

THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMIC STAGE PERSONA (CSP)
IN STAND-UP COMEDY:
AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO AN INTERSUBJECTIVE
PERFORMANCE PHENOMENON

EDWARD DAVID NAESSENS

BA, MPhil (TCD)

A THESIS SUBMITTED FOR DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

THE SCHOOL OF CREATIVE ARTS

THE UNIVERSITY OF DUBLIN, TRINITY COLLEGE

2018

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university and it is entirely my own work.

I agree to deposit this thesis in the University's open access institutional repository or allow the library to do so on my behalf, subject to Irish Copyright Legislation and Trinity College Library conditions of use and acknowledgement.

Signed:

Edward David Naessens

Date:

SUMMARY

Given the multifaceted nature of the thesis subject (the formation of comic stage persona in stand-up comedy), the methodological approach taken sets out a circumstantial case for comic stage persona (CSP) formation through the multiple lenses of performance studies, sociology, psychology, humour studies, and cognitive science. This interdisciplinary approach captures and confirms the viability of the concept of CSP and establishes a matrix of coherence and compatibility. Under the umbrella of Daniel Dennett's Heterophenomenological approach, first-person and theoretical accounts provide support for the central claim that the professional comedian's CSP is formed through iterative processes and by engaging with the environment of stand-up comedy. It is this bridging of subjective folk theory and objective models that ensures the thesis is well-located in the intersubjective space between subjective/objective and folk/scientific accounts of the phenomena under research.

The strength of this approach is demonstrated in how it provides a solution to problems in humour studies. It shows that comic timing is not simply a chronological phenomenon—as suggested by humour researchers—rather, it is better understood as a process of empathically weighing up the right moment in a humour transaction. By taking as seriously as possible what practitioners have to say about their craft, judiciously unpacking their views and insights, and investigating linkages through the multiple lenses set out, the thesis achieves a synthesis between subjective and objective accounts of stand-up comedy that advances current knowledge and understanding.

Via critical analysis of compatible accounts of stand-up comedy performance, chapter 3 identifies the most relevant activity for CSP as the predominantly unscripted, dynamic interactions and adjustment between performer and audience. It is shown that comedians tack and adjust in response to an array of feedback from their audience. Further evidence for such adjustment and persona formation are found in discussions of craft in how-to

literature and interviews. At the core of CSP formation is the accumulation by comedian of audience-interaction-intelligence (AII), a model of intuitive learning through practice and observation.

Having established the concept of CSP as what emerges through AII—iterative live interaction, engagement, and mentalization of humour performance—the concept is subsequently grounded in the cognitive account of humour set out by Hurley et al. (*Inside Jokes*). A link is also established to Bruce McConachie’s cognitive account of spectatorship that supports the case that the formation of CSP can be considered as a fundamentally empathic process whereby the comedian observes and engages with audiences. Through repeated iterations the comedian formulates an effective CSP. This final stage of critical analysis establishes a through-line of compatibility that connects CSP with folk theory, sociological, psychological, and cognitive accounts of stand-up comedy. The final chapter brings together the findings of the thesis by showing the explanatory power of CSP in interviews and analysis. The thesis can therefore claim to be unifying, interdisciplinary, and novel in its explanatory power.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to: my thesis supervisor Dr Eric Weitz for his professionalism and encouragement throughout the Ph.D. process, external examiner Dr Gil Greengross whose outstanding knowledge of psychology and humour studies has been of enormous benefit, internal examiner Dr Nicholas Johnson whose knowledge of performance studies and eye for detail have improved the final draft, and the staff and faculty members at the School of Creative Arts—in particular Dr Melissa Sihra and Dr Ruth Barton—who provided advice and support.

Special thanks are also due to Dr Bernie Grummell (NUI Maynooth) who read several drafts and generously provided prompt and exceptional feedback, Prof David Berman (Department of Philosophy, Trinity College Dublin) for his encouragement and support, Dr Oliver Double who took the time to discuss early versions of the thesis, Prof Rod Martin who generously elucidated on his research findings in the psychology of humour, and the many members of the International Society of Humor Studies who provided valuable feedback during conference sessions at both Boston University and Utrecht University.

This thesis was inspired by my years as a stand-up comedian. I have been fortunate to have met and worked within a community of highly-gifted, immensely funny, intelligent, and collegiate individuals. For generous access to live comedy events I am deeply grateful to Bren Berry and staff at Aiken promotions and Vicar Street. The crew at the International Comedy Club and Tony Ferns at The Battle of the Axe have been a constant support. Special thanks to Stewart Lee for agreeing to be interviewed despite a tight schedule, and to Tara Flynn for helping with arrangements.

Special thanks to my sons Philip and David for forcing me to explain my thesis to six-year-olds (Feynman and Einstein would be most impressed). And finally, thanks to Eva who knew when I was doing housework I was in fact avoiding work on this thesis.

Table of Contents

DECLARATION	III
SUMMARY	V
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	VII
CHAPTER 1 - SHINING LIGHT ON DARK ROOMS.....	1
INTRODUCTION.....	1
APPROACH	4
PERFORMER-AUDIENCE DYNAMIC <i>IN SITU</i>	11
BEGINNERS AND THE DEVELOPMENT ENVIRONMENT	17
CENTRAL PROBLEMS.....	22
PROBLEM OF PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS.....	26
A COGNITIVE APPROACH TO CSP AND INTERACTION	31
LICENCE AND PERSONA.....	39
CONCLUSION.....	41
CHAPTER 2 - MIND THE GAP FROM PAGE TO STAGE	43
INTRODUCTION.....	43
LOUIS CK, BEACON THEATRE 2011.....	45
THE GENERAL THEORY OF VERBAL HUMOR	50
NONCASUAL LANGUAGE.....	54
SCRIPT OPPOSITION IN STAND-UP COMEDY	61
LEVELS OF SCRIPT OPPOSITION.....	63
ATTARDO'S 5-LEVEL MODEL	64
ACTUAL JOKE PRODUCTION	66
ELLIOTT ORING, SCRIPT OPPOSITION AND TARGET.....	68
IN HUMOUR, EXCEPTION MAY BE THE RULE	72
PROFESSIONAL VS NON-PROFESSIONAL JOKE TELLERS.....	75
RASKIN'S CSP	81
CONCLUSION.....	84

CHAPTER 3 – CSP AS SOCIAL INTERACTION	89
INTRODUCTION.....	89
RUTTER AND AUDIENCE	92
AUDIENCE AS DYNAMIC ENVIRONMENT	97
ACCEPTABILITY OF HUMOUR AND THE INTERACTIONAL CONTEXT	100
<i>KAIROS</i> , TIMING, AND RHETORICAL CRAFT	103
“YOU AS GOOD AS MURDERED ROBIN WILLIAMS!”	108
LIVE AND DYNAMIC COMIC INTIMACY.....	112
FOLK THEORY AND COMIC INSIGHTS	116
MATERIAL/PERSONA SPECTRUM	123
SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY APPROACH TO CSP	128
CONCLUSION	131
CHAPTER 4 – FROM PROCESS TO PERSONA	135
INTRODUCTION.....	135
HUNTERS, NAÏVE SCIENTISTS, AND TACIT KNOWLEDGE.....	136
HETEROPHENOMENOLOGY EXPLAINED.....	140
EXAMINING THE PROCESS OF CSP	142
LAUGH OUT LOUD, TEMPLE HILL CDP, MARYLAND	146
INSIDE JOKES AS COGNITIVE MAP FOR CSP	151
MENTAL SPACES AND THE MECHANISM OF HUMOUR.....	157
A MODEL FOR COMIC TIMING	160
ASSUMPTIONS, ACTIVE BELIEFS, AND ACQUIRED DISPOSITIONS.....	161
IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATION TO STAND-UP COMEDY	162
SUBJECTIVE/OBJECT: DICHOTOMY AND INTEGRATION	163
NEGATIVE VALENCE, HUMOUR, AND CSP.....	166
CSP: COMEDY, TRAGEDY, AND PERSPECTIVE.....	171
CONNOLLY, BOORSTIN, BEGLEY – COMEDY AND PERSPECTIVE.....	173
THE INTENTIONAL STANCE AND STAND-UP COMEDY	176
SARAH SILVERMAN NANA	181
CONCLUSION	187
CHAPTER 5 – A SENSE OF CSP	189
INTRODUCTION.....	189
CSP: JOKES, PERFORMANCE, AND SPECTATORSHIP.....	192

SILVERMAN, PERSONA, AND CHARISMA	197
JACK DEE CSP	202
CARLIN AND CSP AS PSYCHOSOCIAL RESPONSE.....	204
CASE STUDY: STEWART LEE	208
CARPET REMNANT WORLD, LYCEUM THEATRE.....	212
AWARENESS AND ORIENTATION.....	216
CSP AND AUDIENCE-INTERACTION-INTELLIGENCE.....	221
CONCLUSION.....	222
THESIS CONCLUSION.....	225
LOCATION OF THESIS AND POTENTIAL APPLICATION	230
APPENDIX	235
INTERVIEW: STEWART LEE	235
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	264

CHAPTER 1 - SHINING LIGHT ON DARK ROOMS

And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong!¹

The Blind Men and the Elephant, John Godfrey Saxe

INTRODUCTION

Comedians learn how and who to be on stage. Writing and performing stand-up comedy entails complex social and professional challenges. Sensibly, comedians are keenly aware that the price of failure is humiliation. In social terms the stakes are high. In professional terms the stakes are perhaps higher. Club bookers, emcees, and fellow comedians must maintain standards if their clubs are to continue to attract new and returning audiences. Facing the challenges of performing, stand-up comedians must consider crowd management and engagement, appropriateness of material, delivery style, the nature of stand-up comedy audiences, the work of comedy exemplars and peers, skills and techniques, rhetorical structures of performed humour as opposed to other forms of humour, and a myriad of elements relating to sociocultural milieu and group humour.

This thesis describes CSP (comic stage persona) as an emergent and adaptive phenomenon that comes about as a result of the multiple processes of learning, communication, and expression involved in stand-up comedy. CSP is an emergent phenomenon in that it has many constituent elements and processes such as mannerisms, facial expressions, and the elements on associates with identity, character, and personality. It is not just one quality but a range of qualities. While

¹ 'The Blind Men and the Elephant' by John Godfrey Saxe, in Martin Gardner, *Best Remembered Poems* (New York: Dover ; London : Constable, 1992), 150.

the use of “adaptive” within the thesis refers strictly to the comedian’s capacity to weigh up performance situations and their given social milieu and to respond flexibly, augment performances, and improvise in a way that maximises humorous engagement with audiences. This capacity to adapt both within performances, from show to show, and over longer periods of a career, makes it possible for a comedian to improve in terms of greater audience engagement and response.

As will be shown, stand-up comedy is live and dynamic, the comedian must be prepared to respond flexibly to performance situations. Bearing this in mind, a useful starting point to understand CSP is the fact that sharing a joke or a humorous tale among intimates is generally distinct from performing stand-up comedy. While there is a degree of overlap between these two scenarios, the elements of difference are telling. In the former case the audience and the performer are known to each other, while in the latter, the performer must establish some form of relationship with audience(s). Both scenarios involve types of CSPs; the former is an amateur CSP, while the latter is a professional CSP. It is the latter that is central to this thesis.

The thesis describes the transition from amateur to professional CSP by firstly problematizing the differences between being “funny” offstage, to being a professional stand-up comedian consistently relating to and engaging audiences of strangers. What is described, therefore, is the highly challenging terrain of professional stand-up comedy and the transformations required to negotiate such terrain. Novice stand-up comedians must introduce themselves, break the ice, and quickly provide background to audiences of strangers. In this sense, performing stand-up comedy forces comedians to appraise the factors of introduction and autobiography in a rapidly digestible way. They must learn the form of the practice and modify their amateur CSP to a professional CSP that handles the demands of presenting themselves to audiences and the vagaries of live performance. Inevitably such preparation entails thinking into the minds of audiences and weighing up plans and fall-back positions. The novice comedian may consider a variation of the following types of questions:

- “What’s the crowd like at this venue?”
- “What will I say about myself to break the ice and make the audience laugh?”
- “How will I tell this story in a way that the audience will get all the necessary details to make sense of the punchline(s)?”
- “How do I phrase this true-life or fictional event/idea and its constituent details in such a way that it will be relatable and funny for an audience?”
- “What are the audience likely to notice about me?”
- “How do I present myself in a way that will maximise engagement and humour with this particular audience, at this particular event?”

The key to understanding CSP and the workings of stand-up comedy is to consider the challenges faced as understood by stand-up comedians, and the type of augmentation, adaptations, and solutions that can reasonably be expected in the face of such challenges. Comedians prepare with audiences in mind. In reflecting on such questions comedians begin the process of presenting a version of themselves to rooms of strangers with the clear aim of establishing a playful/entertaining relationship that maximises the chances of laughter. And, with experience, they come to know that comedy gigs can be fraught with demands, challenges, and obstacles that are hard to anticipate. The journey of the novice over time involves observing the form of the craft through writing, performing, processing audience feedback, handling interruptions and obstacles, and observing how peers and exemplars meet the challenges of the craft. In turn, the form and challenges of the craft influence how comedians present themselves and their material. Therefore, to meet the challenges of performing stand-up comedy, comedians develop a set of strategies and responses that give rise to the emergent phenomenon of CSP—a persona that optimises humour engagement and performance.

CSP is therefore adaptive to audience response, rhetorical structures, humour structure, sociocultural milieu, exemplars, and comic archetypes. In this sense, on-stage/off-stage distinctions are important. On-stage can be taken to mean: “I’m

presenting with intention.” In stand-up comedy, the premise of on-stage is the intention to be playful, entertaining, and to engage in laughter. The self-presentation is therefore a character-like construct. Deadpan, rude, anti-social, and scatological behaviour that might be unwelcome in an off-stage setting is acceptable in the context of a performer/audience agreement. Dyspeptic comments and bizarre remarks are taken as play with the intention to entertain, and not rudeness or signs of deranged behaviour. Comedians intuitively formulate CSP based within a web of tacitly understood agreements and understandings of what such on-stage and audience agreements entail.

APPROACH

Via a critical analysis of research literature, humour theories, and first-person and third-person accounts of stand-up comedy and humour, the thesis identifies the need to bridge folk accounts to scientific method. The thesis appraises current approaches to humour and stand-up comedy, identifies conceptual difficulties and germane lines of discovery, and proposes remedies via NIGHTS (a Notionally Integrated General Humour Theory of Stand-up Comedy). The key claim of NIGHTS is that the performance of stand-up comedy begins as an intentioned process. An individual (stand-up comedian) must reflect on the challenges inherent in presenting in front of an audience as a professional stand-up comedian. The performance situation is varied by a myriad of factors as set out in NIGHTS. The individual (writer/performer) via conscious and unconscious processes weighs up the situation and begins the process of formulating a comic stage persona (CSP). This process will be shown to be an environmentally adaptive phenomenon. It describes stand-up comedians as humour writers, performers, and socio-cultural savants who—through multiple audience interactions—evolve personae as adaptive, strategic phenomena. It provides an alternative to views—set out below—that comedians are ‘themselves’ on stage. The theory of CSP is therefore contained within NIGHTS (a Notionally Integrated General Humour Theory of Stand-up Comedy). CSP is therefore examined as an emergent phenomenon.

The theoretical framework employed is a multi-disciplinary matrix under the umbrella of Daniel Dennett’s Heterophenomenological approach to the study of consciousness. Given that any meaningful investigation of CSP and humour entails

studying first-person subjective reporting, Dennett's Heterophenomenological approach provides a strategy that accommodates first-person subjective accounts within a third-person objective framework. This approach allows for engagement with first-person reports of stand-up comedy from comedians, coaches, spectators, and critics, without privileging such reports. In this way the thesis aims to bridge first-person accounts (folk theory) and scientific approaches to performance. The aim of the thesis is to engage with subjective accounts, unpack concepts (identifying compatibilities and conflicting concepts and definitions), and analyse stand-up comedy and the development of CSP in a way that is amenable to psychology and cognitive science.

The thesis looks at stand-up comedy from multiple perspectives, hence creating an interdisciplinary approach that captures the concept of CSP across performance and humour studies, sociology, personality psychology, and cognitive science. The approach incorporates Erving Goffman's account of social interaction as both performative and adaptive in quality—as set out in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Another perspective examines stand-up comedy and the objective of comedians via a cognitive science approach to humour set out by Matthew Hurley, Daniel Dennett, and Reginald Adams (hereafter referred to as: Hurley et al.) in their 2011 book *Inside Jokes*. The authors describe their approach as a half-way house via philosophy, cognitive science, and neuroscience. As such, this approach establishes an interdisciplinary space that conceptually bridges first-person practitioner accounts (folk theory) and scientific account of phenomena related to humour production and performance.

Other perspectives engaged by the framework include compatible sources in performance studies, humour studies, and personality development. For example, describing how comedians form personae as adaptive strategies to engage audiences, the case is made that reflection on audience responses is central to the comedian's process of development and ultimately the formation of a professional CSP. Such reflection involves a schema of beliefs and interpretations about the world of stand-up comedy (a world inhabited by such concepts as audience feedback, joke structure, relatable topics, sociocultural life, professional exemplars/comedians, and industry professionals). Such reflections therefore generate a worldview that informs the comedian's responses to the world of stand-

up comedy. This suggests a model of reflection, constructing a worldview, and constructing/adapting effective responses. This account of CSP formation finds compatibility with the model of Personal Construct Theory developed by American psychologist George Kelly. Though set out as a psychotherapeutic model, Kelly's construct theory of personality—with its analogy of man as naïve scientist—provides an analogous model for CSP as an adaptive, hypothesis-driven exploration of environment. The model is compatible with the elements of trial-and-error synonymous with the process of stand-up comedy, and is also compatible with the cognitive science concept Theory of Mind (ToM).

A second psychological, relevant, and compatible account of personality is American psychologist's Walter Mischel's description of *Situationism*. Mischel—a student of George Kelly—highlights the role of context and situation in understanding personality and behaviour. Originally put forward in his 1968 book *Personality and Assessment* Mischel's approach challenges the blanket application of trait theories, suggesting that principles of socialisation and the modification of behaviour according to variation in situations need to be accommodated within personality theories. Mischel's claim that '[P]rogress in the area of personality psychology and assessment has been hindered by the failure to apply relevant principles about the conditions that produce, maintain, and modify social behavior'² can well map on to the problem of attempting to describe stand-up comedy in terms of joke structure while ignoring the complex sociocultural aspects of performance. This use of Situationism is a qualified usage that only applies to the adaptability of CSP. CSP is not personality. Rather, CSP is dominantly borne of handling the performance of humour and presenting a self that is optimised for stand-up comedy. Such a qualified usage of Mischel's concept avoids the pernicious contradictions of hard Situationism that refute trait theories. This theory of CSP in no way refutes or contradicts trait theory.

