternative comedy will forever be tied with 'political correctness', that 90s bogeyman, or bogeyperson, which has prevented many from seeing beyond the anti-Tory polemics. Shown to be a right wing by-word for contemporary left policies, PC has seeped into everyday usage with few regards to deeper meaning. Gerry Sadowitz's full frontal assault on these PC mores was instrumental in opening up alternative comedy from smug, political navel gazing and forcing it out of threatened complacency. Sadowitz and his nihilist stance has been rarely equaled for hostility and energy but this has also proved to sideline him. As comedy becomes safer, Sadowitz's extremes have shown no signs of abating.

It was the extremes of language that caused most upset amongst alternative comedy's detractors. We have outlined a defence for the use of an authentic language, an appropriate language reflecting the performer and the audience's own experiences. Modes of performance language developed as the alternative comedy scene began to expand and bring in other disenfranchised fringe performers and comedians and a thriving though small cabaret scene began to be established. The performers began to expand into other areas, television, touring and longer solo shows. The expanded scene also gave further space for other voices than the white male to be heard. Women comedians discovered space to explore their own

experiences and the early alternative comedy movers managed to redefine the role of women in stand-up comedy.

Jo Brand and Jenny Eclair have been seen to utilise the space created in radically different ways. Brand continues her politicised stand-up, continually berating the Cosmopolitan culture and male defined world with her own unique acidic style. Eclair seems to exaggerate the idea of the Cosmo girl, twisting it out of all recognition. Their raw views on sex and sexual politics refute the 'simpering girly' and present an antidote to the 'lad' domination of stand-up with fierce personae and untainted sharpness in cutting humour. They both have a unique grasp of the outrageous statement, understand the brevity of the one liner and possess seemingly endless amounts of scorn.

Mark Thomas has maintained a continual presence on the stand-up circuit losing little of his political edge. His mix of radical politics and sexual observation present an interesting performance style and he sees no difference between the two apparent polarities. Thomas is one of the few, active links with the 1980s polemical style but his amiable persona and delight in sheer filth distance him from the more po-faced pundits. Sean Hughes grounded comedy into the mundane, exploring the darker side of comedy, and was symptomatic of a successful shift from the more dogmatic style of the early stand-up comedians to the more personal and quotidian. His endless analysis of failed relationships swerves far from easy-com territory and he has been seen to gravitate towards the seamier side of life with scant regard for commerciality (although this has not stopped his success). His world view seems to grow ever darker. Eddie Izzard, on the other hand, seems to grow ever more optimistic. His seemingly tireless energy refuses the pantomime dame role many simple journalists would ascribe him through his transvestism. Of course, his unique surreal stand-up comedy also helps. It is through him that some of the androgynous attraction of the stand-up comedian has been explored.



## Several Arguments for Live Stand-up Comedy.

Stand up comedy is forever changing. It has yet to discover all its possibilities. Although it may sometimes appear to have reached critical mass, most comedians have not yet fully explored all dimensions. The comedians outlined here are but a minuscule representative and wholly driven by personal bias. Some of them - Izzard, Hughes, Eclair - are pursuing directions few could follow. There are many others who work in opposition to the central ideas of this thesis: the stand-up comedians who do not wish to be remotely attached to everyday life commentary, who zoom out on surreal comic tangents, Paul Merton and Dylan Moran and so on. And there are those whose desire for absurdism and straight stand-up remains unabashed: Lee Evans, Lee Hurst, Arthur Smith and Bill Bailey. Stand-up comedy is a flexible framework that enables many differing styles to coexist on a single bill at any given night in any comedy club. The larger venues in London, the Comedy Store, Jongleurs etc., are more professional. But it is in the smaller venues, the local venues in pub cellars and top rooms, where 'undiscovered' comedians are working out new ideas, developing new characterisations and pulling in different and as yet unexplored directions. Comedians are becoming more and more an intrinsic part of everyday life. From being a relative minority interest at the end of the 1970s, alternative comedy developed a taste for more challenging forms of stand-up that the Punk and post-Punk generations could relate to. Now of course, the comedian is ubiquitous: the advert voice over instantly recognisable; the chat show guests weeding in parts of their routines to the 'chat'; the encroachment on other leisure areas by comedians, such as They Think It's All Over and in Fantasy Football with Frank Skinner and the perpetual onanist David Baddiel.<sup>1</sup> We know who they are, from cheesy tea-time game show host to late night showcase format.