Finally, from within the multi-disciplinary area of humour studies, the work of key researchers who have closely analysed stand-up comedy—Andrea Greenbaum (ethnographic account), psychologists Fabiola Scarpetta and Anna Spagnolli, clinical and evolutionary psychologists Gil Greengross and Geoffrey

² Walter Mischel, *Personality and Assessment* (New York, etc.: John Wiley & Sons, 1968), 1.

Miller, and interactional sociologist Jason Rutter—provides corroborating support for claims set forth in the thesis that the emergent phenomena of CSP is as a response to the psychosocial exigencies of engaging live audiences in humour. Therefore, an overview of the framework runs as follows: under the umbrella of Dennett's Heterophenomenological approach, CSP—set within NIGHTS—is established as a construct that describes the process of the stand-up comedian as writer and performer of humour within a sociocultural situation. Viewing the comedians process via multi-perspectival approaches makes it possible to grasp CSP as an adaptive phenomenon. The approach integrates folk and scientific accounts and therefore allows for cross-disciplinary verification of the concept of CSP.

The comedian's empathic skills—capacity to read performance situations, and capacity to develop the intuitive knowledge and skills to play such situations—is the *sine qua non* of stand-up comedy. The conceptual framework therefore describes the development of the stand-up comedian's socio-cultural and linguistic ability to negotiate audience interactions and evolve a stage persona that effectively supports this process.

Based on an understanding of personality as partially adaptive, partially inherited, this thesis describes how comedians evolve stage personae through an iterative process of writing, rehearsing, performance, response analysis and reflection concomitant with observation of fellow performers and exemplars. In this iterative model, novice comedians tacitly form a mental concept of what works/doesn't work for them in terms of topics and material, attitudes and demeanour, body language, and audience types. These realisations in turn inform how comedians write and present themselves and their material. It involves tacit knowledge, instinct, awareness, an understanding of self, humour-style, how one is perceived, and a generalised range of sensitivities necessary for engaging with the comedian's milieu.

The environmental-adaptive approach employed aims to capture the essence of stand-up comedy as intuitive response by the comedian to an environment where the comedian must elicit laughter. The intuitive response to this environment can be broadly considered as involving a 'reading of' or 'feel for' human environments. The literary theorist Lisa Zunshine—who, like McConachie,

draws on cognitive approaches—explains how human environment as articulated in theory of mind (ToM) reformulates our understanding of communications, behaviour, and performance. In her book *Getting Inside Your Head*, she sets out the explanatory power of a ToM in the cognitive approach as follows:

Studies in theory of mind suggest a new way of understanding what constitutes our human environment. Usually, the word *environment* brings to mind trees, air, water, roads, houses, and such. If we remember, however that the human species is foremost a *social* species—that is, our need and ability to communicate with others underlies every aspect of our existence—we realise that our environment can also be defined as other minds.³

Based on the hypothesis that persona is an adaptive phenomenon within an environment, it is reasonable to extend the hypothesis to stage persona. This implies, therefore, that stand-up comedians in writing, rehearsing, and performing jokes proceed with a generalised concept of audience in mind. This notion of keeping the audience in mind is both conscious and intuitive/unconscious. Given the importance of this adaptive process in the development of stage persona, the thesis shows links between persona and personality development to stage persona in stand-up comedy. Drawing on the accounts of personality presented by such theorists as George Kelly and Walter Mischel, CSP is explained as an adaptive response to perceived environmental demands. This approach aims to place stage persona formation within a social-interactive account of audience engagement. As the thesis conceptualizes stand-up comedy as a socially-interactive performance genre, and the aim throughout is interdisciplinary compatibility, the work of Erving Goffman provides a useful account from the field of sociology on the performance of self.

In the *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman sets out as follows:

³ Lisa Zunshine, *Getting inside Your Head : What Cognitive Science Can Tell Us About Popular Culture* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 2.

I shall consider the ways in which the individual in ordinary work situations presents himself and his activity to others, the ways in which he guides and controls the impression they form of him, and the kind of things he may and may not do while sustaining his performance before them.⁴

What Goffman proposes could be read to mean that the individual consciously presents and attempts to guide and control impressions. However, Goffman does not stipulate here whether the individual consciously or unconsciously presents himself and his activity, or consciously guides and controls impressions. Goffman's account is purely descriptive, and leaves open the attribution of conscious and/or unconscious behaviour. The reason I bring this up here is to avoid confusion that may arise from attributing conscious agency, when in fact a behaviour may well be partially or wholly unconscious. A cognitive account of performance must accommodate a mix of conscious and unconscious utterances and actions. Keeping in mind the idea of conscious and unconscious action, it is essential to accommodate for the complex and problematic relationship between behaviour, utterance, and response.

In a stand-up comedy performance not all actions are intended, not all utterances are prepared, and not all laughter occurs as expected by the comedian. As I will show later in this chapter when analysing a section from a routine by Eddie Izzard, it can be difficult to glean from the transcript where the laughs 'ought' to be. Therefore, a probabilistic analysis of the text and performance is required to suggest rather than definitively declare the most plausible account of how the comedian is weighing up the audience's response to the performance, and how the comedian adapts his performance to audience feedback. A safe assumption is the stand-up comedian is to elicit laughter. The extent to which his presentation of self to the audience is consciously or unconsciously performed to achieve that end is open to debate. To what extent laughter comes about through the intended utterance and behaviour of the comedian is not always as clear-cut as it might seem.

Neuroscientist Robert Provine's research suggests laughter can be both natural and reactive, or 'put on' and active, or a mix of both. He sets out a

⁴ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, A Pelican Book (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), preface.

distinction between laughter and humour, underscoring the idea that laughter does not require what could be readily considered humour. Describing how laughter is often used as a form of social bonding and is not necessarily triggered by humour per se, he provides evidential support for his claim that laughter works as a kind of social lubricant, helping the smooth running of social interactions.⁵ A seemingly trivial remark may raise a laugh in performance but look non-humorous on the page. Accounting for the unquantifiable between humour on the page, humour on the stage, and audience response, is part of the central mystery that this thesis attempts to address. Stand-up comedy by definition is performed. Accounting for what the performer brings to the text to elicit laughter, how stand-up comedy functions as humour transaction, and the extent to which stand-up comedy is a social transaction between comedians and audiences, requires a focus on the performance of humour and the role of persona in such performances. The significance of Provine's claims must not be underestimated in relation to the performance of humour and the centrality of CSP.

Combining both Goffman's notion of guiding and controlling impressions and Provine's claim that a great deal of social laughter is not linked to discernible humour in the transcript, it is possible to consider that through presenting themselves in a comedic frame, comedians key the audience to detect humorous intent in their actions and utterances. The audience therefore laughs both at clear punchlines and engages in the types of laughter Provine suggest as forms of social bonding. This could certainly help explain, partially at least, the difficulty of detecting audience laughter from reading a transcript alone, as mentioned earlier.

While agreeing with Provine's questioning the assumed link between humour and laughter, Matthew Hurley, Daniel Dennett, and Reginald Adams (Hurley et al.) in their book *Inside Jokes*, point to the relationship between thought and speech as primarily social. In addressing Provine's point they say the following:

⁵ Robert R. Provine, *Laughter : A Scientific Investigation* (London: Faber, 2000), 40.

... laughter and humour are clearly not disconnected phenomena. We want to pursue a somewhat different claim: the relation between humour and laughter has some similarity to the relation between thought and speech. Thoughts ‘happen in the mind,’ but their expression in speech acts is usually indirect, monitored, and often censored [...] Laughter, like speech, must be understood as a social phenomenon, not just a feature of individual psychology and physiology, though it evolved physiological basis is very important.⁶

Hurley et al. provide both a ToM and a theory of humour that supports the socio-dynamic elements of the thesis I set out here, and is compatible with the cognitive approach to theatre engagement set out by McConachie, Kemp, and scholarly contributions from theatre, performance, and humour studies.

PERFORMER-AUDIENCE DYNAMIC *IN SITU*

Given what has been discussed so far, it should not be surprising that those academic researchers who have engaged with practitioner accounts (folk theory) provide insightful ideas on performer-audience interplay. While text and various modes of recording clearly have a role in research, their primary limitation in terms of this thesis is that they generally present the polished end product, devoid of the essential glimpses of how audience interaction impacts upon performances and in turn the development of comic stage personae and shows.

Such audience interactions that play a vital part in the development of stand-up comedians are rarely if ever available in the text or recordings, as microphones and cameras cannot capture a sea of faces moment-to-moment, the seemingly innocuous sensory details—clinking glasses, noise leaking in from outside, movement, sneezes, equipment, and all manner of attention-straining distractions—accessible only to the live audience, the dynamic atmosphere and ‘feel’ of the event, or the nuances of multiple samples of laughter. And rarely do tightly edited recorded shows include those segues into one-on-one conversations or impromptu interactions with individual members of audiences that occur regularly at live gigs.

Jason Rutter, a sociologist whose research focuses on the *in situ* interactive elements of stand-up comedy, discusses the centrality of interaction in the moment-to-moment framing of stand-up comedy shows. It is his particular focus

⁶ Matthew M. Hurley, Daniel Clement Dennett, and Reginald B. Adams, *Inside Jokes : Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011), 19.

on the work of the emcee that affords a clearer vision of the performative-interactive dynamics involved in live stand-up comedy. Emcees, in almost all circumstances, are stand-up comedians. However, in the role of emcee the general implicit agreement is that he or she works to facilitate the smooth running of a show in terms of establishing ground rules, breaking the ice, 'warming up the room', performing comedy, and structuring a supportive environment for the acts coming on stage. While they may use material from their repertoire, their generally understood priority is to serve the show and the acts.

In the role of the emcee, therefore, the stand-up comedian is less focussed on his or her own material, and more focussed on engaging the audience and providing a macro-frame for the overall event. For this reason Rutter's work provides valuable insight into the centrality of engagement and performance in humour. In a general sense the emcee is a stand-up comedian, with less focus on material in favour of a more interactive and audience-engaging objective. Rutter makes the case that the framing provided for humorous text by the performative-interactive is often overlooked in the literature. He says:

Theorists and researchers (most influentially Raskin, 1985) have concentrated on how to understand the joke as a text that has a variety of canonical structures to which the hearers respond in an unproblematic and systematic manner. Humour research has tended to focus on finding 'structures of humour' at the expense of analysing how a joking frame is established and how interactional involvement between joker and audience is developed. With rare exceptions (such as Norrick, 1993) humour research has ignored the interactive foundations of joke telling by professional comedians.⁷

Rutter describes how the framing provided by the comedy emcee plays an essential role in club comedy shows. He identifies a set of common patterns that enhance the audience/performer interaction, where the emcee in an affable and friendly manner sets down the ground rules and in so doing establishes a joking frame for interactional involvement between joker and audience. This sequence, as described by Rutter, has the two-fold effect of:

⁷ Jason Rutter, "The Stand-up Introduction Sequence: Comparing Comedy Compères," *Journal of Pragmatics* 4, no. 32 (2000): 463-4.

1. Breaking the ice for, and giving support to, the comedian as he or she takes to the stage
2. Providing assurance to the audience that the act they are about to see is of a certain standard and standing within the circuit.

This kind of research also illuminates the foundational elements of the development environment. With few exceptions, comedy clubs are the *de facto* training grounds for stand-up comedians. The clubs—as constituted of audiences, other comedians, and emcees—represent and provide a socio-linguistic structure that to varying degrees guides the novice and experienced comedian alike in terms of rhetorical technique, joke structure, and an array of strategies for engaging audiences.

Picking up on the themes of the interactional context of jokes and humour, psychologists Fabiola Scarpetta and Anna Spagnolli describe the rhetorical techniques employed by comedians to bring the audience around to their worldview.⁸ Their research focuses specifically on how stand-up comedians negotiate what they call ‘risky laughables’, that is: playful utterances, teasing, and controversial material that risks alienating audiences. Referring to the negotiation of the performance context of humour, they say it is ‘crucial in order to define the precise action it is performing and reduce the failures in recognizing or accepting it. Professional comedians use several verbal and paraverbal cues and other devices to make a response relevant to the audience.’⁹

Further, they say, ‘acceptability and recognisability both rely on the local context that is created *ad hoc* in the humorous conversation.’¹⁰ The authors make the point that comedians are not just concerned about the relatability of material in terms of an audience’s background knowledge of the subject matter but also the acceptability in terms of finding the material appropriate. While performing, comedians simultaneously monitor audience response. This form of feedback monitoring is an element I describe as the stand-up comedian’s essential capacity

⁸ Fabiola Scarpetta and Anna Spagnolli, "The Interactional Context of Humor in Stand-up Comedy," *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 3, no. 42 (2009).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 211.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

to appraise the audiences response to the performance/situation and to ‘tack’ accordingly: that is, make ad hoc adjustments to keep the show on course. This tacking in response to audience response, I argue, is an adaptive strategy. Over time, such adjustments contribute to the formation of stage persona. Scarpetta and Spagnolli’s research demonstrates the way audience response impacts the comedian’s in-the-moment performances. For the purposes of this thesis it demonstrates how comedians accommodate feedback from audiences to their material and performances.

Further support for a central part of this thesis—that stand-up comedians form a stage persona that is distinct from their off-stage selves—comes from research carried out by evolutionary psychologists and anthropologists Gil Greengross and Geoffrey Miller. They identify stand-up comedians as ‘a vocational group with unique characteristics; unlike most other entertainers with high creative abilities, they both invent and perform their own work, and audience feedback (laughter or derision) is instantaneous.’¹¹ They go on to show how their empirical research suggests a discrepancy between the stage personae of comedians and their true personalities, concluding:

The public perceives comedians as ostentatious and flashy. Their persona on stage is often mistakenly seen interchangeably with their real personality, and the jokes they tell about their lives are considered by many to have a grain of truth in them. However, the results of this study suggest that the opposite is true. Perhaps comedians use their performance to disguise who they are in their daily life. Comedians may portray someone they want to be, or perhaps their act is a way to defy the constraints imposed on their everyday events and interactions with others. Further study needs to be done to clarify the apparent contradiction between their true personality and on-stage persona that they choose to present.¹²

While it is beside the purpose of this thesis to consider the deeper psychological motivations of stand-up comedians, what is most noteworthy is that there is good empirical evidence that the onstage persona of comedians as a group is at variance in significant ways with their offstage personalities. In particular, the findings that stand-up comedians are relatively low on trait extraversion seems paradoxical in

¹¹ Gil Greengross and Geoffrey F. Miller, "The Big Five Personality Traits of Professional Comedians Compared to Amateur Comedians, Comedy Writers, and College Students," *Personality and Individual Differences* 47, no. 2 (2009): 79.

¹² *Ibid.*, 82.

the following sense: presenting to rooms of strangers as ostentatious and flashy is the opposite of what one might reasonably expect from individuals of a group that is low on trait extraversion. Given what the research suggests, and the set of demands and venues in which they perform, it should not be surprising that stand-up comedians adapt a persona (CSP) fit for the demands of such environs.

In terms of social adaptiveness, there is common ground between CSP and what Erving Goffman terms as *front*—describes as, ‘all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers.’¹³ CSP, in this respect, occurs in the onstage setting that may include not just comedy clubs, but also media interviews and other public presentations where the individual is presented and presenting as stand-up comedian. The implicit promissory nature of such introductions and presentations is worth noting. A set of expectations is established when any individual presents as a comedian. One key variation to this is when a comedian is being interviewed about the craft. For example, the British comedian Jack Dee when in interview with BBC’s Mark Lawson, appears reflective, open, and sincere. Relative to his onstage performance he makes little or no attempt to raise a laugh. Given that the objective of the interview is to discuss seriously his career and approach to his work, his front is different to his performing stand-up comedy front.

A further point by Goffman is worth noting: ‘[F]ront, then, is the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance.’¹⁴ It is important to keep in mind the mix of conscious and unconscious awareness of behaviour and concepts like front and CSP. For the purposes of describing CSP, Goffman’s description of front as intentionally or unwittingly employed is of particular importance. Comedians may or may not be aware of their CSP, or they may be aware of some aspects and not others. The nature of the adaptive unconscious is such that individuals unconsciously adapt and affect behaviour and speech patterns in various situations. To avoid the confusion that arises from privileging what subjects self-

¹³ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 32.

¹⁴ Ibid.

report about their onstage personas it is important to acknowledge how front is unwittingly employed. Subjective accounts are valuable though incomplete. Subjects by definition are unaware of unconscious processes. Hence, the Heterophenomenological approach, as described by Dennett, takes as seriously as possible what conscious subjects report about their experience without abandoning objectivity. Front, like CSP, may be both consciously and unconsciously employed. Goffman, discussing what might be described as impression management in the social sphere, says the following:

It was suggested earlier that a performance of a routine presents through its front some rather abstract claims upon the audience, claims there are likely to be presented to them during a performance of other routines. This constitutes one way in which a performance is ‘socialized’, moulded, and modified to fit into the understanding and expectations of the society in which it is presented. I want to consider here another important aspect of this socialization process—the tendency for performers to offer their observers an impression that is idealized in several different ways.¹⁵

This description by Goffman of a performance being ‘moulded and modified to fit into the understanding and expectation of the society in which it is presented’ is compelling. It certainly seems to fit with what Scarpetta and Spagnolli suggest about ad hoc adjustments and the notion of tacking I set out. Another example of such adjustment that seems to concur with Goffman’s view is how many comedians, when performing to audiences in a ‘foreign’ location, perform material about themselves that would not be performed at ‘home’. An English comedian performing in the US is likely to ‘play up’ his Englishness in a way that would not make sense playing to a home audience. This example suggests the practical strategies employed by comedians when engaging audiences.

Likewise, in the process of introducing themselves to audiences for the first time, comedians are likely to focus on what is perceived to be quickly identifiable features that are likely to be apparent to the audience. They may, for example, comment on what celebrity they look like, followed by a self-deprecating remark. They may say where they are from, followed by a joke based on commonly-known information or perceptions about the place. As the ice is broken and the comedian moves past the introductory phase of his or her act, the astute performer in

¹⁵ Ibid., 52.

interaction with an audience draws from that audience a sense of licence. The performer has some degree of awareness to judge what goes over well, what scans as a good line, what aspects of their persona, presentation and humour excite an audience response, and what aspects need modification. This audience-performer dynamic is akin to a hot-cold game.¹⁶ And while short-term success in stand-up comedy—measured in audience laughter—is possible for the novice, longer term survival requires sustained engagement, adaptation, and most importantly an effective stage persona that can sustain audience engagement and laughter.

BEGINNERS AND THE DEVELOPMENT ENVIRONMENT

It might be argued that the formation of stage persona begs the question. How does a novice stand-up comedian come to possess such a concept in the first place? All things being equal, human beings, like other social animals, are by necessity attentive to the reactions of others within social and community structures. Through this awareness, they form a concept of how they are perceived by others. Regardless of the accuracy or veracity of the beliefs inherent in such awareness, it is sufficient to say that a central part of socialization involves a sense of how others see us. In the absence of evidence to the contrary it is reasonable to assume that the formation of CSP should broadly map patterns in personality development.

Before his or her first ever public gig (performance), the novice stand-up comedian forms the view that he or she is ‘funny’; that is, others—usually friends, family, and colleagues, laugh when they make off-the-cuff comments, tell jokes, and or tell stories.¹⁷ The idea of standing up in front of a room of strangers in a comedy club without such a belief in one’s basic comedic abilities would be odd. It is safe to assume that stand-up comedians begin with the assumption of some basic humour skills. However, when they go in front of a room of strangers for the first time with material they believe to be worthy of laughs, audience reactions are to a lesser or greater extent at odds with their expectations. Material they thought would do well may not; unscripted remarks may go down well, or any number of

¹⁶ As in the children’s game Hot & Cold where the group tells the searching player when they are get closer or further away from finding a target.

¹⁷ ‘Funny’ here is a non-controversial belief that they are capable of causing an audience to laugh based on experience. Leaving aside unusual cases of delusion and error, this is a simple belief that the person possesses some degree of humour skill.

surprises—pleasant or otherwise—might happen on the night. It is reasonable to say that the novice has a non-professional/amateur CSP. It is also reasonable to say novice comedians begin with a set of beliefs pertaining to their humour, audiences, and humour presentation.

The stand-up comic, writer, and cartoonist Jay Sankey speaks about a greater degree of challenge that often emerges after the novice comedian has completed his or her first few performances. He says:

It's a cruel fact of life that many amateurs do better their first and second time on stage than they do their fourth or fifth. The reason is quite simple. One of the keys to stand-up is to try to make everything you say look spontaneous and unrehearsed. Well, as a complete amateur, your performance is pretty close to unrehearsed to begin with! ... One of the real challenges of stand-up—something that truly separates the men and women and the boys and girls—is the ability to deliver a joke for the six-hundredth time and still make it look fresh and dewey [sic]. That's a challenge indeed.¹⁸

Sankey identifies the challenge as consistently recreating the freshness of a joke and negotiating the paradox of *rehearsed-yet-spontaneous* presentation familiar to actors and other performers. The objective of presenting structured material as if just spontaneously occurring, affecting a conversational style, and responding and adjusting to the moment-to-moment feedback to one's efforts becomes the recurring focus. As I will show when discussing Hurley et al.'s *Inside Jokes*, affecting spontaneity and a conversational style, apart from other factors, is essential to concealing punchlines. It is the page to the stage transition of comic ideas that forms the central challenge.

Being writer/performers, comedians have to also work out ways to translate offstage selves to onstage personae. This process involves selecting details that are 'just right' to recreate a humorous idea. Failure to provide sufficient background and context to jokes that have heretofore been told to individuals familiar with the novice and his world inevitably diminishes the

¹⁸ Jay Sankey, *Zen and the Art of Stand-up Comedy* (New York ; London: Routledge, 1998), 11.

chances of an audience of strangers being able to engage with the intended humour.

The comedy coach Judy Carter describes the problem as follows: ‘Unless the audience is clear about *what* you are joking about, they’re not going to laugh.’¹⁹ Should the novice comedian choose to go on to do more gigs, and if he or she wishes to improve audience response, the novice must work out how to appropriately ‘translate’ personal narrative into performance. The novice must adapt for the stage the conditions under which familiars find him or her funny. In the how-to literature this is often described in such terms as ‘finding your voice’ or ‘developing a style’. Carter describes this problem of translating personal humour to the public arena as follows:

My experience as a comedy coach has been that when students bring in material that they carefully plotted out on their computers, it can be clever and smart that sound too literary and contrived to get laughs. The best way to write killer material, the kind that will rock a room and threaten to create hernias from laughing too hard, is to capture and expand upon spontaneous moments. That means that you want to create material when you were in the funny zone.²⁰

Carter brings up a number of salient problems and challenges faced by comedians when adapting real life events and ideas for live performance. Often it is the case that what looks good in a script or in text and scans well to the writer’s eye does not ‘work’ in performance. Capturing and expanding upon spontaneous moments suggest a mix of meta-textual, physical, and highly contextualised elements beyond easy recreation and codification. As Jimmy Carr and Lucy Greeves say in *The Naked Jape*, ‘jokes rightly belong to an oral culture: they live out loud, not on the page’.²¹ The challenge for stand-up performers, therefore, is bringing words and ideas alive, creating and recreating elements of humour often beyond the text. In taking on the challenge, the novice comedian invariably builds a body of knowledge based on trial-and-error experience.

The development of a comedian’s stage persona entails the development of tacit knowledge—the building of skills necessary to master multiple elements

¹⁹ Judy Carter, *The Comedy Bible : From Stand-up to Sitcom : The Comedy Writer's Ultimate How-to-Guide* (New York: Fireside, 2001), 71.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 42-3.

²¹ Jimmy Carr and Lucy Greeves, *The Naked Jape : Uncovering the Hidden World of Jokes* (London: Michael Joseph, 2006), 4.

associated with writing and performing stand-up comedy. This thesis shows that conceptually the formation of stage persona is adaptive in an environment of iterative praxis, reflection/re-working/re-writing, and rehearsal. It makes the case that the adaptive challenge for the stand-up comedian is developing material and a persona that (as consistently as possible) elicits laughter from audiences. The challenge as Sankey and Carter suggest, is constructing and, or, reconstructing humour that occurs either in personal reflection or interpersonal engagement with familiars, so that an audience of strangers can apprehend the relevant narrative context so as to appreciate the humour.

Further degrees of challenge are added to the retelling when a novice comedian must take to a stage, manage a mic, and somehow replicate and project a sense of naturalness. The Canadian folklore scholar Ian Brodie describes the challenge of stand-up comedy performance as follows:

Through their use of amplification, stand-up comedians are able to engage an audience at a natural register, employing the modes of everyday, interpersonal, conversational speech, avoiding for the most part the distancing required for most forms of cultural performance. By maintaining control of this conversation, they are able paradoxically to give control away, wresting it back when required, thus creating the illusion of intimacy, exchange, and reciprocity between themselves and the audience.²²

As Brodie notes, the challenge of replicating the natural registers of interpersonal, conversational speech while creating the illusion of intimacy is no mean feat. Compatible with the claims of this thesis, he identifies one of the hallmarks of stand-up comedy as creating 'the illusion of intimacy' and negotiating 'a disregard for the distancing of the stage.'²³ Stand-up comedians must therefore control a highly dynamic engagement between audiences. This necessity to manage and control the performance environment in a natural key requires a degree of adaptability and—as this thesis aims to show—leads over time to the emergence of a functional stage persona. As I will discuss later in relation to Bruce McConachie's account of theatre riots and the gender profile of audiences, the CSPs of stand-up comedians—just like the performers at these theatres described

²² Ian Brodie, "Stand-up Comedy as a Genre of Intimacy," *Ethnologies* 30, no. 2 (2008): 156.

²³ *Ibid.*

by McConachie—are to some extent products of the environment that they habitually aim to control.²⁴

Contemporary comedians employ a variety of performance styles and appeal to a variety of audience tastes and preferences. An effective theory needs to accommodate, in a generalizable sense, these styles and tastes, the challenges of stand-up comedy, and the process of adaptation and development. A further complicating factor in terms of understanding stand-up comedy is perhaps generated by the elements of ‘overlap’ with both acting/performing and writing.

Comedians are not just writers or performers; they are writer/performers. As I will show when discussing some of the psychological research on stand-up comedy and comedians, this writer/performer categorisation has a bearing upon understanding these practitioners and their art form. While stand-up comedians share common ground with actors and writers, and stand-up comedy performance shares elements with theatre performance, it is the defining element of first-person, direct-address that is worthy of particular attention.

When discussing the cognitive approach to theatre and performance proposed by Bruce McConachie—in particular, his usage of cognitive blending to describe spectators simultaneously admiring the craft of the performer while engaging in the performance itself—I suggest that comedy spectators can potentially appreciate the comedian’s multiple skills. Bearing in mind that the comedian is both writer and performer of the comedy material, there is good reason to consider the distinction between actors playing a role and stand-up comedians presenting ‘self’ on stage. This line of discussion provides more reasons to both doubt the naïve view that comedians are themselves on stage, and good cause to consider a more nuanced and plausible account.

Finally, before moving on from broad definitions and distinctions of stand-up comedy as an autobiographical writer/performance form, there is an important distinction that needs to be made between what I will call *autobiographical comedians* as opposed to *character comedians*, who present as characters. The British comedian Steve Coogan, for example, presents as the

²⁴ Bruce A. McConachie, *Engaging Audiences : A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre*, 1st ed., Cognitive Studies in Literature and Performance (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 31.

characters Pauline Calf, Paul Calf, and also performs impressions. Clearly there is overlap between both types of comedian and, therefore, there is no clear-cut way to place a strict line between them; however, the character comedian does little, if any, in the way of autobiographical material. The formation of CSP in stand-up comedy at the heart of this thesis is, for the most part, in relation to the autobiographical comedian.

CENTRAL PROBLEMS

There is a common view that stand-up comedians don't have a stage persona or character. Oliver Double, in his paper, *Characterization in Stand-up Comedy: from Ted Ray to Billy Connolly, via Bertolt Brecht*, sets out two such views (one from John Harrop's book *Acting* and the other from TV and cultural critic David Marc's book *Comic Visions*).²⁵ Harrop makes the case that, 'at the simplest level, the muscleman, the Miss Universe contestant, and the stand-up comedian are projecting themselves. They may be making adaptations to the conventions of the performance, but they are not playing a character'.²⁶ It is easy to see that Harrop is intending to show how actors develop characters to present on stage, engage with a process of concealing self and revealing an 'other'. However, drawing such definition between the performance of actors and stand-up comedians is not so easy.

CSP is a disputed concept. Harrop's definition runs into problems when considering the on-stage persona of Rodney Dangerfield, for example, who bemoans the fact that he 'can get no respect', or the onstage (but not off-stage) miserliness of Jack Benny, or the obstinacy and social ineptitude of Larry David (in his TV series *Curb Your Enthusiasm*). All humans are capable of the aforementioned negative qualities, but in the above cases there is good evidence to suggest these individuals are not miserly, put upon, or socially inept. However, for comic effect they 'play up' the 'as-if' of these fictive characteristics for the purposes of generating laughs.

²⁵ Oliver Double, "Characterization in Stand-up Comedy: From Ted Ray to Billy Connolly, Via Bertolt Brecht," *New Theatre Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (2000): 315.

²⁶ John Harrop, *Acting* (London: Routledge, 1992), 5.

In a similar vein, television historian and critic David Marc questions the ill-defined boundary between the comedian onstage and real life. He alludes to the lack of mask, created distance, and the sense of a naked self. He writes:

Without the protection of the formal mask of a narrative drama, without a song, dance, or any other intermediary composition that creates distance between performer and performance, without even, necessarily, some remarkable physical trait or ability to gratuitously display, the stand-up comedian addresses an audience as a naked self, eschewing the luxury of a clear-cut distinction between art and life.²⁷

Marc's phrase 'protection of the formal mask' captures well the sense of threat, risk, and danger that is central to performing stand-up comedy. Mask and CSP overlap, in that they present a front while concealing elements of personality. Mask and CSP therefore reveal and conceal. Marc perhaps overlooks this bi-directionality aspect of mask. A mask can indeed conceal. Given that the same actor in older forms of theatre might play several roles, it helped, for obvious reasons, that the audience could not see that it was the same actor. However, it is also the case that a mask reveals. A well-designed mask can quickly convey information, short-hand to the audience details and traits relevant to understanding the character. The efficiency of mask in this respect is apparent. Likewise, in stand-up comedy, efficiency and economy are sought in both the writing and the performance. If stage persona can quickly locate the audience into the world the comedian needs them to relate to for the purpose of framing humour, then the economy of a well-drawn persona would seem desirable. Drawing the link between mask and persona, Erving Goffman quotes the following from Robert Ezra Park, in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*: 'It is probably no mere historical accident that the word person, in its first meaning, is a mask.'²⁸

While Oliver Double challenges the views of David Marc and John Harrop and the pervasive view that comedians present themselves on stage as their "naked selves" whereas actors present characters, his challenge is on the grounds that stand-up comedians, in the process of telling jokes and routines, jump in and

²⁷ David Marc, *Comic Visions : Television Comedy and American Culture*, Media and Popular Culture (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 13.

²⁸ Robert Ezra Park, *Race and Culture*, His Collected Papers, V 1 (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1950), 249.

out of roles, to act out characters as part of a story-telling style.²⁹ His challenge, therefore, is based on ‘momentary characterisation’ and not the broader claim—set out in this thesis—that stage persona is presented and in operation the moment the stand-up comedian presents as stand-up comedian.

One example that suggests grounds for questioning the ‘momentary characterisation’ account is that there are stand-ups who, for the most part, do not do ‘act outs’, accents, or play roles in story-telling, but are still presenting a stage persona. A good example of this is the American comedian Steven Wright who does not do characters or accents; he is nonetheless presenting a stage persona as someone who sees the world in quite a confused way. His on-stage persona, it is reasonable to assume, is at odds with the type of person who could function in the highly demanding world of writing and performance—he is a well-educated, award-winning writer-director, accomplished in his field. One telling point Oliver Double makes regarding his personal experience of doing stand-up comedy suggests that he has an on-stage persona but does not either recognise nor describe it as such. In the concluding part of his paper he says:

I never consciously constructed a stage persona, nor was I aware of a tangible transformation from an offstage to an onstage self as I stepped behind the microphone. However, I was adapting to the conventions of the performance, perhaps most obviously in making myself sound as spontaneous and relaxed as I would in everyday conversation when I was actually delivering prepared and oft-repeated lines, and suppressing the tension which is a normal part of performance.³⁰

That Double is sincere is not in question. His response is likely to be in keeping with how many comedians might describe presenting themselves as comedians. However, it is not unusual that an individual might be oblivious to the degree to which they are in fact presenting a role. As suggested previously, the development of CSP may be conscious and unconscious. As psychologist Timothy Wilson puts it in his book *Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious*, ‘many of people’s chronic dispositions, traits, and temperaments are part of the adaptive unconscious, to which they have no direct access.’³¹ He makes a

²⁹ Double, "Characterization in Stand-up Comedy: From Ted Ray to Billy Connolly, Via Bertolt Brecht."

³⁰ Ibid., 323.

³¹ Timothy D. Wilson, *Strangers to Ourselves : Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 68.

compelling case for being somewhat sceptical about subjective accounts of psychological realities.

These constructions, Wilson explains, are the result of ‘the simple need to construct a coherent narrative about ourselves, in the absence of any direct access to our non-conscious personalities.’³² In the case of playing ‘oneself’ on stage, the natural assumption would be that the portrayal is authentic. However, given the absolute demand to make the audience laugh, being ‘oneself’ is, at the very least, a clearly problematic claim to maintain. As Oliver Double acknowledges, he was ‘making himself sound spontaneous’. But to ‘make’ oneself look or sound anything seems to run counter to the notion of being oneself.

Goffman presents an insightful quote from the BBC broadcaster John Hilton, who in an essay entitled ‘Calculated Spontaneity’, says the following:

To give a radio talk that will sound genuinely informal, spontaneous, and relaxed, the speaker may have to design his script with painstaking care, testing one phrase after another, in order to follow the content, language, written, in cases of everyday talk.³³

It is possible to see how confusion can arise in considering the presentation of self. Notions like ‘being fake’, ‘putting on an act’, or ‘being natural’ may speak to embedded ideas and values associated with personal authenticity. But presenting self and meeting the performance demands of stand-up comedy almost certainly preclude what might be considered a natural situation where one can just be oneself. It is then, possible, I argue, to feel as if one is being ‘oneself’ but in fact adapting a version of self to meet the particular demands of engaging audiences in laughter.

Timothy Wilson provides an account that explains how this distinction between the self and onstage self might be overlooked. He points out that, ‘it makes little sense to talk about a single ‘self’ when we consider that both the adaptive unconscious and the conscious-self have regular patterns of responding to the social world.’ Interestingly, he goes on to say that ‘this distinction has largely been overlooked by psychological theories of personality.’³⁴ It is reasonable to

³² Ibid.

³³ John Hilton, “Calculated Spontaneity” in James editor Sutherland, *The Oxford Book of English Talk* (Oxford: At The Clarendon press, 1953), 399-404.

³⁴ Wilson, *Strangers to Ourselves : Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious*, 68.

suggest, therefore, that the degree to which an individual notices what are often subtle changes in behaviour and personality adaptation, may be far less than the actual change that has objectively taken place.

The development of CSP happens as both conscious and unconscious response to an environment. For the comedian that environment is, for the most part, the audience. Of course, there are other details of social factors to be accounted for, but for now I am proposing a generalised concept of stand-up comedian as adaptive agent within an environment made up variable audiences, a working community of other comedians, comedy promoters, media producers, and the wider social landscape made up of topicality, trends, and issues that occupy the mental space of their audiences.

PROBLEM OF PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS

Demonstrating how comedians develop and use persona, 'work' and engage audiences, often involves text analysis based on video recordings. However, this process comes with a number of challenges. In the main, formal text is a rarity in stand-up comedy. It is, for the most part, of an oral tradition. That is not to say comedians do not write down ideas, make notes, or even produce full-length scripts. The British comedian Stewart Lee, for example, has published the script of his show *If You Prefer a Milder Comedian, Please Ask for One*.³⁵ Woody Allen, in conversation with Larry Wilde, explains his stand-up comedy writing method as scribbling notes on scraps of paper, match boxes, and the like, and storing them in a drawer that he processes in a more formalised way after a period of time.³⁶

A 2012 New York Times article entitled 'A Stand-Up Joke is Born' followed the comedian Myq Kaplan as he developed a series of jokes in comedy clubs in Manhattan, and eventually performing on a late night TV show. The article describes the painstaking effort undertaken by Kaplan to modify, edit phrasing, and extend the concept of jokes about himself, and one in particular about a gentleman laying down his coat for a lady.³⁷ The article provides an insight into

³⁵ Stewart Lee, *Stewart Lee! : The 'If You Prefer a Milder Comedian, Please Ask for One' Ep* (London: Faber, 2012).