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<sup>1</sup> On Baddiel's latest stand-up comedy outing, the one handed Too Much Information tour, 1997, he discusses favoured photographs in slide form from his porn collection. Perhaps in his revelations lies the desire to be exonerated from guilt, a public exoneration to sustain him until he retires to the bathroom yet again. Perhaps not. The worst thing about Baddiel is the way he plays down his intelligence; at the end of the day he is a Cambridge posh boy pretending to be one of the lads, obviously so when sat next to Frank Skinner on Fantasy Football. "Dangerous territory is where we have to be". Sunday Times, 17/8/97. Masturbation? Football? Hardly dangerous. He remains unconvincing.

Stand-up comedy has moved far from the original music hall hangover and the working men's clubs of the 1970s and though these remain they are not the predominant venues now. As mentioned several times previously, it is London that is comedy heavy compared to, say, Manchester or Birmingham. Most large towns and cities have at least one regular gig and many colleges are now part of the comedy networks that have sprung up over recent years. It is doubtful whether it will become as central to many of our lives as pop music and it is doubtful many adolescents (and beyond) have pictures of their favourite gag merchants hanging pride of place above their beds. This is precisely because of our relationship to these comedians: they are not pop iconic, but are more like us than us. Proper pop stars should be extraordinary individuals dedicated to excess and bum-foolery, whereas most comedians appear to be ordinary. It is their everydayness that our 'liking' is built upon. There are exceptions to this obviously: Gerry Sadowitz is no more like us than Dame Edna Everage, we hope, and we enjoy not liking them for it. But stand-up comedy is in a healthy state. It is certainly being marketed more than ever before. However, the over-commercialisation and the rapidity which a comedian can transcend from comedy circuit to television is problematic, although this is no argument for the years-treading-music-hall-boards bias. A watering down of material, a fear of risqué expression or any direct political or social comment is noticeable. But comedy, as ever, reflects its time. As party politics have become blurred as policy hovers over the mid-ground, the need or desire for radical comment appears to have slipped away on much of the circuit. Alternative comedy was defined by its opposition to Thatcher and her draconian measures. Now, the body politic is greyer, less harshly defined. Stand-up comedy reflects the general thinking. Topicality may be seen as too eighties, although Phil Jupitus, Andre Vincent, Izzard and Kevin Day are not averse to the odd political relevancy and show the possibility of having something substantial to say whilst still being funny.

“Any minute now the blow flies will hatch.” Blue Jam.<sup>2</sup>

The subversive strain appears to be in temporary recess as far as stand-up comedy goes. It is more likely to be found in television or radio with Steve Coogan’s I’m Alan Partridge (a Hancock like observation of small-time Englanders), Armando Iannucci and the Friday Night Armistice, and the various incarnations from the BBC’s The Day Today series, Channel 4’s Brass Eye and Rory Bremner. Chris Morris, the talking head of The Day Today and Brass Eye, appears to have continued in an increasingly bizarre direction to the standard television career. Morris also works as a radio DJ and mixes dance and independent music with phone pranks and set-ups: the most notorious was the Michael Heseltine obituary incident where he rang up various members of Parliament in the then Tory government and asked them to supply a few words on the supposedly deceased minister. He was suspended. Morris then resurfaced in Brass Eye, this pastiche of documentary tested the boundaries of taste: animals, crime, drugs and sex where all explored using set-up interviews and mock-documentary techniques.<sup>3</sup> Morris is not afraid to experiment: his newer radio series Blue Jam is an hallucinatory mix of ambient music and bizarre set pieces run with a stream of consciousness/drugged narrative: a man with his eyes removed gets turned into a private art installation; he has sex on air using bizarre rude euphemisms; and he trades priority of news stories for food gifts.<sup>4</sup> Rather than dismantling the form, as he did with The Day Today and Brass Eye, he seems more concerned with dismantling the senses. Morris is fully prepared to take on the unexpected, the unusual and even the frightening. Blue Jam sounds like he has been locked in a room with performance group Forced Entertainment, a lot of proscribed chemicals and a compulsion to explode the late night radio mentality. “Morris describes the show as insomniac, monged and warmly grinning.”<sup>5</sup> Morris on the radio is the antithesis to Alan Partridge.