³⁶ Woody Allen, Larry Wilde, and Larry Wilde Collection (Library of Congress), *Woody Allen Interview* (1966), sound recording, 1 sound tape reel (54 min.) : analog, 3 3/4 ips, 1/4 track, stereo. ; 7 in.

³⁷ Jason Zinoman, "A Stand-up Joke Is Born," *New York Times* 2012, March 5th.

how Kaplan, like most comics, tests material and adapts according to how audiences respond.

This process of ‘road-testing’ is an essential part of the development of material. The concept of writing employed by comedians is a blend of actual writing and road-testing. While there is no fixed method of writing and rehearsing, the process can be generalised by comedians working to efficiently engage their audiences. This aspect of analysing what is predominantly an oral tradition means that much of the humour intent is not necessarily inherent in the words on the page. As Provine’s research shows, many incidences of social laughter happen in the absence of any clear textual punchline.³⁸ Whether, as Provine suggests, these incidences of laughter are as a result of some form of social validation, or whether it is down to the role of non-verbal communication (NVC), the key point is that punchlines are not always apparent in transcribed text. Also, as in theatre, the performance of text has a significant bearing on the effect created. Accommodating the non-verbal and socially constructed aspects of stand-up comedy presents a certain degree of challenge.

In a similar vein, another difficulty in analysing stand-up comedy performances is accounting for the role of disfluency—false starts, uhm, ahs, beats, intakes of breath, sighs etc.—and other forms of NVC that key the audience to non-verbal punchlines. To demonstrate this I present a piece of transcribed text from a stand-up performance: *Eddie Izzard—Live at the Ambassadors*³⁹.

As discussed earlier (see section: Performer-Audience Dynamic *in Situ*), a recording of live stand-up comedy varies in many ways from attendance at the actual event. There is a limit to how much one can imagine oneself into the live experience. This show, for example, is Izzard’s first West End run and first published video. The fact that he could sustain a 4-week run at the Ambassadors (subsequently extended) suggests that he was at that point a comedian with a sizeable following. It is possible to assume that several advantages accrue to a

³⁸ Provine, *Laughter : A Scientific Investigation*, 40.

³⁹ Eddie Izzard – Live at the Ambassadors (YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DoIYydf9614> captured 25/6/2017)

performer with a following, including being afforded a certain level of goodwill, assumption of ability, and benefit-of-the-doubt by the audience.

Set against those possible advantages is the disadvantage of the recording process intrusively impacting on the performer-audience dynamic. The show was recorded in the West End in 1993. There are many contextual and historical details that simply cannot be captured on tape. Finally, watching a recording of a live performance involves a mediation of the event, in that the director and video editors guide the viewer in a way the live spectator is not guided.

(Clip Time ref: 02:50—03:33)

1. Tuesday, Tuesday people, yes, you are Tuesday people.
2. I was talking to Monday people last night and they said, 'well', and they
3. build it into their weekend and, so, they, you know, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday!
4. And that's the way they deal with it.
5. But Tuesday and Wednesday people go, 'oh!'
6. Because you don't know exactly where you are. It's not quite the weekend where you can go 'way hey!!' and get completely pissed.
7. And drag yourself home, and get yourself up for work the next day.
8. It's kind of weird, eh?
9. Oh! Complete silence.
10. So you're not Tuesday people.
11. Perhaps you thought it was a Thursday.
12. No, no, I checked the calendar. It is Tuesday and you're trying to deny it.
13. But I know, I, James Mason, knows, it is in fact, Tuesday.
14. Don't you sit there with the lights on you and think,
15. 'There are a load of cameras around me and I'm just going to ignore them.'

In this forty-three second clip, there are in fact five laughs of varying duration and intensity audible on the recording. Reading the 'raw' text however, gives away little of where these laughter points might be. As folklorist Ian Brodie puts it in his paper on stand-up comedy, 'What is funny in performance—for the audience, at any rate—does not translate well to the page, despite my efforts at transcription.'⁴⁰ And, as mentioned above, recordings are generally a somewhat diminished

⁴⁰ Brodie, "Stand-up Comedy as a Genre of Intimacy," 164.

representation of a live performance. Below is a copy of the same text with disfluency highlighted and laughter marked and ranked with a basic small, medium, large classification: SL, ML, and LL.

1. Tuesday, Tuesday people, yes (elongated), you are Tuesday people.
2. Ham...I was talking to Monday people last night and they said, ‘well’ (elongated), and they
3. build it into their weekend and, so, they, you know, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday!
4. And that’s the way they deal with it. [SL]
5. But Tuesday and Wednesday people go ‘ahh, oooh, oooh’ (false starts, facial expressions and body movements that invariably show confusion.) [ML] ⁴¹
6. Because you don’t know exactly where you are. It’s not quite the weekend where you can go ‘way hey!!’ and get completely pissed.
7. And drag yourself home, and get yourself up for work the next day.
8. It’s kind of weird, eh? (sharp drawing in of air through lips)
9. Oh! Complete silence.
10. So, you’re not Tuesday people. [LL]
11. Perhaps you thought it was Thursday.
12. No, no, I checked the calendar. It is Tuesday and you’re trying to deny it.
13. But I know, I, James Mason, knows, [LL] it is in fact, Tuesday. (mimics James Mason)
14. Don’t you sit there with the lights on you and think,
15. ‘There are a load of cameras around me and I’m just going to ignore them.’

From watching the clip, it seems Izzard was expecting a laugh from the audience at the end of line 6 ‘completely pissed’ (which is inflected) or at the end of line 7 which is a run on. By line 8 he’s saying, ‘It’s kind of weird, eh?’ But no laugh is forthcoming. The sharp drawing in of breath seems to be his idiosyncratic way of both marking a comment as humorously intended and a way to momentarily fill

⁴¹ Izzard’s physical playfulness, his use of false starts, and disfluency, plays on the audience’s expectation of an intelligible line that never arrives. Izzard knocks on the door of attention and runs away when it is answered. What the audience gets is attention arousal without content worthy of attention: foolery. This type of routine is similar to playing with a dog, pretending to through a stick or a ball, and then stopping at the last second when the animal has already taken a couple of steps to retrieve the object. This tricking is a form of play. As I will show when discussing the work of Hurley et al. later, Izzard is exploiting the mind/brain mechanisms involved with listening and pre-empting conversation.

the gaps between utterance and the audience receiving the utterance, reading it as humorously intended, and responding with laughter.

Izzard realises the punchlines at the end of line 6/line 7 has failed to get a response. This explains the deflation on line 8, the sharp intake of breath, and then line 9, 'Oh! Complete Silence.' The audience too, in a general—perhaps vague sense—knows that Izzard has paused and the NVC cues of a punchline are present. But to what degree the audience are aware of what is going on at this particular point, is hard to know. However, when Izzard points out the complete silence, implying that the audience has missed an intended joke, they seem to instantly recognise something is afoot. And when Izzard follows this up with, 'Perhaps you're not Tuesday people' the audience seem to register a composite realisation:

1. That Izzard has interpreted from their non-response that they don't realise they are Tuesday people.
2. That Izzard has made a clever interpretation of their silence—that the audience is aware that they are in fact 'Tuesday People'. In this instance he faces the choice to ignore and move on, or to address the failure.

Izzard, I suggest, subsequently detects that the presence of recording equipment is distracting the audience, making them feel self-conscious, and uneasy—hence his remark to the audience, 'Don't you sit there with the lights on you and think, "There are a load of cameras around me and I'm just going to ignore them"'. The audience responds with a strong laugh suggesting Izzard has in fact hit upon an obvious yet poorly recognised difficulty with recording live comedy. The audience's response, mainly laughter, is vital. However, the intrusiveness of recording equipment—and especially the high levels of auditorium lighting required, has the counterproductive effect of putting a 'freeze' on the audience by both distracting focus and making them self-conscious.

Izzard therefore 'names the elephant in the room' by identifying what is a source of unease. I would also suggest that his background as street-performer is brought to bear in the situation. He is aware of the primary importance of full

attention from the audience so that they will recognise the many subtle punchlines in his show.

As will be discussed in both McConachie and Hurley et al., the criteria for jokes in terms of attention, memory, and socio-cultural-linguistic context is generally strict and unforgiving of diminished attention. This example from Izzard therefore shows the importance of the stand-up comedian's empathetic engagement with his audience—reading into their minds and addressing the here-and-now vicissitudes of live stand-up performance.

A COGNITIVE APPROACH TO CSP AND INTERACTION

The highly interactive nature of stand-up comedy lends greater importance to the role of audience in the comedian's process and CSP development. If, as theatre theorist Helen Freshwater puts it, 'the presence of an audience is central to the definition of theatre', audience in stand-up comedy takes on an even higher order of importance.⁴² While stand-up comedy shares many elements with theatre and other performance disciplines in general, the dependence on audience laughter is an inescapable and defining feature of stand-up, given the moment-to-moment influence audience response has on comedy performers and performances. The 'momentum' of stand-up performance relies heavily on audience response. As is evident in the clip from Izzard, comedians adjust, tack, and segue to 'check-in' with audiences. And while different comedians engage in different ways, the principles of live engagement and direct address demand the management of audience connection.

Audiences could therefore be described as the co-creators of the live comedy event. But this close dependence on audience approbation raises some interesting issues. In her discussion of attitudes of theatre practitioners to audiences, Freshwater speaks of 'the polemic which surrounds audiences', and speaks of 'a complex mix of hope, frustration, and disgust.'⁴³ What I draw from Freshwater's point is the potential for contempt in perceived/misperceived dependency. Given the stand-up comedian's reliance on both audience laughter and some general sense of approbation, it might be tempting to conclude that

⁴² Helen Freshwater, *Theatre & Audience* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 2.

comedians would do whatever it takes to please audiences/give them what they want—perhaps while harbouring some degree of contempt. It might suggest that the world of stand-up comedy would reduce to a form of people-pleasing. However, against this suggestion is a world full of comedians who present as rebellious, indifferent, edgy, challenging, eccentric, and in some form or other defiant to general notions of normativity. To go even further, some of these comedians revel in presenting as anti-social curmudgeons with no respect for their audiences as a subset of general public.

The American comedian Bill Hicks certainly exemplifies the type of ambivalent relationship there can exist between performer and audience. Forgoing the usual polite pleasantries, he greets his audience with the opening lines to one of his shows as follows:

Good evening, my name is Bill Hicks. I've been on the road now doing comedy twelve years, so, uh, bear with me while I plaster on a fake smile and plough through this shit one more time. [...] I'm kinda tired of travelling, kinda tired of doing comedy, kinda tired of staring out at your blank faces looking back at me, wanting me to fill your empty lives with humor you couldn't possibly think of yourselves.⁴⁴

A first reading of this might suggest contempt, or a performer going through the motions, or burnout. But another interpretation could be that it is intended to convey his honesty, his commitment to speak his mind to his audience, his authenticity—after all, one of the primary qualities of a friendly relationship is the possibility to complain and gripe while also sharing humour. Despite the apparent contempt in his monologue, the audience laughs.⁴⁵

Another example that demonstrates the ambivalent relationship between stand-up comedian and audience is exemplified in another quote from Hicks. Much of his material deals with serious issues such as abortion rights, religious conservatism, American hegemony, and conspiracy, among other topics. However, finding that some audiences were 'switching off' in terms of response during these sections of his shows, he began to 'reassure' the audience that there was lighter material on the way by saying, 'There are dick jokes on the way, ladies

⁴⁴ Bill Hicks, "Dark Poet," (1992).

⁴⁵ Of course there may have been audience members who might not have read this introduction humorously, and have taken Hicks at his word.

and gentlemen. Please relax.’⁴⁶ He both reassures and admonishes. In this he dismisses his audience as having limited taste in humour and an inability to engage with important issues. This suggests something of a paradox. While the comedian needs to keep the audience onside, he or she can sometimes achieve this most effectively through a form of attack and teasing. Keeping in mind David Marc’s notion of mask as protection, it might be said that the best form of defence in stand-up comedy is attack. However, the rules of play and engagement will naturally militate against alienating the audience by being overly aggressive. All this points to the critical need to judge each performance, situation, and audience.

Like the licensed fool, the comedian must negotiate the power relationship between performer and audience. This notion of power relationship is of particular relevance in stand-up performance. Freshwater says that, ‘the terms employed to describe audience and their relationship to performance are laden with value judgements’ and, she asks, ‘Are they just viewers, or accomplices, witnesses, participants?’⁴⁷ In stand-up comedy, perhaps the greater dependence upon audience engagement suggests the necessity for comedians to read and pre-empt audiences. Such a form of reading and pre-emption maps well to a central feature in the cognitive approach to performance and spectating that describes how humans ‘think into’ the world, and the minds of others. Following this approach, this thesis sets out how comedians ‘think into’ the minds of their audiences. It is from the cognitive perspective of performance that the thesis develops an account of stand-up comedy, engagement, and persona formation.

In their series editors’ preface to *Engaging Audiences*, Bruce McConachie and Blakey Vermeule make the case for adapting and developing theatre and performance studies methodologies to acknowledge the cognitive turn in ‘human self-understanding.’⁴⁸ However, as McConachie and Vermeule point out, ‘[T]he terrain ahead is still unmapped.’⁴⁹ This ‘unmapped’ aspect I will return to later to discuss the merits of blending compatible prescience theory with scientific approaches. Suffice to say that what is available in terms of ‘off-the-shelf’ viable

⁴⁶ Bill Hicks, *Love, Laughter and Truth*, *Voices series* (London, England: Rykodisc., 2002), sound recording Bill Hicks, 1 sound disc : digital ; 4 3/4 in., RCD 10631 Rykodisc.

⁴⁷ Freshwater, *Theatre & Audience*, 2.

⁴⁸ McConachie, *Engaging Audiences : A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre*, vii.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

tools of analysis is modest and in need of bespoke modification. They go on to say: 'Unlike the theories of the last century, the mind sciences offer no central authority, nor revered group of texts that disclose a pathway to the authorised truth. Indeed cognitive approaches to the arts barely fit under one broad tent.'⁵⁰ This suggests that a good deal of preparatory work needs to be done prior to setting out to map the terrain.

Likewise, the research aim of this thesis into stage persona in stand-up comedy is to set out the ground for mapping, drawing from scientifically compatible areas. Just as the history of theatre and performance studies entails a natural and mutual interest between psychology and performance, the same seems to be the case for stand-up comedy and humour studies. McConachie and Vermeule provide the following definition:

Cognitive approaches are unified by two ideas. The first is that to understand the arts we need to understand psychology [...] the second is the idea that scholarship in this field should be generally empirical, falsifiable, and open to correction by new evidence and better theories—as are the sciences themselves.

With this in mind, this account of stand-up comedians and the performance of stand-up comedy will follow a cognitive approach to describe how comedians focus on 'getting inside the heads' of audiences and adapt stage personae for this purpose. Comedians engage in intuitive reasoning and cognitive adaptation to tell stories that capture attention, construct jokes that will lead smoothly to laughter, intuit the response of audiences and devise effective performance strategies.

In the discussion of Eddie Izzard (see above), his speedy recognition that all is not well with the audience is an act of intuitive reasoning. But it can also be said that the audience also picks up on how a punchline has fallen flat before Izzard says, 'Oh! Complete silence. Perhaps you're not Tuesday people.' The big laugh that follows could not be attributed to any discernible humour in the text. But regardless of why the audience responds with laughter, the piece is a good demonstration of engagement. As McConachie points out, 'theatrical engagement always works in two directions. That is, theatre audiences must engage with actors (and indirectly with others behind the scenes), and the artists of the theatre must

⁵⁰ Ibid., viii.

engage with spectators before performative communication can occur with effectiveness.’⁵¹

Even before entering the stage, efforts are made to engage the audience. The lights in the auditorium are brought down. The murmuring conversations of the audience are silenced by blacking out the auditorium. In the darkness there is giddy, expectant, tittering from members of the audience. The stage-lights fade up. The stage is bare except for a microphone set front-centre, black backdrop which is spot lit, and rose light floods the front of stage. Izzard enters to enthusiastic audience applause from back of stage right. Halfway to the microphone, Izzard moves his arms out to the side and continues walking toward the microphone.

On reaching the microphone he performs the following piece of physical business: with eyes and mouth wide open, looking out toward the audience slightly stage left, he grabs the microphone stand affecting wide-eyed, childlike excitement. However, after a few seconds this demeanour rapidly switches as he takes the radio microphone from the stand with his left hand, and tilts the microphone stand to his left. His facial expression, now, is stern, his mouth is taut, his head is tilted back to his right, and he draws in breath sharply, fixing the audience with a stern look. His eyes are now narrowed, his head is tilted to his right, and pulled into his neck, creating a double chin effect, and with the radio microphone in his right hand he gestures to the audience to quieten down. Izzard, leans back on his right foot, striking an imperious pose.

He then switches expression slightly as if about to speak. His first vocal utterance is 8 seconds of dis-fluent sounds (ah, aaaah, oooh, aaah, em, ah, oh, aaaah, let’s not go [...]) (mumbling inaudibly) as if he has forgotten what he is going to say—clearly exaggerated. This raises some titters and laughs. The whole routine up to this point has not involved a full sentence to the audience. By his use of false starts he has kept the audience engaged.

The feel of face-to-face conversation between Izzard and the audience is quite pronounced, particularly when at line 9 he stops in his tracks to get the audience ‘back on track’ as it were. There is a ‘stepping out’ of routine to correct

⁵¹ Ibid., 1.

what he—and to some extent the audience—detect as a loss of connection. As McConachie points out, ‘the give-and-take of theatrical communication does fall short, however, when the actors sense complete spectator indifference or lack of understanding.’⁵² While Izzard’s audience could not be described as indifferent, there is what could probably be described as a weak connection in terms of getting the humour. The intended punchline at line 7 falls flat. On line 8 Izzard flags that that line 7 was a punchline. On line 9 he suggests that the audience is unresponsive. Line 10 seems to be an *ad-hoc* line explaining the reason for the lacklustre response. Line 10 also reincorporates the theme he sets out from line 1 (where he calls them ‘Tuesday People’).

As the above section from Izzard’s performance demonstrates, attention is particularly vital in humorous transactions. Izzard seems to perceive that the audience is not fully engaged, hence the flat response. He firstly names the situation and then improvises a comic reincorporation of the Tuesday-people bit to get things back on track. The use of reincorporation requires memory; the recognition of Izzard’s plight requires empathy on the part of the audience. Izzard empathetically detects (assumes) the audience is distracted by the cameras, lights, and the general intrusion of the recording process.

An explanation of the concept of audience engagement at play in the above piece of interplay between Izzard and the audience requires an account of theatrical engagement. McConachie, for example, says:

For theatrical engagement to have a chance, spectators and players require most of the cognitive skills that *Homo sapiens* normally expect from one another. As we know, non-sighted and hearing-impaired spectators and performers can also play the game of theatre, but in such cases basic perceptual normality is less crucial, as we will see, than *attention, memory, empathy, and cultural knowledge*.⁵³ (My emphasis)

The four pillars of theatrical engagement set out by McConachie are particularly useful in describing stand-up comedy. Joke-telling in a general sense relies on all four. In a basic set-up/punchline joke, ‘getting the joke’ requires attention to take in the details in the set-up of a joke, memory to retain and manipulate those details,

⁵² Ibid., 2.

⁵³ Ibid.

empathy to infer consequences for the agents/characters in the joke, and cultural knowledge to provide essential context, make inferences, and identify multiple meanings and nuances involved.⁵⁴

Before Izzard, or any other stand-up comedian reaches the level of playing a major venue, recording a DVD, or appearing on a TV show, there is usually a period of development involving challenging performance environments. Some audiences may not attend to the same degree as Izzard's audience at the Ambassadors Theatre. In this respect, I suggest that stand-up comedy shares common ground with the mid-eighteenth century Paris Opera or the audiences at the mid-nineteenth century Bowery Theatre New York as described by McConachie when he says, 'our contemporary custom of engaging with performers through studied attention, emotion-charged silences, and occasional laughter, coupled with applause only at the curtain call, is hardly the historical norm.'⁵⁵ The case I make for the environmental-adaptive nature of stand-up comedy and the formation of stand-up personae as adaptive strategies seems to find support in the idea performance environments mould the performer who inhabit them. Where audience attention spans tend on the low side relative to say that of an audience in a theatre or lecture hall, the performer compensates.

As McConachie puts it, referring to the Paris Opera and Bowery Theatre audiences, 'in both of those historical situations, however, the performers accommodated lapses in audience attention and could make up for them with *coup de theatres* of local force or energetic movement.'⁵⁶ Interestingly, prior to embarking on his stand-up comedy career, Eddie Izzard was a street performer capable of commanding the attention of passing audiences in London's Covent Garden Market. There can be little doubt that such a background can enhance a performer's ability to read and engage the attention of audiences bombarded by street noise and other distractions. Performance genres such as street-performance, stand-up comedy, improvisation—all forms of performance requiring high levels of audience interaction and engagement—naturally demand

⁵⁴ The next chapter is given over to a more detailed examination of theories and joke structure relevant to the central thesis.

⁵⁵ McConachie, *Engaging Audiences : A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre*, 2.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

that performers rely more upon what cognitive literary theorist Lisa Zunshine describes as ‘intuitive reasoning: making sense of human action by assigning them to mental states.’⁵⁷

Given the co-creative, central role of the audience in such performances, the performer must, if he or she is to develop a sufficient capacity of pre-emptive rapport, think empathetically into the minds of audiences. As mentioned earlier, stand-up comedians begin with ideas, memories of events that must be translated from the personal and familiar sphere to the public sphere. While writers may write with an ideal reader in mind, comedians create and prepare (write) with a spectator-listener in mind. A joke written, like any form of text, has endless options in terms of who is performing it. Stand-up comedians therefore think in terms of how a joke will sound, the context of its performance, the likely response of the audience, and details of phrasing in terms of delivery.

This process of imagining into the performance situation and into a generalised sense of the mind of the spectator is an extension of what people do—to a lesser or greater extent—in social situations. As Zunshine puts it, ‘we live in other people’s heads [...] Cognitive scientists have a special term for the evolved cognitive adaptation that makes us attribute mental states to ourselves and to other people; they call it ToM or mind reading.’⁵⁸ Of course, this is not to suggest that such performers are mind readers. But, a developed sense of audiences, a familiarity to what and how they respond to certain topics, types of jokes, stage personae, cultural references, plays a large role in the process of ‘reading a room’. In this respect, much of the working of our mental processes is intuitive,

⁵⁷ Zunshine, *Getting inside Your Head : What Cognitive Science Can Tell Us About Popular Culture*, ix.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

embodied, and instinctive. This account is also compatible with Hurley et al.'s view that:

Comedians know how to target their audiences with content that resides in highly accessible knowledge stores, where it is more quickly activated. So they tailor their routines to fit the crowd: [...] it requires just as much intuition to use these kinds of content to enhance humour—through transfer and misattribution of arousal—as to create the humour itself. How do such inventors of humour direct their design efforts? By large amounts of trial and error, adjusting their wording, their timing, their facial expressions, to see what combination gets the heartiest laughs—a handy metric, delivered by a collection of black boxes whose inner workings they need not understand (except ‘intuitively’) in order to be guided by its volume.⁵⁹

The phrases ‘trial and error’ and ‘adjusting their wording, their timing, and their facial expression to see what combination gets the heartiest laughs’ appears to support the view that stand-up comedians are shaped by their performance environment in an adaptive way. However, a more detailed and precise examination of the process is required to identify the relevant moving parts in this complex process.

LICENCE AND PERSONA

The term ‘Licence’, as I present it, denotes an intuitive sense of permission. Bringing to mind connotation of the licensed fool at the medieval court, modern day stand-up comedians often must negotiate the boundaries of what they can and cannot say and do on stage. On the one hand a comedian might be tempted to excite or ‘push the envelope’ in terms of topics or audience interaction, while on the other, refrain from stepping ‘over the line’ with negative consequences. There is a balance to be struck between exciting and alienating an audience. The boundaries in such matters are complex. The notion of the ‘controversial’ stand-up, for example, is a perennial trope. But controversial is a relative term. Like all relative terms there is constant flux. What might be considered controversial and exciting to one audience at a certain place in time, may well be mundane to another.

Licence, as it relates to the stand-up comedian in this thesis, entails not just a sense of the social milieu but how one is likely to be perceived within the flux of location and time. Conceptually, therefore, licence is the intuitive judgement of

⁵⁹ Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, *Inside Jokes : Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*, 275.

stand-up comedians and therefore part of an intuitive understanding of persona. As an example, while an Irish comedian may lampoon and mock *Irishness* to an Irish audience, the same routine, performed by a British comedian—unless framed appropriately—is likely to go down poorly. As the examples from Bill Hicks discussed earlier show, stand-up comedy entails a complex performer-audience relationship that may involve tacitly agreed permissions to be edgy, honest, or outrageous. Licence, therefore, is a reflected sense of self/persona through audience interaction—a sense of how one is seen as a stage persona.

In stand-up comedy the chief criterion is to elicit as much laughter as possible from an audience. As the critical theorist John Limon puts it, ‘Your laughter is the single end of stand-up’.⁶⁰ However, this definition requires greater nuance. As has been shown—in particular in the discussion of Jason Rutter’s research on the role of comperes in comedy clubs, stand-up comedy is not just joke telling—it firstly requires a performer-audience relationship to begin with. The comedian must engage as a persona, and this relationship provides context: the basis to initiate and sustain laughter. It is the latter challenge of sustaining laughter that is met by the contextual and integrating quality of persona. Inherent in the concept of persona is the concept of licence, what the persona can and cannot say and do in the process of eliciting laughter.

The British comedian Stewart Lee concurs with the idea of stage persona and licence. Discussing the idea of what material he felt audiences let him away with now as opposed to when he was younger, he says the following:

Well, you change as a person; I think, partly what’s changed is this: when I was twenty-one, I was thin, reasonably good-looking young man. And for you to say arrogant things then, or nasty things about people, or confident things about sex or sexuality is very different to saying the same things as an over-weight, grey-haired man. And I think the best thing that happened to me was that in the four years I had off during ‘Jerry Springer the Opera’ I sort of got a bit broken, I got really knackered out, I went grey, I put on weight, and when I came back to doing stand-up I think I was entitled to inhabit a lot of the positions I’d taken, as an affectation, when I was in my 20s. And also, looking a bit fucked makes taking certain arrogant positions heroic, whereas before it

⁶⁰ John Limon, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 12.

just seemed arrogant. And I think it took me a decade and a half to look right for the stuff that I was doing.⁶¹

Lee refers to the idea of changing physically over time and how aging has somehow allowed him do material that would have seem arrogant coming from his younger self. He uses the word ‘entitled’ to describe the sense of permission he felt to inhabit positions. It seems that the more broken down he became with age the more license he had with audiences to take such positions. The same person once perceived arrogant could later be seen as heroic. What Lee refers to as a sense of entitlement I describe as licence.

CONCLUSION

The central claim of this chapter is that to understand stand-up comedy performers and performance one needs to account for the most essential skill of the craft. I suggest that this skill is the capacity to mentalize as described by Zunshine. This is also consistent with compatible approaches set out by McConachie and others drawing on a cognitive approach to performance and text analysis. By discussion and application, I have demonstrated a starting point for applying a matrix of analysis from four adjacent and compatible areas:

1. Dennett’s heterophenomenological approach
2. McConachie’s cognitive approach to performance
3. Humour Theory: Hurley, Dennett, Adams, *Inside Jokes*
4. Erving Goffman’s *The Performance of Self in Everyday Life*, and

To supplement these four, I refer to adaptive accounts of personality formation, including George Kelly and Walter Mischel and others, to describe performance and audience engagement within a general ToM. Such mentalization informs the iterative process of writing and performing. I have set out theatrical engagement in stand-up comedy as a form of imaginative mental activity, namely, perceiving and interpreting human behaviour in terms of intentional mental states (e.g. needs, desires, feelings, beliefs, goals, purposes, and reasons) within the performance situation. This capacity to mentalize humour transactions is the

⁶¹ Stewart Lee, interview by Edward Naessens, 2013.

essential prerequisite to developing as performers who can generate sustained laughter. Comedians come to know intuitively how to present themselves (body and text) and engage a room. This mentalizing informs and involves the writing and delivery of material, the physical presentation and framing of self on stage, and the business of conceptualising how one's comic persona is perceived. I have demonstrated how mentalization can be applied to text analysis to read both the audience and performer. In analysing a short section of Eddie Izzard's performance, identifying a moment of failure and recovery, I have shown how the four pillars of spectating (attention, memory empathy, and cultural knowledge—AMECK) can be identified in this short clip. Finally, I have introduced the notion of adaptive agent in an environment, partially to foreshadow what is to follow in a description of persona development.

Using an array of strategies both before and after the punchline, competent comedians extract as many laughs as possible. But more importantly, stand-up comedy is a presentation of a comically-biographied-self, an observer who creates a world, and or, observes a world familiar to one's audience in a comedic way. In other words, the comedian presents a stage persona that structures, frames, and provides essential context for the jokes.

The thesis provides a pragmatic account of stand-up comedy and thereby makes the case for CSP as an emergent phenomenon borne of the process of pre-empting, performing, adapting, and developing in front of audiences, in a community of comedians, and within the structure of stand-up comedy environments. CSP overlaps significantly with concepts like mask and front. But the thesis describes its formation and ongoing development as fundamentally a response by the comedian to translate humorous ideas and text into performable routines, and reflecting on the feedback from audiences and the performance environment. What follows, therefore, is that analysis of stand-up comedy via text-based approaches alone falls short. What is required is an account of stand-up performance in its psychosocial, cultural, and non-verbal aspects that addresses the short-comings of purely text-based methods of analysis. By bridging folk accounts with compatible scientific theory, the thesis creates a cross-disciplinary verification of CSP as a viable and constructive concept in understanding the workings of stand-up comedy.

CHAPTER 2 - MIND THE GAP FROM PAGE TO STAGE

INTRODUCTION

The central argument of this thesis, as set out in the introductory chapter, is that comic stage persona (CSP) is a key element to understanding the performance of stand-up comedy. CSP is expressed both verbally and via non-verbal means in performance. Direct audience engagement/interaction in the live setting entails strategic presentation of a public 'self' intended for humour (a comically-*biographed* self). This thesis argues that the process of CSP formation involves intuitive reading of the writing and performance of comedy material (tacit understanding of writing and performance craft), a sense of licence, and the psycho-social awareness to anticipate and negotiate the live event.

However, as was shown in the previous chapter, CSP is a conflicted concept.¹ The complexities of factors including personal awareness, conscious and unconscious behaviour, cognition, and implicit and tacit knowledge, may well account for much of the confusions regarding the recognition and definition of CSP. But there should be little doubt that becoming an accomplished stand-up comedian requires a substantial process of development of voice, style and competence as an interactive performer. Stand-up comedy is not just well-crafted jokes. With this in mind, this chapter examines and discusses the approach of key theorists in humour studies to verbal humour. The aim is to show where and how humour studies informs the understanding of humour in stand-up comedy and how accounting for CSP offers a better alternative to a purely linguistic approach.

The main body of the chapter begins with an analysis of a transcript from Louis CK. The aim is to show the problematic nature of a purely textual analysis of stand-up comedy, and then suggest how Louis CK's CSP mediated through his performance skills is vital for apprehending the humour in the piece. This then opens to an exegetical analysis of Salvatore Attardo's and Victor Raskin's General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) and an analysis of Salvatore Attardo's and Lucy Pickering's approach to comic timing. The primary aim of this exegesis, analysis, and critique of the linguistic approach to humour is to provide a deeper

¹ See: Central Problems section in chapter 1 for views expressed by Double, Harrop, and Marc.

understanding of how stand-up comedy cannot be properly understood by purely linguistic methodology as it stands. In doing so, the aim is to expose some of the key issues involved in understanding the interwoven workings of stand-up texts and CSP. And while the process of analysis and critique that follows might at first suggest why these approaches are problematic for understanding stand-up comedy, the ultimate aim is to compare and contrast stand-up comedy material with canned jokes, and identify areas of compatibility and incompatibility.

It's also important to stress that there are two forms of criticism in this chapter: one that identifies issues within linguistic approaches that are problematic for humour theory, and a second form of criticism that identifies why the approaches are problematic for analysing and understanding stand-up comedy. It is the latter form of criticism that makes the case for alternatives. Neither form of criticism should be viewed negatively. Rather, they are intended to identify areas where the approaches are useful, and others where they might be corrected, modified, and extended. Both forms imply ground rules for the thesis.

One issue of concern, when addressing GTVH in particular, is the insistence by the authors that it is not a model of how jokes are actually produced; rather, it is a way to analyse them linguistically. The authors say, 'It is also demonstrated that the proposed model is not a model of joke production and that, therefore, production-related considerations do not and cannot inform the model.'² Much of the content and discussion in GTVH relates to linguistics, ordering, and logic. Such matters, while relevant to linguistics and cognate fields, seem of little relevance to this thesis on CSP. However, GTVH makes its claim as a theory of verbal humour. This being the case, it is reasonable to conclude that GTVH may be extended to analyse stand-up comedy as verbal humour. Indeed, Elliott Oring—one of the three internal readers for GTVH—suggests that it should not be so difficult to extend GTVH to cover NVC (non-verbal communications). The case can therefore be made that such an extension of the theory would have to accommodate stand-up comedy performance. It is on this basis that any theory of verbal humour should be evaluated, given that stand-up comedy is a form of verbal humour. While acknowledging GTVH's monumental value, it is shown that without

² Salvatore Attardo and Victor Raskin, "Script Theory Revisited(Ed)," *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 4, no. 3-4 (1991): 294.

accommodating the performative factors captured in CSP, GTVH comes up short in the analysis and understanding of stand-up comedy. For this, and other reasons that will become apparent, the following exegesis, review, and engagement with the selected approaches from humor studies is focussed on the elements that have relevance for the performance of stand-up comedy.

Finally, through the analysis and critique of Pickering and Attardo's investigation of comic timing, CSP is revealed as a psychosocial empathic process that defines comic timing not as a chronological phenomenon but as empathic-timing phenomenon: *Kairos*. The claim I put forward is that comedians time by reading audiences, tuning into a range of feedback from the live environment. Stand-up comedy is a highly social activity. While much of what is presented by the comedian is prepared, its delivery is a matter of in-the-moment appraisal and response to live interaction and the accumulation of intuitive skills built over time and multiple audience interactions.

LOUIS CK, BEACON THEATRE 2011³

Time code: 22:50 – 23:50

1. I mean, everything we introduce to the world is shitty...
2. Meaning white people. [ML]
3. Because.... I really think that white people are from like another planet. (SL)
5. Because, we like, when we came to America it was so nice. It was just Indians...
6. ...and they weren't even Indians.
7. We called them that by accident... [SL]
8. and we still call them that. [ML]
9. Like we knew in a month that it wasn't Indians [SL]
10. but we don't just give a shit. [ML]
11. We never correct it [LL with some applause]
12. We came here, they're like (act out) 'Hi'
13. We're like, 'Hey! You're like Indians, right?' [ML]

³ Louis C.K., "Louis C.K.: Live at the Beacon Theater," (USA2011).

14. 'No...' [SL]
15. 'No, this is India, right?' [SL]
16. 'Naw, it's not, it's a totally other place.' [SL]
17. 'You're not Indians?'
18. 'No.'
19. 'Argh, you're Indians.' [LL and applause]

The above 18-line transcript is marked at the end of lines where laughter occurs with a basic SL/ML/LL and applause to indicate intensity of audience response. The first challenge for a linguistic analysis is to identify the humour and jokes. Without the laughter indices provided, this would be quite a feat—arguably impossible.

Even with the laughter marked and graded, the text is relatively lifeless. The opening line establishes a polemic or viewpoint. CK claims that 'we' have a bad track record as inhabitants of the world. He paces throughout the delivery of this line, holding the microphone at chest level, and using his left hand to mark out beats. This physical style of pacing the stage is discussed in much greater detail in the next chapter. Suffice to say for now that the impassioned oratory of a preacher or public speaker provides a substantial degree of cuing to the audience in terms of salient thoughts and points of interest in the script.