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<sup>2</sup> Blue Jam, Radio 1, 20/11/97.

<sup>3</sup> Brass Eye, Channel 4, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Blue Jam, Radio 1, November 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Time Out, 12/11/97. As this thesis is on stand-up comedy it is a shame to consign Morris to the footnotes. Morris’s background is in radio rather than stand-up, starting on Radio Cheltenham he moved to GLR and the BBC’s On The Hour before The Day Today and Brass Eye and his psychotic

Rory Bremner seems to be, with Mark Thomas, holding the burnt down candle of satire, as far as stand-up comedy is concerned. New Labour as much grist to his mill as the old Tories, his Rory Bremner, Who Else?<sup>6</sup> starts with a hyper stand-up blitz summary of the week's events, the watching of which charts the decline of New Labour's public respect, seemingly at the hands of the demon-meister, the much maligned Peter Mandelson. Although interspersed with sketches, computer generated graphics and seasoned satirists John Bird and John Fortune, Bremner's show really takes off in the monologues book-ending the programme. Rapid fire switching from voice to voice, leaving no gaps for breath, laughter or to marvel, Bremner's ranting run through the week is often a bizarre consummation of cricket, news and media sound bites.

Alternative comedy's legacy was in re-writing the comedy agenda to provide something of more substance, more politically or mentally challenging perhaps, to get rid of the old traditional joke hacks, update it, write their own material and bring it more in line with contemporary culture. But what was once subversive to the dominant traditional comedy is now, in stand-up at least, the predominant method of approach. It has been a dialectical process, often more of a wrestle, culminating the end of left/dogmatic comedy of the 1980s and the fading out of the dad-tradition to produce a more livelier, less hackneyed breed of comedians. It is easy to look back and criticise the 1980s approach - much was dry and easy Thatcher gags - but it was a necessary moment to make stand-up what it is now. As there is nothing more tedious than listening to a sanctimonious, middle class white boy whining anti-Thatcher jokes, there is nothing more tedious about listening to a sanctimonious middle class white boy whining about his penis.<sup>7</sup> Or daytime TV. Unchallenging comedy is unchallenging comedy, whatever the subject: Thatcher or masturbation. Too many comedians cover and re-cover the same territory in the same way. The

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Paxman-like anchor man.. He takes delight in the utilisation of studio trickery and tape techniques and Blue Jam sounds as if concocted in a home studio whilst 'tired and emotional'. He is an original.

<sup>6</sup> Rory Bremner, Who Else? Autumn, 1997, Channel 4.

<sup>7</sup> See note 1.

current 'lad' humour is as insubstantial as the 1980s alternatives: staid, predictable and repetitious. Epitomised in 1997 by the BBC's Men Behaving Badly, They Think It's All Over and Fantasy Football cheeky humour, lad comedy is essentially shallow and unadventurous. Its crassness tempered by irony, just, the lads - Lee Hurst, Frank Skinner and David Baddiel, et al - often sell themselves short with easy penis gags when their best humour comes from themselves as a target, and by extension many of us.<sup>8</sup>