Another aspect of CK's delivery is his apparent spontaneity—as if the thoughts are just occurring to him in the moment. This performance technique is a common feature in stand-up comedy that—as discussed in the opening chapter—promotes a sense of natural conversation and intimacy. This engaging style also allows for script departures, improvisation, and digressions. But despite the appearance of free form conversation, punchlines and topics are, in the main, scripted. Adding to the impression of an ordinary guy (an everyman) having a chat with a group of friends, CK opts for a decidedly casual style of dress—a plain black t-shirt, regular blue jeans, black and white trainers, and a wrist watch.

At the end of line 1, having said, 'shitty', CK, with a wry smile pans his eyes from his left to right across the front rows for approximately one second before raising his eyebrows and delivering a punchline on line 2 that generates a mild laugh. On paper, the putative punchline doesn't seem to merit a laugh, but CK's

tone of voice dips at the beginning of line 2 to qualify his previous use of 'we' on line 1 as intending to specifically say 'white people' like himself. He could have said, 'When I say 'we' I mean: white people.' A general question for the purpose of analysis is: what is implicit in line 2 that qualifies it as a punchline, and triggers the audience to laugh?

One possibility is that the dipping of his voice at the beginning of line 2 denotes a sheepish private/secretive admission/recognition that by using 'we' on line 1, he was engaging in a form of obfuscating that uses a generalised collective term in order to obscure one's burden of responsibility for a wrong. CK's tone might therefore be seen as the performance of confession, hence the dip in his tone and level of voice. By doing this, CK points up this oft-used truth-avoidant strategy. Using 'we' suggests that all races were complicit equally in the introduction of 'shitty' things into the world. CK, therefore pulls himself up to correct his self-serving generalised use of 'we', when in fact he believes it was mostly whites who brought so much harm into the world. Therefore, the implicit disambiguation of the word 'we' may be considered the key part of the set up for the punchline on line 2. But it is significantly CK's performance of the lines that drives, frames, and signposts the humour.

As he moves on to line 3, the audience laughter continues, he says, 'Because' and a broad smile breaks across his face. This smile conveys any or all of the following: playfulness, anticipatory glee at the route of polemic he is about to embark upon, a recognition of revealing an embarrassing truth about white people and their historical record of destructiveness. What I propose is most significant about this repeated form of smiling is its devilish/playful quality that is congruent with the CSP Louis CK has established heretofore.

At the end of line 4, he delivers the line, 'It was just Indians' matter-of-factly, and then performs line 5 as if a thought that has just occurred to him and taken him by surprise. It's as if he has suddenly realised a new fact to support his main polemic. On line 6, he builds further by acting out a mix of discovery and incredulity at colonial lack of concern for identifying native peoples correctly. The phrase 'by accident' presses home the arbitrary decision that impacted the naming of natives of the continent for centuries—as if a pedestrian everyday mix-up. Then

he reduces this monumental historical event in lines 8, 9, and 10 to a description of blasé indifference.

What is notable is that CK—like other competent humour performers/comedians—engages what psychologists Karl-Heinz Renner and Timo Heydasch describe as, ‘the histrionic self-presentation style that is characterized by performing explicit As-If-behaviours in everyday interactions.’⁴ CK recreates, as an actor does in each performance, the emotional registers of each line afresh. As will be discussed in the next chapter, the use of act-outs and other performative techniques identifies humorous intentions latent or ambivalent within the text. Without the comedian’s performance craft, however, much of the humorous intention remains inaccessible. This speaks to what Jerry Palmer refers to when he says, ‘... the principle is beyond doubt: all jokes, and much of humour, are dependent upon performance skills’⁵

There is an interesting opening to the show where CK acknowledges the artifice of the stand-up form. Arriving on the stage unannounced, CK begins, ‘I’ll do all the announcements you would have heard.’ (There have been no announcements regarding the use of flash photography, mobile phones etc., as is customary prior to most theatrical events). While making announcements and setting down ground rules—CK says, ‘[D]on’t yell out during the show. If you have something to say to me... totally (seriously)... this is what we do. You write it down. And then you go outside in the lobby. And then you go home and kill yourself. Because that’s selfish. It’s a rhetorical performance. It’s got nothing to do with you.’⁶

On the one hand there is an illusion of live conversational engagement synonymous with stand-up performance, on the other there is the reality that it is a scripted monologue. CK is not telling his audience anything surprising. Just like the example from Bill Hicks in the previous chapter, he is displaying the type of ambivalent attitude toward his audience that, based on the laughter, is received as playful. Also, by admitting that his show is a prepared script and not a dialogue

⁴ Karl-Heinz Renner and Timo Heydasch, "Performing Humor: On the Relations between Self-Presentation Styles, Gelotophobia, Gelotophilia, and Katagelasticism," *Psychological Test Assessment Modelling* 52, no. 2 (2010): 171.

⁵ Jerry Palmer, *Taking Humour Seriously* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1994), 161.

⁶ C.K., "Louis C.K.: Live at the Beacon Theater."

that depends on audience reciprocity, he perhaps earns kudos for honesty. These lines work on multiple levels in terms of the performance: he warns off hecklers and interrupters, shows dominance and playfulness, and the ability and willingness to name the elephant in the room.

CK's judicious performance choices, particularly his use of juxtaposition, could be seen as an interesting use of oppositions and contrast. Could this use of topic/performative contrast of heavy topic performed with lightness be considered akin to Raskin's concept of script opposition? This performance choice certainly seems to be instrumental in the humour. CK takes a weighty topic but assumes a light CSP to act out a compressed version of history. The topic is serious. But in a playful spirit, CK uses humour to make light. Here are echoes of Bob Newhart's routine of an Elizabethan court official taking a phone call from Sir Walter Raleigh discussing the discovery of tobacco. But in the white people routine, CK plays the cultural superiority of white colonialists as an everyman dismissing information that conflicts with his preconceived notions (that he has reached India, in this case). As a comedy writer CK is leveraging the well-known story of Columbus believing he has reached India via a Western route.

Notably, by playing his particular brand of the everyman, CK takes the audience into a world where the high-status figures of lore are reduced to the flawed everyman in this vignette. His benign dismissiveness on line 18 encapsulates centuries of cultural and racial superiority. In this respect it could be suggested that comedians perform script oppositions. Eddie Izzard, for example, in his *Star Wars Canteen* routine presents a similar type of juxtapositioning of familiar concepts. In a two-character vignette featuring Darth Vader engaging in an argument with a member of the canteen staff on the Death Star, the character of Vader is worn down as he attempts to order *Penne alla' Arrabiatta*.⁷

The aim of discussing these performance and script examples is to highlight some of the interplay between text and performance that must be accounted for. It demonstrates the use of performative craft, pacing, oratory style, rhetorical technique, affected spontaneity, and act-outs, and it introduces a potentially fruitful link between CSP and histrionic self-presentation. The discussion now

⁷ Anastasia Pappas, "Circle," (UK2002).

turns to the work of key theorist in humour studies to explore linkage and problematic points on the humour studies map as it relates to my thesis of CSP and stand-up comedy performance.

THE GENERAL THEORY OF VERBAL HUMOR

The General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH), proposed in 1991 by Salvatore Attardo and Victor Raskin, revises, extends, and combines two previous and separate approaches by the authors to joke theory—Raskin's (1985) Script-based Semantic Theory of Humor, and Attardo's Five-level Joke Representation Model. GTVH postulates a hierarchical arrangement of six Knowledge Resources (KR) that inform a joke. They are: Script Opposition (SO), Logical Mechanisms (LM), Situation (SI), Targets (TA), Narrative Strategies (NS), and Language (LA). According to the authors, 'Each knowledge resource is discovered as a parameter of joke difference.'⁸

Having set out seven joke examples, some with varying degrees of overlap and distinction (variance and invariance), the authors set out the parameters by which they intend to analyse jokes. Starting with language, they discuss how a joke can be paraphrased and still retain an overall recognisability as broadly the same joke. They suggest that elements such as paraphrasing, choice of words, and syntactic structure can vary without varying the underlying joke. While accepting how this point applies to linguistic analysis, and that the authors stress that GTVH is not a theory of joke production, it will be shown later why GTVH is a problematic fit for craft of writing and performing stand-up comedy.

Crucial to both writing and performing stand-up are poetics, phrasing, word choice and placement, and delivery. Crafting efficient set-ups and maximising laughs by judicious use of language is also essential to how persona is established and laughter is generated. Interestingly, there are points germane to stand-up comedy raised by John Morreall.⁹ Attardo and Raskin respond broadly that the application of the Script-based Semantic Theory of Humor (SSTH) is '...not as straightforward as in the case of simple jokes.'¹⁰ However, when addressing

⁸ Attardo and Raskin, "Script Theory Revisited(Ed)," 294.

⁹ See: note 1, Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 334.

Morreall's query on how parodies can be accommodated within script theory, they say that, 'Parodies are allusive, and all that means in terms of scripts is that the specific scripts alluded to by the speaker be available to the hearer(s), at least per the speaker's assumption'.¹¹ In the case of the stand-up comedians, 'the speaker's assumption' is a key point of relevance in terms of reading audiences. This was touched upon in the introductory chapter in relation to theory of mind and stand-up comedy. This concept of thinking into the mind of audiences, however, is strongly linked to language usage.

Still on language, the authors refer to the semantic competence of natural speakers entailing the ability to recognise paraphrasing, and therefore if the same joke were paraphrased, the native speaker would recognise it as the same joke. Therefore, other parameters, such as logical mechanisms, situations, script oppositions, have a greater degree of importance in terms of distinguishing jokes. A reworded version of the same joke structure would therefore be detectable to the native speaker and would cause him or her to stop the joke-teller midstream to inform them that they know the joke or, at the end they will not laugh. Again, in the normal run of joke-telling this is true, however, at least one exception comes to mind in stand-up comedy. Meta-comedy, a style that often parodies comedy styles, employs multiple repetitions of jokes to demonstrate absurdity. Stewart Lee, for example, exploits repetition to ridicule, often varying just his vocal and physical performance to drive home his comedic point. But perhaps it is an audience's capacity to detect the comedian's oppositional intent that marks the humour as a form of script opposition.

GTVH cites William F. Fry, that one may want to tell the same joke more than once but certainly not to hear it more than once. However, a comedian could build a routine around Fry in 1963 being some kind of comedy policeman, sternly setting out the rules of what the audience wants and does not want to laugh at, and what jokes the audience wants and does not want to hear again. This comedian could then retell the same lame joke repeatedly and the audience might very well laugh.

¹¹ Ibid.

The point here is not to dismiss the general point made by Fry (1963), but rather to consider the performative dimension of verbal humour, the potential of performer-audience interaction for anarchic subversion of rules and norms, and how the performative virtuoso of a stand-up comedian, engaging with an audience, has the potential to subvert general 'rules' of humor theory. Again, the point here is not a claim against GTVH as a means of analysing traditional jokes, but rather a demonstration of how verbal jokes and ordinary humour transactions can vary substantially from the joke/bits and performer/audience interaction in stand-up comedy. As a theory of humour GTVH can broadly be described as rooted in incongruity. But no one theory of humour could comfortably claim to cover all styles of stand-up comedy.

An objection relevant to stand-up comedy¹² raises the point about paraphrasing and meaning, in response to which the authors say, '...it can be argued that no two meanings are totally equivalent and that even a very slight change in the wording of a sentence always introduces a different shade of meaning'.¹³ Again, this acknowledgement is relevant to stand-up comedy where sometimes very slight variation of shade and subtlety drives the humour.

Further in note 2, they mention Eleanor Rosch's research that showed speakers characterize robins and sparrows as better examples of the set of all birds, and rate penguins as the worst. Considering the writing process of comedians, choosing topics and specific details that are relatable and familiar are core considerations. The reference to Rosch is therefore extremely relevant to the study of stand-up writing craft, where relatability of material and the perceived aptness of phrasing is a central focus. It points up a significant distinction between joke-telling and the structure of joking in stand-up comedy. Whereas a person telling a Polish joke aims for one laugh on the punchline, stand-up comedians, on the other hand, attempt to maximise laughs by working micro punchlines into set-ups.

A good example of the kind of scripting considerations involved are discussed in a video for the New York Times Magazine where the comedian Jerry Seinfeld describes his writing process from inception of idea, through joke linkage,

¹² See note 2, Attardo & Raskin

¹³ Attardo and Raskin, "Script Theory Revisited(Ed)," 334.

and down to the final closing punchline.¹⁴ Describing how he wrote a routine about Kellogg's Pop Tarts, Seinfeld explains how, 'It's a fun thing to say: Pop Tart. I like the first line to be funny right away.' This suggests his sense of comedic efficiency: the type of comic maximising that seeks to create potential laughs even in the set-ups of routines.

In the video, Seinfeld discusses the type of specificity that typifies his comedy writing craft. He reads, 'When I was a kid, and they invented the Pop Tart, the back of my head blew right off.' And then explains to his interviewer, '[T]hat specific part of my head blew off, not just my head, but just the back.' Further he reads, 'So... in the midst of that dark and hopeless moment the Pop Tart suddenly appeared in the supermarket. And we just stared at it like an alien spacecraft, and we were like chimps in the dirt playing with sticks', and then explains, '[W]hat makes that joke is, you've got 'chimps', 'dirt', 'playing', and 'sticks'. It's seven words, four of them are funny.'¹⁵

In terms of the point about paraphrasing made in GTVH, it is hard to see how those comedians who painstakingly craft routines could accept that the language in the set-ups is not of importance to the overall routine. If Seinfeld's opening line was rephrased it could read as follows, 'I remember seeing Pop Tarts for the first time. I was amazed.' This paraphrasing could be said to diminish both the linguistic and performative potential of the original, 'When I was a kid, and they invented the Pop Tart, the back of my head blew right off.' We don't have the picture of Seinfeld as a kid. We don't have that idea of the Pop Tart being 'invented' by 'they'. We don't have the specificity of the exaggerated claim: 'back of my head blew right off.' That said, it is reasonable to suggest that Seinfeld—a highly-accomplished comedy performer—would still manage to get a laugh at the end of the paraphrased line by pausing and showing his amazed face to the audience. He might even act out a double-take and in doing so, gets a laugh. But the point still stands: outstanding comedians attend meticulously to both writing and performing based largely on a drive to optimise laughter potential.

Therefore, set-ups in stand-up comedy not only serve the punchline, but

¹⁴ Jerry Seinfeld, "Jerry Seinfeld: How to Write a Joke," (New York Times Magazine, 2012).

¹⁵ Ibid.

also work as micro-punchlines. One thing that has been established so far is that comedians seek to maximise the potential for laughter, and therefore the putative punchline in a comedy routine is not the only trigger point. Perhaps it is the insatiable demand of keeping audience engaged and laughing that drives the comedian to dig for better words, phrases, and sleeker iterations of the material. What the *New York Times* interview with Seinfeld does not address or show is the painstaking process of road-testing, or how his masterly comedic performance skills raise the material to its ultimate level of humour in performance. There is no way of knowing how much of the Pop Tart routine was augmented or re-written based on the responses of initial club audiences. What Seinfeld does say that is intrinsically relevant to stand-up comedy and GTVH is how precise word choice and phrasing in writing stand-up comedy matter. He shaves off syllables to make material flow: 'It's more like song writing', he says.¹⁶

NONCASUAL LANGUAGE

The authors make the case that content precedes language: 'When an ordinary utterance is made, the content of what the speaker is going to say is roughly fixed in his or her mind, but the exact wording has yet to be decided upon.'¹⁷ But jokes are not part of casual language. Non-casual language, they say, 'contains an additional layer of meaning, having to do with function.'¹⁸ In the case of jokes the function is to cause laughter. Here again, there is a discernible difference with stand-up comedy and verbal jokes in presentation, while the function of both is the same: laughter. Many stand-up comedians, as folklorist Ian Brodie and others suggest, attempt to veil their jokes, routines, and vignettes in a conversational style. Affecting a natural conversational style while targeting laughs creates the paradoxical state of stand-up comedians controlling the engagement and laughter demands of a performance while at the same time appearing casual, natural, and conversational. So often in stand-up comedy it is the sincerity of the comedian's expression that has a positive impact on the material. Engaging the audience is but a part of the performance. Another part is taking the audience in. The good

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Attardo and Raskin, "Script Theory Revisited(Ed)," 298.

¹⁸ Ibid., 299.

comedian, like the good liar or fiction writer, has a sufficient command of verisimilitude and the ability to smoothly conceal the mechanics of craft.

Much of stand-up comedy is not joke-telling as in the canned jokes presented in GTVH. A central challenge of stand-up comedy is to affect a conversational style. As will be discussed in more detail in the chapter/section on 'Wrong-footing' and theory of mind, a comedian wants to mentally wrong-foot the audience. It is a temporary form of misdirecting or playing with the credulity of the audience. One way to do this is to appear sincere. It might even be said that appearing authentically engaged in conversation is prioritised over the naked presentation of jokes. A stand-up audience is therefore left guessing where the comedian is going with their set-up. The art of presenting joke set-ups in a natural, conversational style is synonymous with contemporary stand-up comedy.

Consider the following quotes from Paul Provenza's documentary, *The Aristocrats*: 'How many comedians tell jokes on stage? People usually have routines, or they string together small short observations (George Carlin). And, 'I mean, you don't do joke jokes on stage... ever; that's the total kiss of death 'cos you're viewed as a big old hack' (Lisa Lampanelli).¹⁹ Both these comments are in keeping with the monologic/dialogic conversational structure synonymous with stand-up comedy. So, while accepting Attardo & Raskin's point on non-casual language, it is worth restating that stand-up comedy is not the same as joke-telling. Bearing in mind Louis CK's announcement to the audience 'not to yell out' during his show (discussed at the beginning of this chapter), central to stand-up is the comedian's craft of presenting jokes within a rhetorical structure that engages a casual, conversational style. Therefore, Attardo & Raskin's point about non-casual language offers an extremely useful distinction for this thesis in that a person in normal conversation might be said to be casual, whereas in the presentation of a stand-up routine any appearance of casual is in fact masking a non-casual purpose. This point of distinction becomes even more relevant when discussing the intentioned nature of mind. The intention of a comedian is to entertain his audience by playing a game of wrong-footing over the duration of a performance.

¹⁹ Paul Provenza, "The Aristocrats," (USA2005).

The issue of how comedians present their routines to audiences is also relevant for Attardo & Raskin's second parameter: Narrative Strategy. It describes how joke structure/format operates in terms of presentation. The Polish jokes in GTVH are presented as riddles, expository, question-and-answer etc. In stand-up comedy the joke formats are different for several reasons, as described in the previous paragraph. Perhaps the main reason for the difference is the primacy of affecting a natural conversational style with an audience. Topics might, for example, be introduced in the form of a rhetorical question, or a declaration as in the beginning of CK's routine (see transcript of routine above). Here is where an examination of the how-to literature provides an understanding of the general principles of the art and craft.