The flavour of much stand-up on the circuit tends towards surrealism or casual observational humour as well as healthy doses of smut. Milton Jones, Dylan Moran, Izzard and Paul Merton live in the bizarre end of things; Richard Morton, Michael Smiley, Alan Davies, Jeff Green and Dominic Holland all have an easy going openness. There are many more women comedians on the circuit now experimenting with character and developing strong performance personae, such as Mandy Knight, Rhona Cameron, Donna McPhail, Helen Austin, Gina Ryan, Jo Enright, Linda Smith, Hattie Hayridge, Josie Lawrence, Brenda Gilhooley (AKA Gayle Tuesday), Gina Yashere and JoJo Smith, amongst others. It is an optimistic and fast moving scene with more variety in the bills than before.

Alternative comedy was a revolution in stand-up comedy. It certainly has not been the same since. It is unlikely that such a revolution would recur. It is not needed as stand-up is in fine fettle. Occasionally, catalysts spark off changes in comedy and highlight further possibilities: Sadowitz changed the expectations of the audience; Vic Reeves reinvested comedy with distant, twisted music hall; and Harry Hill and Eddie Izzard have presented remarkable and unique stand-up comedy peopled by the increasingly bizarre, occasionally spawning small imitators.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> 'Lad' humour, typified by David Baddiel, Lee Hurst, Nick Hancock, Frank Skinner et al, came from the stand-up scene and appears to be the star ascendant for television comedy at the moment. According to a BARB chart in The Sun, 14/11/97, They Think It's All Over got 13.17 million viewers and Men Behaving Badly 11.81 million in the week ending 11/11/97.

<sup>9</sup> The term 'Eddie-ing' is used for progressive procrastination in stand-up - "eh ... urr ... yeah ... anyway ... yes".

Stand-up comedy continues to be fascinating and dynamic because our behaviour and contemporary times, events and catastrophes, need putting into some kind of context where we can deal with them, where we can look or laugh at them. It is a live thing, constantly changing. Many comedians perform the same set night after night but it is the improvisations and fresh gags of the day that can keep it from sounding too stale. The Louise Woodwards, Princess Dianas, the Michael Jacksons and Hugh Grants are all fresh meat for an incisive comedian's wit. Sick certainly, funny definitely. But the comedian can say what we would not. It is the comedian's reaction to contemporary events and phenomena that keeps comedy live. And stand-up comedy is always better live. Film and television rarely capture those unique moments in stand-up that make being there so good and it is in these mediums lack that the argument to see stand-up comedy live becomes solid.

### **Filming Stand-up comedy.**

Much of the subversive comedy dealt with here - from The Goon Show through That Was The Week That Was, Monty Python's Flying Circus and Not The 9 O' Clock News - has existed in televisual or audial form. Alternative comedians mixed elements of this subversive strain back into a stand-up performance mode previously Monkoused or locked in Northern clubs and have found difficulty converting their acts back into a televised form. Stand-up comedy has often failed to translate out of the live context and stand-up comedy on television fails as television. Television has its own methods, its own interpretations and ways of representation. Stand-up comedy is a live experience that has difficulty transferring into this static, studio form: it appears awkward, out of place. Although difficult to transfer with any degree of success to this medium, given the chance, television presents comedians with an opportunity to experiment with form and expand inherent possibilities within their comedy.

In the television studio, there is a physical distance between audience and stand-up performer created by the technical demand of close-up camera work and lighting

(although often artificially disguised by a small array of tables). In the live stand-up comedy context empathy through proximity is generated, the comedians are 'reach out and touch them' close. The tables surround the comedy club stage (except in a larger theatre where there is a specific audience) and the comedians often have to walk through the audience to get to the performance space. It is purely psycho-geographical: physical closeness reflects a psychological closeness and it removes much of the alienation perhaps felt in the theatre or other live forms. Watching television, the tensions that drive comedy - the audience/performer contract, the heckling, the risk of failure - are edited out, smoothed by techno-trickery or simply dissipated by the medium. Stand-up comedy lives in the moment: it is suffused with tensions wholly lacking in much represented entertainment, in the cinema, video and television.