In her book *The Comedy Bible*, comedy coach Judy Carter suggests that novice comedians structure their routines starting with four basic attitudes: weird, scary, hard, stupid. She provides the following rationale, 'Attitude provides the energy that moves a topic from idea to joke... [T]he hardest part of performing is engaging the audience. Posing the attitude+topic as a question is one powerful way to get the attention of the audience.'²⁰ Though she says 'attitude provides energy', she also adds that it engages audience attention. Note line 1 in CK's routine: it is attention-grabbing; it piques our interest to hear more, and, is therefore sound oratorical and rhetorical strategy.

Another element of verbal humour Attardo & Raskin discuss in the NS parameter is the use of non-redundancy, that is: how the joke is unveiled in such a way that the joke's set-up provides details as 'missing links that the hearer must and can reconstruct.'²¹ Non-redundancy is a general principle of efficiency—in a sense that the details provided in the set-up are necessary. However, it can be said that there may be variations in set-ups to any particular joke, depending on the joke-telling competence of the person telling the joke. Arguably there is grey area. Embellishments can and do add to jokes and storytelling. Paul Provenza's *Aristocrats* shows the imaginative flare of comedians taking a vile stock joke and extending its comic potency by adding flourishes of comic detail that show both

²⁰ Carter, *The Comedy Bible : From Stand-up to Sitcom : The Comedy Writer's Ultimate How-to-Guide*, 72.

²¹ Attardo and Raskin, "Script Theory Revisited(Ed)," 301.

performative and creative brio. Where one comedian might get to a punchline in a line or two, another may construct a set-up with micro punchlines on the set-up details prior to delivery of the major punchline.

Secondly, a less capable comedian may well add superfluous details that detract rather than build. While efficiency is generally recommended in the how-to literature, the live situation is always open to digressions, segues, and various modifications based on the live event. A good example of this can be found in Chris Rock's interview with Franklyn Ajaye. Asked, why he is so mentally tired after a stand-up performance, Rock replies, 'Because even though I know the jokes, I'm still looking for that ad-lib. I'm wondering, is it there, is it here? I'm constantly feeling the audience.'²²

Such is the centrality of 'feeling the audience' in the performance of humour that it must not be relegated to the domain of the ineffable and inscrutable. As will be shown in later sections discussing timing, rapport, and as discussed in the opening chapter in relation to theory of mind and Bruce McConachie's identification of attention, memory, empathy, and cultural knowledge—comedians work their material out in front of live audiences and edit accordingly. Therefore, the jokes demonstrated in GTVH may well be edited down, but the opposite can often be the case for bits in stand-up. While superfluous details might be dropped or reworked, other details may be extended. Recorded shows that make it to public broadcast are generally the show after the process of whittling and honing in the natural development environment of the live setting.²³ This is a part of GTVH worth exploring tightly to demonstrate the issues that both link and separates the joke examples in GTVH from the comedy routines and performances in stand-up comedy.

Parameter 3, Target, is GTVH's only parameter defined as optional. It describes how many jokes have a target. Joke 1 in GTVH's set of light-bulb-changing Polish jokes 'deals with an absurdly stupid way of performing a simple and obvious task. As such, it can be targeted at any individual or group from whom

²² Franklyn Ajaye, *Comic Insights : The Art of Stand-up Comedy*, 1st ed. (Los Angeles: Silman-James Press, 2002), 178.

²³ See *New York Times* interview with Myq Kaplan: Zinoman, "A Stand-up Joke Is Born."

such behavior is expected.’²⁴ Attardo & Raskin deal briefly with the sociocultural knowledge aspect of joke target. In line with what is being argued in this thesis, joke targets require the kind of ‘agreement’ between performer and audience as captured in two of the elements employed in McConachie’s description of theory of mind: empathy and cultural knowledge.²⁵

Firstly, the task of changing a light bulb must be culturally understood as a relatively simple one. Therefore, in a culture where light bulbs do not exist, or a system other than bayonet or screw is not familiar, these jokes won’t work. Secondly, the phrase ‘from whom such behavior can be expected’ is an extremely open definition. In the British Isles, for example, Poles are more associated with being hard-working and conscientious, whereas programmes on cowboy builders associate a section of British tradespeople with overcharging, over-promising and/or under delivering, or somehow fitting the dodgy-dealer stereotype.

Again, this principle of a joke with broadly understood targets, concepts, and stereotypes appears to be in line with McConachie’s description of cultural knowledge. For Attardo & Raskin, a) the audience must be familiar with the concepts and stereotypes, and b) the audience don’t necessarily have to believe the stereotype to be true, they just have to have the stereotype associated with the target. As they put it, ‘it is unimportant if the teller or the hearer of the joke believes in the stereotype as long as they possess it and can apply it to the humorous act of telling and hearing the joke.’²⁶ So while the concept of target is clear, how targets are ‘agreed’ seems tacit and contingent. In this regard in particular, I make the case that stand-up comedians—as writer/performers—are cultural savants who intuit audience knowledge of stereotypes and attitudes. They build tacit intelligence and nous in the process of writing material and then testing it in front of multiple audiences. This type of accumulated intuition/tacit knowledge of the sociocultural milieu is what I argue is part of the comedian’s resident store of intuitions that inform CSP.

²⁴ Attardo and Raskin, "Script Theory Revisited(Ed)," 301.

²⁵ McConachie, *Engaging Audiences : A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre*.

²⁶ Attardo and Raskin, "Script Theory Revisited(Ed)," 301.

Attardo & Raskin state that, 'for most joke consumers, such stereotypes exist on the same fictional plane as unicorns, monsters, and Little Red Riding Hood.'²⁷ This suggests something of the tacit playful agreement that generally operates in stand-up comedy. However, such a claim requires unpacking, as it raises questions about the status of what comedians say and mean, if anything, through their material. Does deliberate violation of Grice's maxim of quantity describe a fundamental principle of stand-up comedy? The short answer to this is: yes; stand-up comedy entails playful violation. But there is more to consider. Is the comedian presenting his/her own views, or in the spirit of humorous violation presenting the views of a persona that should not be taken at face value? How does this principle apply to offence? What is the status of onstage utterances in stand-up comedy? More will be said about joke targets and the status of "views expressed" in stand-up comedy as it is a parameter that is most applicable to the central claims of this thesis. How comedians function as stage personae and sociocultural savants negotiating the contingent nature of comic targets is of great relevance to CSP. Comedians play with audiences. The status of the boundary of such play is crucial as it is complex, as later discussion of controversies and offence will show.

Parameter 4, Situation (SI), describes the familiar and widely practiced activities and behaviours employed in jokes. Therefore, 'An obscure and unknown activity will incapacitate the joke for most consumers.' Arguably, from a joke writer and comedian's standpoint, there is sufficient overlap between parameters 3 and 4 to combine them on the basis that they deal with the same general concepts: relatability and context. Elements of the joke must be relatively familiar concepts for the audience.

An example of how cultural knowledge and situation can be leveraged is Irish-American comedian Des Bishop's routine about leaving on the immersion.²⁸ Having moved from New York to live with Irish relatives in Waterford, Ireland, Bishop describes the sociocultural differences. The routine about the immersion²⁹

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Des Bishop, "Des Bishop Unplugged," (2009).

²⁹ Always-on hot water is a concept alien to Ireland. This was particularly the case during the 1970s and the oil crisis of the 1980s. In the majority of households a large copper cylinder with an electrical heating element must be switched on in order to heat water. Given the relatively high cost of electricity and the high cost of heating water, the custom is to only heat as much as is required.

relies on Irish-raised audience who are familiar with how the cost of electricity for domestic water heating is a cause of hysterical angst in Irish homes. Bishop juxtaposes a person from New York who takes always-on hot water and properly pressured water for granted, against a culture where electric energy and water heating are considered precious but unavoidable luxuries.

In terms of how target and topic function in stand-up comedy, arguably parameters 3 and 4 are really an amalgam that can be captured under the heading: Relatability of Material. Therefore, a given target must be relatable as a target. A situation must be relatable in terms of how it yields comicality. For stand-up comedians, relatability of topics, objects, concept, characters, etc., essentially reduces to the same principle: what knowledge/concept do audiences have of the topic, how are they disposed to the targets and topic, how much or how little needs to be explained/set up, and what details need to be placed where and when to surprise or wrong foot via punchlines. It doesn't matter to a comedian/joke-writer whether they are talking about a spoon or the president; both simply function within the joke as relatable objects with explicit and implicit associations that are amenable to creating punchlines. In this regard, therefore, people and things in jokes may not need separate parameters, as within the workings of the comedy they are all conceptual props within the material.

Parameter 5, Logical mechanism (LM), distinguishes the types reversals in jokes. For the purposes of this thesis it is perhaps the least controversial, as it deals with common ground shared by jokes and routines. It is interesting that Attardo & Raskin suggest that jokes (5) '...will not withstand any close scrutiny'³⁰ This may suggest that somehow the logic mechanism of the joke can impact the response to the joke. If the LM is sloppy, an audience may balk. But similar to stereotypes and targets, the issue of cultural knowledge means that if the LM is sound but not effective in terms of audience response, the comedian would be wise to favour response over logical correctness. Effective exaggeration may well violate rules of logic. Therefore, 'telling the truth' can get in the way of 'telling good jokes' if the audiences understanding of a topic is faulty. A comedian may well opt to write according to what the audience is likely to believe and understand, in preference to

³⁰ Attardo and Raskin, "Script Theory Revisited(Ed)," 304.

writing accurately and logically. If a bit involving a logically false assumption gets a laugh whereas an accurate and factual version does not, the punchline that gets the laugh—perhaps, because audiences have that assumption—will generally be retained. Laughter response trumps LMs.³¹

SCRIPT OPPOSITION IN STAND-UP COMEDY

According to Raskin (1985) '[T]he script is a large chunk of semantic information surrounding the word or evoked by it.' ³² The central claim of Raskin's (1985) Script-based Semantic Theory of Humor (SSTH) is that jokes contain two opposing scripts that are revealed as such via the punchline of the joke. Set-ups by their nature set up a reveal and/or reversal in the punchline. The punchline is therefore a point of revelation, where the hearer of the joke realises that based on the information implicit in the punchline, there was more than one interpretation of a script in the set-up. In terms of the category of jokes presented in GTVH, this is a straightforward and viable claim. Objection raised previously notwithstanding, the type of jokes presented in GTVH can be committed to paper and can be recognised by the modern reader as jokes. However, in the case of stand-up comedy scripts, for the most part, the same cannot be said. As the quotes from George Carlin and Lisa Lampanelli above show, 'joke jokes' are the kiss of death. The question is: Why? What does it mean: joke jokes (canned jokes) are the kiss of death? In answer to this, I'm suggesting that a key part of understanding stand-up comedy is how the set-up and punchlines are bound up with the comedian's CSP. The humour is presented as the thoughts, experiences, attitudes, and unique perspectives of the comedian. By establishing themselves with audiences within the frame of a CSP (the comically-biographed-self), comedians in effect create contexts as meta set-ups. Audiences know then to read between the lines accordingly, hence the difficulty of attempting to explain many stand-up punchlines and routines without such context.

Consider the challenge of explaining the punchlines in Louis CK's "White People" routine using SSTH or GTVH. There are evidently intended punchlines,

³¹ See section below, *Elliott Oring, Script Opposition, and Target*, for further discussion of cultural knowledge and stereotype.

³² Victor Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor* (Dordrecht ; Lancaster: Reidel, 1985), 81.

but it is difficult to see how SSTH applies to these jokes. An example to demonstrate the problem is the opening line with a putative punchline at the end of line 2:

1. I mean, everything we introduce to the world is shitty...
2. Meaning white people. [ML]

If, as suggested, the phrase 'we, I mean white people' is the punchline, what is the joke and what are the script oppositions?

Could it be argued that there are two opposing understandings of what 'we' CK is referring to?

1. 'We' i.e.: all human beings on the planet.
2. 'We' i.e.: white people (white European colonialists).

In GTVH, Attardo & Raskin set out the claim for script opposition:

The main claim of SSTH is that the text of a joke is always fully or in part compatible with two distinct scripts and that the two scripts are opposed to each other in a special way. In other words, the text of the joke is deliberately ambiguous, at least up to the point, if not to the very end. The punchline triggers the switch from the one script to the other by making the hearer backtrack and realize that a different interpretation was possible from the very beginning.³³

The two phrases that stand out here are 'opposed to each other in a special way' and 'deliberately ambiguous'. In the Louis CK routine, by filling in the implicit inferences, it's possible to say that he deliberately kept 'we' ambiguous in line 1. At that line he could have said, 'We white people'. That cuts out the punchline generated by his clarification. Essentially, 'when I say 'we', I mean white people' is a clarification. Is a clarification 'funny' per se? Clearly not. What therefore makes this line a joke?

It could be argued that joking relations have been established; a certain performative rhetorical rhythm has also been established; the audience knows it is Louis CK and he is a comedian; the lines are intended to be humorous; it is a stand-up comedy show; and he has been performing comedy and generating laughs for 22 minutes etc. But the question remains: how is CK's clarification perceived as

³³ Attardo and Raskin, "Script Theory Revisited(Ed)," 308.

funny? There are no clear markers as given in GTVH. It would seem that it is CK's NVCs (vocal tone, facial expression, body language) that mark the punchline. Arguably, the script opposition is implied. But that requires an extension beyond GTVH by reading into what might be inferred by CK's NVCs. However, without the performative, and based purely on identifying text-based SO alone, it is difficult to see 'I mean white people' as a punchline. This adds further weight to my claim that an understanding of CSP is necessary to understand the workings of stand-up comedy.

LEVELS OF SCRIPT OPPOSITION

Attardo & Raskin state that SSTH postulated, but not explicitly, three levels of SO. They are: actual vs non-actual, normal vs abnormal, and possible vs. impossible. But how does this apply to Louis CK? It could be argued that CK's act-out of European settlers arriving in the Americas is an act-out of an amalgam that comically represents multiple interactions over time. CK acts out a generic understanding of the general history taught to school-goers. It could be argued that this is a hyperbolic summation of white colonial history that is in contrast to a reality that is factual, tragic, and brutal.

However, if we take another comedian such as Eddie Izzard who also employs this act-out style to describe well-known Greek and religious mythology, it becomes more challenging to apply the three levels of abstraction as presented in SSTH. Greek myths, Goldilocks and the Three Bears, and the story of Noah's Ark, are not real. However, it could be argued that these myths are general agreed scripts. Those who know the story of Noah's Ark know that there were not three bears on board, and that in the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears, Goldilocks broke Baby Bear's chair.

A further argument that could be made is SO can be good/bad. Therefore CK in setting up the routine has identified white people as bad. The planet and non-white people are good, white people are bad. But the question can then be asked: isn't good/bad implicitly achieved by Target? Once established as the target of a joke a comedian rhetorically justifies the choice of his or her particular target. There is no obligation to facts and proof in a form that centres on point of view. CK, as Stewart Lee often does, could just equally flip the target of the routine by

attacking the romanticised notion of native people, and or, make the routine about the hypocrisy of white privileged social justice warriors who self-aggrandise by attacking white privilege while at the same time reaping the benefits of that privilege. This, therefore, leaves open the question of good/bad SO as a viable standalone parameter. As mentioned already, comedians in engaging audiences create a world that is ruled by their unique viewpoints. It is Louis CK's, Eddie Izzard, Sarah Silverman's, and Stewart Lee's worldview that is created. Just like a game or other fictive mechanism, the rules are established within the parameters of personae. The rules may overlap with those of the world, but the world of the comedian are established within his or her performance.

ATTARDO'S 5-LEVEL MODEL

The reformulation of Victor Raskin's SSTH proposes the integration of the six principles of the SSTH with a five-level hierarchy put forward by Salvatore Attardo. Based on a five-level hierarchy, Attardo (1987) postulated a model for the text of jokes. Starting with script opposition and logical mechanism on down to the actual text of the joke, the model proposes a system for ordering the elements that make up a joke. Again, the main aim of the authors of GTVH is the analysis of jokes by establishing the categories and ordering of jokes by modifying and integrating their respective models. The remainder of this chapter will deal with the parts of GTVH that have specific relevance for the present PhD thesis—rather than providing a step-by-step exegesis of Attardo & Raskin's process of integrating two models of joke and verbal humour. As the authors make clear they are in search of 'an abstract model of joke generation' and not a model of how jokes are actually produced. They say:

It means simply a convenient, dynamic representation of an entity, a joke in our case, as a process in which the decisions and choices about the various traits and ingredients are made in a justified logical order. What it does not mean is that jokes are actually produced this way by the speakers, as we will explore a little further in a later subsection.³⁴

In Note 10 of GTVH, John Morreall challenges GTVH, in particular Attardo's 5-Level Model.³⁵ Both the objection from Morreall and response from the authors

³⁴ Ibid., 314.

³⁵ Ibid., 339.

run to over eleven-hundred words of technical back-and-forth regarding the lack of joke generative algorithms and the fact that the theory ‘makes no claim to psychological reality’.³⁶ Negatively comparing GTVH to Transformational Grammars (TG grammars), Morreall claims that GTVH is ‘an abstract model without much predictive or explanatory power.’³⁷

Morreall seems to identify a substantial lacuna in GTVH that has relevance for the analysis of stand-up comedy. One of the aims of this chapter is to closely examine approaches within humour theory in terms of the workings of stand-up comedy and the role of CSP in negotiating audience engagement and generating humour. As set out in the opening chapter, the aim is to draw up an interdisciplinary model that includes various strands of sociology and psychology as they relate to performance to explain CSP. Therefore, Morreall’s objection regarding the lack of psychological realism in GTVH, and Attardo & Raskin’s response, is of particular relevance. Both the lack of psychological realism and neutrality to the process of humour generation count against GTVH for my purposes. However, both authors argue that GTVH is ‘... what a theory must be, namely, the general basis, format, and template for analysis.’³⁸

Attardo and Raskin claim that GTVH can separate ‘a (potential) joke from a nonjoke in the case of the proposed humor theory’ and they go on to say,

It is this resolution function which renders both theories explanatorily and descriptively adequate and gives them the “predictive power,” which means simply that they can predict what entities will and what will not belong to the privileged set (of well-formed sentences and jokes, respectively).³⁹

Based on what I have set out in this chapter, GTVH does not offer such expressed predictive or analytic potentials for stand-up comedy. This, in and of itself, is no mark against GTVH. It does, however, suggest the need to investigate what sort of model alteration or alternative could.