There have been successful attempts where comedians have moved beyond stand-up comedy into television. The Young Ones translated the energy and prevalent psychosis of early alternative comedy into a televisual context, fully aware that the elements on which it was based - Mayall and Edmondson's *Dangerous Brothers*, Nigel Planer's moaning hippy, Alexei Sayle's psycho-comedian - would be difficult to transplant straight onto the screen. A suitable context had to be developed which subsequently broadened the possibilities within both the medium and alternative comedy itself. Alexei Sayle also expanded these possibilities in his subsequent BBC series Stuff which took him further away from the limitations he had felt in stand-up comedy. The success of the Saturday Live series in the 1980s could be more down to content than format.

One of the most recent and few successful attempts to integrate straight stand-up comedy into a televisual context is the American programme Seinfeld, sporadically broadcast on BBC2. Here the main character is a stand-up comedian and his routines bookend, or bracket, the character action. The routines introduce the general theme of the otherwise rambling conversations and actions of the principle characters and

the convoluted (and ultimately pointless) plots of the programme. The stand-up comedy becomes a means to an end, invested with a purpose, and showcases the programme's ideas or subject matter. On British telly-firma, many of the more recent stand-up comedy programmes, cashing in on the thriving cabaret scene, have been hardly more imaginative than the 1970s The Comedians programme format with comedian after comedian performing before a studio audience, often with a limp pretext involved. No amount of retro-irony can reconstitute this cheap TV style despite the varying skills of the performers. Packet of Three and Packing Them In (both Channel 4), Paramount City (BBC2), The Mary Whitehouse Experience and subsequent Newman and Baddiel ventures (BBC2), The Stand-up Show and Planet Mirth (ITV), The Comedy Store and Comedy Network (Channel 5) and any other number of late night ventures have over time attempted to translate the tension and energy of live stand-up comedy to television with scant success. This appears to have less to do with the obvious talents of the comedians than the medium itself; they need to perform in a more suitable context. A stand-up comedian performing in front of a studio audience is often boring, bad television and symptomatic of cheap production. There have been some notable exceptions where the comedian seems to have maintained control over the production rather than being invited along to a studio gig to perform in front of a gratis audience without a drink or heckle in sight. The first series of Channel 4's The Jack Dee Show was filmed in an actual stand-up comedy club and worked better because of the low approach by the cameras, they were less intrusive.

Sean Hughes created his Sean's Show which, rather than performing a stand-up routine with the usual sketches, situated the comedian either in his front room or the pub and introduced the various odd characters through monologues.<sup>10</sup> Something of a cult success, Sean's Show and its attendant catch phrases, moved closer to sit-com territory minus the fourth wall, with Hughes semi-communicating with the audience. Hughes expanded his stage persona - the perpetual student miserabilist - and

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<sup>10</sup> Sean Hughes, 'Sean's Show', two Channel 4 series in the early 1990s.



invested more dimension to his micro-world and further explored his personal icons (Morrissey and various pop ephemera) and obsessions (inability to form a coherent relationship).

Mark Thomas and Jo Brand have both attempted a way round the problem of television. For the series The Mark Thomas Comedy Product he filmed stand-up material the day before broadcasting in an intimate, live stand-up comedy club.<sup>11</sup> The material remained topical which removed the 'routine' from much stand-up comedy where the comedian does the best of their well-rehearsed material for their televised five minutes. Thomas interspersed this material with variously subversive and amusing pranks: getting Members of Parliament to humiliate themselves in bizarre situations in front of the cameras, or kidnapping the Good News Bunny from L!VE TV (the most memorable, if only for the pointless absurdity). Thomas showed himself to be one of the few stand-up performers prepared to experiment in television. He is also one of the few stand-up satirists around with a keen gift for the absurd. Thomas expanded his Comedy Product format into a longer investigation into the conditionally exempt land and buildings scheme in Channel 4's Dispatches series in 1997.<sup>12</sup> His affable persona, his anger and irony temper the polemics (just). Jo Brand's Through The Cakehole series had mixed her caustic stand-up with often substandard sketches; pun laden drollery padded out the good bits, with the exception of The Drudge Squad, a Sweeney style spoof using housewives in the key roles.<sup>13</sup> Her later series, Like It Or Lump It fared less well and tried to revive a tired format.<sup>14</sup> This was filmed at different venues round the country and Brand would develop material based on local information which often amounted to rehashed jokes probably previously heard. The stand-up routines were recorded shortly before broadcasting and featured some topical material that gave the performance a fresher edge (despite the occasional anachronistic reference to "the Tories", late 1980s

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<sup>11</sup> Mark Thomas Comedy Product, Channel 4, 1996.

<sup>12</sup> Dispatches, Channel 4, 13/11/97.

<sup>13</sup> Jo Brand Through The Cakehole, Channel 4 1995.

<sup>14</sup> Like It Or Lump It, Channel 4, Autumn 1997.

habits die hard). The audience, although seated in theatre rows, were more responsive and Brand could talk to them better than the usual, moribund, studio audiences, remarkable only for their timidity. Perhaps due to camera presence however, few, quite reasonably, were prepared to risk the wrath of her bombast and many remained quiet. Most of us could probably live without the risk of ritual humiliation on national television. This series was marred by the inclusion of 'fly on the wall' style 'life on the road' scenes. This could have been more interesting if it had been genuine footage, Spinal Tap having had the final say in endless, pre-scripted on-tour jokes.

Frank Skinner also dabbled in a television series, Blue Heaven.<sup>15</sup> As a depressed out of work musician in Birmingham, he presented a grim vision of his grotesque family and a portrait of unsentimental inner-city bleakness. Kitchen sink comedy smut, ugly urbanity and unlikable characters almost conspired to make the series uncommercial. It was a bold move and one of the best things he has done. Using 'real' locations rather than studio shots, Skinner ambled through the series dispensing one liners and becoming ensnared in ridiculous schemes and daft scenarios. His stand-up work and Fantasy Football, amongst other things, have appeared to surpass this earlier work but he is no less a writer for that. The lack of a laugh track, its bleakness and obvious uncommercial angle has relegated Blue Heaven to unfortunately undeserved late night screenings.

The Harry Hill Show successfully realised the more bizarre elements of his previously imagined family who he had already been representing in his live act and his earlier BBC Radio series' Harry Hill's Fruit Corner.<sup>16</sup> Although he performed some of his stand-up material, it was not central to the series. His badger parade, Stoofah the cat, Finsbury Park, Little Alan, his adopted son, and Nana Hill characters all made an appearance. Hill's micro-world expanded into concrete form within

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<sup>15</sup> Blue Heaven, Channel 4, 1994.

<sup>16</sup> The Harry Hill Show, Channel 4, Summer 1997.

television and presented further possibilities limited by straight, solo stand-up performances.

The most successful transition from comedy club to television has, of course, been Vic Reeves and Bob Mortimer's various incarnations, from Vic Reeves Big Night Out to The Smell Of Reeves and Mortimer and the spoof quiz Shooting Stars. Perhaps this is because Reeves was always more cabaret than straight stand-up comedy. Although they started off in the back room of a pub in London's New Cross their humour - in jokes, funny voices, non-sequiturs, word play and absurdity - is less alternative and more updated music hall and tiresomely compared to a 'post-modern Morecambe and Wise' because Reeves has glasses and Mortimer is small. Reeves and Mortimer have received scant coverage in this thesis precisely because of this cabaret bent. They were always less interested in pure stand-up comedy than most. There is much play and improvisation, irony and idiocy side by side. The desire to be 'in' with their humour is strong. They are the closest to 'alternative comedy' superstars and remain lodged within the national comedy psyche, if only for their longevity and ubiquity.

The sterility of the television studio has none of the atmosphere of a comedy club where stand-up thrives in the drinking, smoking and audience interjecting ambiance. Watching television, the audience seem to be having a better time than we are (sometimes). Stand-up comedy is a process of involvement, from the audience coming into the environment, getting a beer from the bar, to them putting their coats on at the end and talking about the acts. Each comedy moment is unique, lived. It fails to be represented, the original experience cannot be repeated. As filmed, comedy becomes a static product, sliced away from the time it lived in. A video is the same video anywhere: it can sit on the shelf of the video shop or at remain unwatched under the sofa at home. It is a frozen moment and comedy is at its strongest when it presents us with moments now. Stand-up comedy's ephemerality is its greatest asset.

The beneficial side of filmed and televised stand-up comedy is of course its value as documentation. It may make bad television but a clip is worth several dry pages of reiterated dialogue. An argument for preserving rather than televising stand-up thus presents itself.

### **A Comedy Archive?**

This thesis has barely reached into the mid-1990s and uses scant stepping stones towards now. Stand-up comedy, moving as rapidly as it does, refutes cataloguing or frustrates the archivist's attempt at maintaining some kind of contemporaneousness. It has a rapid turnover. But this is not the point of the thesis: the identification of the stand-up comedian, the way s/he works and the dynamics of performance are examined in order to locate this subversive thread in British comedy in the post-war period. This subversive thread has constantly attacked the mundanity of everyday life, the bizarre social relations and political machinations of the day. It is to be celebrated. A rich, hilarious counter presence to those who would settle for an easy target, a quick myth or a half truth. Some of these comedians are household names and often respectable - The Goon Show, Hancock, the Monty Python team - and others are destined to obscurity, frustration or to divert into other forms of expression. What becomes clear is that this 'heritage of dissent' in comedy should be documented and it is deserving of more dynamic representation. There is an argument for a comedy archive. History is selective and depends on the bias of the historian. Historians document events but comedy documents reaction to those events. Jokes contain the information about how we feel. They can be moribund with mythology but this is still a reaction. Comedy works in relation to its times, it documents those times, can make us make sense of our own position within these times. If jokes are documented in some form and not in 'joke books', then so too must the counter presence be documented, the dissenting voices, the voices away from the dominant discourse and the ideological bent of the cultural historians.

This is subversive comedy uniquely British. This 'identity' is as changing as the comedy which would represent it. In examining changing comedy, not just the subversive thread but also the mainstream, we can map the development of the changing dimensions of culture and a development of identity. Hancock was uniquely English, but is not now. Monty Python's Flying Circus was uniquely English identifying with a privileged public school and university educated demographic. Times have changed. The alternative comedians grew from a political malaise of the late 1970s and from all the social and cultural ructions that came from that. The comedians of today are documenting today. A comedy archive could easily be realised on CD ROM but this rich heritage is deserving of much more. As pop music acknowledges its own history so, too, can comedy acknowledge and be acknowledged. It would be certainly useful to researchers but also to preserve that heritage and put contemporary stand-up into historical context. The archive of comedy footage, filmed or taped, could never replicate the moment but it could preserve its echo. Just as British theatre can so often be at the centre of international excellence, so too can its poorer cousin, limping solo some way behind, be deserving of such accolades, if only on a national level.

### **And Finally ...**

Stand-up comedy need not remain densely national, of course, and there are hopeful signs of comedy crossovers, not just the usual American and British exchange. It is this that can crack open the insularity and parochiality within much of the comedy scene. Billy Connolly, Eddie Izzard, Donna McPhail and Nick Wilty have all been taking stand-up comedy out of London and into the wider world. Comedy depends on shared reference and so many comedians rarely move above referencing day time TV repeats of 1970 children's programmes, shopping with girlfriends, late night garage escapades and similar. There is a more global reference framework developing. As the 'free market' (free is you can afford it) expands globally, as satellites link up our daily diet of video verbiage and as the availability of commodities defines the First World from the Third World rather than country and

*Caps.*

country, references and experiences become more common, for good or bad. Stand-up comedy can tap into this shared framework, as Izzard has demonstrated, and can transcend the language barrier to provide a different way of looking at our place in the world, different from the role of placid consumer. Communication possibilities expand beyond the dominant discourse.<sup>17</sup> Izzard performing in French in Paris and in Iceland and Scandinavia almost makes mockery of this limited shared reference idea; the framework is broader than we are prepared to think. Donna McPhail has performed in Holland, Germany, Australia and Hong Kong; the Dutch and Germans appreciating the comedy in markedly differing ways.<sup>18</sup> Some European countries being multi-lingual, and English dominating more and more global media, means that stand-up comedy can speak to a far wider audience, as long as some of the reference points tally. Sean Hughes would disagree, however. Having performed in Reykjavik to a degree of non-acclaim he says:

“that was a very odd festival indeed ...their idea of comedy seems to be rather different from ours.”

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Arthur Smith, who performed at a festival in Denmark, may side with Hughes. In a small article in The Guardian Smith detailed a bizarre escapade, on the same bill as US soft metal act Van Halen, where several Swedish suicide gags died before him and it took four nights to get the audience on his side, a rarity for a performer so skilled and likable.<sup>20</sup> However, there are signs that this comedy exchange is working both ways. Although stand-up comedy has grown and defined itself in relation to American and British culture, London has been the recent recipient of both Japanese and South African comedians. Isse Ogata is not Japan's only standup comedian, but he is the one of the only ones that attacks Japanese institutions and sense of national psyche. Eschewing the traditional comedian role from theatre history, Ogata performs solo in various guises and “reveals how ordinary people survive the

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<sup>17</sup> There is an enormous amount of websites and trans-global exchanges on comedy on the Internet.

<sup>18</sup> Donna McPhail, Loose Ends, Radio 4, 8/10/97.

<sup>19</sup> Sean Hughes, Time Out, 30/10/96.

<sup>20</sup> Arthur Smith, The Guardian, 10/7/95.

bombardment of daily humiliations.”<sup>21</sup> This appears to be standard fare in Britain but not so in a Japanese performance context.<sup>22</sup> Although he performed in Japanese there was a simultaneous translation in headphones and much of the comedy was physical. Similarly, South African comedian Pieter-Dirk Uys performed his anti-Apartheid You ANC Nothing Yet at the Tricycle Theatre, London in June, 1995. This show was also televised. Although to some degree obscure, Uys’s one man satire was supported by a couple of frocks and props but was mainly monologue. It was both honest and compassionate and documented socio-political changes of world altering proportion through an hour of impressions and one liners:

“I’m not going to humiliate him [Mandela] - his wife does that all the time.”<sup>23</sup>

Performing under apartheid, Uys was infinitely more subversive than any alternative gag about Thatcher’s handbag.

Connolly and Wilty, touring the English speaking reaches of the world, further demonstrate the move to an internationalism in comedy. Connolly has performed widely in America and Australia and Wilty has performed in Hong Kong, Australia, New Zealand, Hawaii, Nova Scotia and America, amongst many other places.<sup>24</sup> This does not work for all comedians. Put Bernard Manning in New York or Richard Pryor in Devon to dissolve this idea. But they are specialists covering their own identities (polar opposites though they may be) and they relate to specific local or political difference rather than universal commonalities. This global comedy communication is achievable through a willingness to engage, a fertile imagination and an awareness of difference as well as similarity. This is one of the possible futures for stand-up comedy.

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<sup>21</sup> Joanna Coles, The Guardian, 11/10/95.

<sup>22</sup> Ogate performed at The Lyric, Hammersmith 10/95.

<sup>23</sup> Pieter-Dirk Uys quoted in Observer, 4/6/95.

<sup>24</sup> Nick Wilty interview, Time Out, 8/1/97.

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