³⁶ Ibid., 340.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 341.

³⁹ Ibid.

Further, they say:

Even if not rooted in the actual process of joke production, a hierarchical representation of the components informing the joke would have gained enormously in validity if it did have some empirical roots, and another subsection below will argue that the degrees of similarity among the jokes, even if clear only in some cases and legitimately opaque in other, borderline cases, do provide this anchoring for the hierarchy which will emerge.⁴⁰

This refrain of GTVH not concerning itself with the ‘actual process’ of joke production is worth noting. Certainly, for stand-up comedy the process of joke production is a central concern.

ACTUAL JOKE PRODUCTION

By way of demonstrating how GTVH and its hierarchical model—as the authors say—does not reflect how jokes are actually produced, consider the production of puns that leverage cliché, well-known phrases, or culturally familiar concepts:

Tiny keypads on photo printers are so annoying. The other day someone nudged me while I was printing photos of my trip to a Spanish milking parlour. I ended up with six of Juan and half a dozen of an udder.

The punchline is a play of ‘six of one, half a dozen of the other’. The generation of the joke starts with a search for a way to wrong-foot an audience by ridiculing a cliché (It’s six of one, half a dozen of another). The punchline was therefore the point that the other parameters had to work for. Six of one becomes six of Juan. Other becomes udders. The challenge of incorporating six and half-a dozen is resolved by introducing a complaint about tiny key pads, udder leads to milking parlour, and Juan means the joke location can be Spain. The ordering and hierarchy of actual joke productions could therefore be said to be arbitrary and dependent on the requirement of the jokes creator to strategically ambush the audience.

Q: What animal do Polish drug smugglers use?

A: Crack Cow!

Again, the production of the joke begins with the punchline and works back. It is worth considering that how jokes are actually produced in stand-up comedy could

⁴⁰ Ibid.

well be the story about what comedians do: exposing the arbitrary nature of custom, morals, mores. Why is X done this way and not that way? Observational comic tradition takes the familiar and flips it. The work with puns takes a well-known cliché, alters it, and uses it in a surprising way. There is ridicule of the banality of conversations and use of clichés and aphorisms. Hurley et al. say that as such humour is Mother Nature's reward for error-detection, and that humour producers such as comedians exploit that reward mechanisms.⁴¹ But regardless of theoretical approach, it seems that joke production and presentation is central to the workings of stand-up comedy and is therefore discussed in the next chapter in terms of how comedians such as Tim Vine generate and present jokes that fit their CSP.

Though the authors of GTVH insist it is not a theory of production, it does however offer other insights of importance. Discussing the order priority between Situation (SI) and Script Opposition (SO), Attardo & Raskin make the case that SO may put a constraint on SI and vice versa. They conclude that both should be treated as mutually independent. They say:

It can be argued perhaps that this particular Script Opposition, smart vs. dumb, puts a constraint on an acceptable Situation: it should be one in which one can make a fool of oneself. It can be convincingly counter argued that one can make a fool of oneself in just about any Situation.⁴²

The reason for drawing particular attention to this section is because it touches on self-deprecation, a point of significant relevance to stage persona in stand-up comedy. Central to stand-up is the establishment of a co-operative and, in essence, playful relationship between performer and audience. The prevalence of self-deprecation in stand-up might be considered part of establishing and supporting such a relationship.

For example, even though Louis CK is not directly self-deprecating, he precedes this piece by twenty-plus minutes berating his low moral status and character. Even referring to a more general and global issue such as European colonialism, he implicitly points the finger at himself by clarifying he is talking about white people—his own race. It is an inescapable pattern of self-deprecation

⁴¹ Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, *Inside Jokes : Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*.

⁴² Attardo and Raskin, "Script Theory Revisited(Ed)."

that drives the construction of his rhetoric and comedy. Considering its power to engage an audience, I argue that the use of self-deprecation—be that use explicit or tacit, conscious or unconscious—is a core feature of CSP. Therefore, the selection of topics and material, and its construction into jokes, will be significantly influenced by how it can serve the presentation of the CSP of the stand-up comedian. One could go so far as to say that a case can be made that CSP can be the dominant ordering parameter.

ELLIOTT ORING, SCRIPT OPPOSITION AND TARGET

A central consideration for stand-up comedians relates to the handling and leveraging of stereotypes and targets depending on the audience in front of them. Depending on where they are performing and to whom, seasoned comedians know to tack and adjust accordingly. Their material can play with or against stereotypes. The priority is to create and maintain connection and engagement. In presenting a CSP, a comedian playing a miser, a grump, or a fool, for example, establishes an archetype that is easy for an audience to recognise/relate to. The CSP can then be leveraged in self-deprecatory humour or, if playing a grump, the CSP gives licence for the material to be more ruthless in attacking targets. The comedian in presenting a CSP creates a world amenable to Script Oppositions and Targets. As effective sociocultural savant, the comedian reads rooms and situations, and intuitively handles such issues as Script Opposition and selection and handling of Targets.

However, regarding the relationship between Script Opposition and Target, Attardo & Raskin say that the claim for mutual independence cannot be made because: ‘In order to be used with the smart/dumb script Opposition, the target group (or individual) should be believed to be dumb. In other words, the dumb stereotype should be strongly and widely associated with the group.’⁴³ This claim raises some interesting questions about cultural knowledge, mental associations, and relatability of jokes in humour transactions. In terms of stand-up comedy, I question whether the stereotype needs to be, as Attardo & Raskin claim, ‘strongly and widely associated’. As suggested earlier, the dumb stereotype of Poles is not

⁴³ Ibid.

global. However, one can appreciate such jokes, perhaps through on-the-fly inferences, having lived in a culture where deprecation and put down of regional or cultural groups is a familiar form of humour. Dumb stereotypes, as the work of Christie Davies shows, are somewhat transferable. The joke structure is not alien, and therefore it is possible to quickly figure out the various components. Elliott Oring (see note 12, GTVH) makes the case that 'Jokes often establish the stereotype where none exist... thus one could tell clever Pole jokes to someone who didn't know any Polish jokes at all.'⁴⁴ It is a good point Oring makes, but arguably the truth lies somewhere in between. My point about transferability still stands. Being sufficiently exposed to types of jokes makes it possible for audiences to infer the situation and targets etc. To demonstrate the point, consider the following Polish joke:

A guy in a bar leans over to the guy next to him and says, 'Wanna hear a Polack joke?'

The guy next to him replies, 'Well, before you tell that joke, you should know something. I'm 6' tall, 200 lbs. and I'm Polish. The guy sitting next to me is 6'2' tall, weighs 225 lbs, and he's Polish. The fella next to him is 6'5' tall, weighs 250 lbs, and he's Polish. Now, you still wanna tell that joke?'

The first guy says, 'No....

I don't want to have to explain it three times.'⁴⁵

Though ostensibly presented as a Polish joke, the guys at the bar, don't have to be Polish (TA). They don't even have to be at a bar (SI). Arguably, the joke is a script reversal predicated on aggressive guys being called stupid by insinuation. In this sense the joke TA may be overdetermined: is it dumbness, is it aggression, is it dumb aggression and humourless demeanour? The elements of tension in the joke work elegantly to intensify the inevitable sense of violence/humiliation or fight/flight (perhaps an alternative SO). Assuming one engages with the set-up of the joke, the empathetic, mental scramble is then on to figure out how the protagonist is going to extricate himself from the implied violence, while also avoiding the humiliation of having to withdraw from telling a joke. Arguably it is

⁴⁴ Ibid., 342.

⁴⁵ Source: (<http://www.rantnroll.com/html/polish.html>)

the effective creation of tension within the narrative of the joke that is the joke's most outstanding feature. Therefore, the joke does not have to be a Polish joke.

The association with aggression and dumbness will suffice. In this regard, I partially agree with Attardo & Raskin, that the dumb stereotype (even if tacit) must be present. By tacit, I mean, big guys can be associated with aggression but the association is not necessary. There is also, for example, the association of the 'gentle giant'. Tacit associations are therefore dormant and can be activated. In this particular joke the association of big and dumb is activated by attributing dumbness to those willing to threaten violence over a joke. The fact that the three guys happen to be big, strong, Polish, and greater in number than the relatively weak protagonist is not the issue; the fact that they are threatening violence over a joke is.

Elliott Oring raises the issue of multiple stereotypes associated with groups, and therefore more than one stereotype may be invoked in a joke.⁴⁶ He suggests that jokes can be enhanced by activating more than one stereotype. He writes, 'Indeed, one could argue that such jokes would be better because there is more work involved in selecting the appropriate stereotype operating in the joke.'⁴⁷ Attardo & Raskin respond saying that generally one of several stereotypes is activated and suggest the idea of a 'threshold amount of work will kill the joke for many hearers, and still more will kill it for all.'⁴⁸ The introduction of concepts of sophistication, difficulty, and work, is certainly relevant to stand-up comedy. Part of the pragmatic intuition informing a comedian's approach is a sense of the audience's capacity to 'get' jokes as their attention spans wane. As psychologist Dolf Zillmann's research shows, factors including the consumption of alcohol impact on the level of cognitive work an audience is prepared to or capable of doing to process a joke. He writes:

⁴⁶ Attardo and Raskin, "Script Theory Revisited(Ed)," 343.

⁴⁷ Note 13, Elliott Oring, Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

The findings leave no doubt about the fact that the enjoyment of ambitious, subtle and 'sophisticated' humour deteriorates with increasing alcoholic intoxication. The findings also show that blunt humour, by contrast, gains with intoxication.⁴⁹

By adjusting their registers, delivery and material, comedians accommodate the boisterous late-night audience and the lunchtime (soberer) audience. A good description of performers adjusting to engage audiences can be found in Bruce McConachie's account of boisterous Bowery theatre crowds in *Engaging Audiences*; it demonstrates the performer's tradition of handling disruptive theatre crowds.⁵⁰

The role of stereotypes and associations in the joke is complex, to say the least. The dynamic of the above joke could also be altered substantially if the protagonist is significantly more powerful (e.g. heavily armed), or significantly less sympathetic (e.g. a neo-Nazi skinheads) than the three Polish guys. The role of associations, empathy, and how one engages with a joke and joke-teller are significant and subtle factors. But stereotypes do not necessarily need to be strongly and widely associated with a group, as Attardo & Raskin insist. In this respect degree of association is somewhat arbitrary and contingent on multiple factors with varying hierarchies of importance. As already mentioned, a good comedian creates a world and establishes its rules. Having engaged his or her audience in play via an effective CSP, the world of stereotypes and targets can be managed locally, i.e. within the dynamic established within the performance. Often in their work, stand-up comedians relate personal stories and introduce characters we know nothing about prior to the comedian providing these details. Once established, the comedian can use these characters in call-backs and later references, for example.

In setting down rules for the hierarchical model of joke parameters, Attardo & Raskin have perhaps overlooked the complexity of sociocultural dynamics and the subversive tendencies of comedians. Comedians can effectively turn stereotypes, clichés, assumptions, and even the perceived rules of comedy on their heads. As Eric Weitz puts it, '[T]he fact remains that the world of comedy will

⁴⁹ Antony J. Chapman and Hugh C. Foot, *It's a Funny Thing, Humour* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1977), 293.

⁵⁰ McConachie, *Engaging Audiences : A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre*.

always betray leakage or untidiness when an attempt is made to confine it within consistent parameters, because by nature it cannot resist turning its mischievous gaze even upon the limits of its own framing.’⁵¹ But the particular difficulty with the TA parameter is picked up on by Oring who points to the contingent sociological character of TA as a knowledge resource. He writes, ‘GTVH acknowledges that not all jokes have Targets. Indeed, TA is a component of jokes that is rooted in sociological rather than linguistic knowledge.’⁵²

A further issue for GTVH’s overly prescriptive definition of how stereotype functions is it that it does not seem to allow for cases of over-determination discussed above. It is possible for a joke target to be the butt of the joke for more than one negatively perceived stereotype. In the joke where the guy at the bar offers to tell a Polish joke, it could be argued that the threat of aggression blends with Polish ethnicity to leverage the dumb stereotype. Do the three guys at the bar have to be Polish? What if they were Australians, Russians, or Germans, for example? For some listeners the ethnicity may make the association with dumbness, while for other listeners the association might be big and humourless.

IN HUMOUR, EXCEPTION MAY BE THE RULE

Considering the creative nature of comedians and comedy writers, there will be exceptions. Attardo & Raskin write, ‘Since brain surgeons are stereotypically associated in American culture with the highest degree of smartness, one should not expect to succeed with a joke involving a real board-certified Polish brain surgeon.’⁵³ When writing in 1991, Attardo & Raskin were not to know that in 2016 the U.S. Republican presidential candidate Dr Ben Carson—a board certified brain surgeon—would become the TA in so many jokes predicated on the dumb stereotype.

⁵¹ Eric Weitz, *The Cambridge Introduction to Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 18.

⁵² Elliott author Oring, *Joking Asides : The Theory, Analysis, and Aesthetics of Humor* (Utah State University Press, 2016), 20.

⁵³ Attardo and Raskin, "Script Theory Revisited(Ed)," 318.

Q: How many American brain surgeons does it take to change a light bulb?

A: One thousand. One to change the light bulb and nine-hundred and ninety-nine to keep Dr Ben Carson away from the procedure.

Again, this is not to dismiss the general rule put forward. However, it does show that society, culture, and stereotypes are fluid, dynamic, and diverse—that rigid rules are vulnerable to the vagaries of humour in practice. Humour must be relatable—and this ultimately is a psychosocial cultural matter. Another aspect of stand-up comedy is that the jokes set-ups are not obvious; one might even say they are deliberately concealed. Therefore, the wrong-footing inherent in a canned joke may be somewhat easier to detect textually than the same wrong-footing mechanism in a stand-up routine where, as already suggested, the natural registers of sincere conversation somewhat mask the joking-intent. The following advice from Judy Carter speaks to this convention in stand-up comedy:

When you seem sincere and personally revealing in your setup, it gets the audience to relate to what you're talking about. Then, when you jump to the funny part, it creates a surprise that makes people laugh. If you *start* funny, there is no way to *build* to the laugh.⁵⁴

Throughout 'Script Theory Revisit(ed)', Attardo and Raskin repeat that GTVH is not concerned with the question of: 'how do people use humour?' GTVH addresses what humour is. My purpose here is not to speculate on why they make this insistence but to show that GTVH, as it currently stands, is insufficient as a theoretical approach to stand-up comedy performance. Oring writes, 'While GTVH is largely focussed on printed text, it would not be too much of an extension to include relevant paralinguistic features of oral texts.'⁵⁵ However, there are perhaps substantial hurdles to be cleared before such an extension to the performance of stand-up comedy could be possible. Consider a comedian with a self-deprecating CSP; once established, this identification becomes the unspoken TA within lines that refer to particular character traits. In this way CSP allows for multiple punchlines without the need to establish a TA each time. Therefore, analysing jokes

⁵⁴ Carter, *The Comedy Bible : From Stand-up to Sitcom : The Comedy Writer's Ultimate How-to-Guide*, 70.

⁵⁵ Oring, *Joking Asides : The Theory, Analysis, and Aesthetics of Humor*, 19.

in stand-up comedy without the context provided by the CSP and the paralinguistic/NVC elements is problematic.

It should be clear at this point that the discipline of humour studies is in a quandary or crisis in terms of its theory-driven approach exemplified in GTVH. While that is as one would expect for a discipline that is relatively young and finding its feet, it seems to point to a need to take a step back in order to move forward. Elliott Oring has an interesting position on this. In response to Christie Davies's suggestion that LM should be abandoned as a parameter in GTVH,⁵⁶ he makes the following qualified defence of theory-driven hypotheses: Oring writes:

While I am entirely in favor of theory-driven hypotheses, I am equally in favor of generalizations that emerge from a close study of the materials themselves. Often, startling results emerge from naïve, non-theoretical questions, while theory-driven ones flap and fail. ... We need to understand as much as possible about how jokes do their work. Whether joke techniques can be reduced to a fixed number of clearly delineated principles is an open question.⁵⁷

Oring puts it well. Theory-driven hypotheses are a necessary part of any science. However, the study of humour in the wild—as in the practice of stand-up comedy and the folk theories of comedy practitioners—is the obvious place to begin when formulating hypotheses and theories. Perhaps more engagement with philosophy of science might be needed to support humour studies with its progress. There is an inescapable conflict between theory and practice in areas such as humour studies as the various communities of researchers attempt to accommodate the compatible and incompatible elements of interdisciplinary research.

My proposed thesis of CSP is favourably disposed to the kind of observation and approach suggested by Oring. There is scope for greater engagement with comedy practitioners and exploration of the folk theories of stand-up comedy. The urge to formulate theory does not have to mean closing off to non-theoretical folk accounts or accommodating naïve non-theoretical questions. On the contrary, theories that accommodate openness are less likely to 'flap and fail'. However, as the next section shows, getting the balance right means being prepared to get it

⁵⁶ Christie Davies, "Victor Raskin on Jokes," *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 17, no. 4 (2004): 379.

⁵⁷ Oring, *Joking Asides: The Theory, Analysis, and Aesthetics of Humor*, 21.

wrong. But most importantly, it shows why this thesis on CSP prioritizes engaging with the views of articulate comedy professionals.

PROFESSIONAL VS NON-PROFESSIONAL JOKE TELLERS

What follows is a discussion of Salvatore Attardo's and Lucy Pickering's research on comic timing as set out in their 2011 paper: "Timing in the performance of jokes".⁵⁸ The authors make the case that in the literature, timing in humour is commonly believed to be significant; however, very little is written on the subject. They narrow the definition of timing as comprising pauses and variations in speech rate. Using data collected from twenty joke performances, Attardo & Pickering claim to show that speakers do not significantly raise or lower their speech rate at and around the punch line. Their data shows no evidence that punchlines are preceded by pauses. They conclude 'that the theory of timing in jokes performance is in serious need of further research'⁵⁹. While I agree that timing needs further research, I will return later to question the reasons given by Attardo & Pickering.

Having presented a selection of loose definitions and quotes relating to timing from various non-academic sources, Attardo & Pickering suggest that timing in humour is 'a complex and multifaceted topic' and may well be a 'folk-concept that results from the conflation of several independent phenomena.'⁶⁰ They then cite a broad definition of timing by Neal Norrick.⁶¹ They conclude that based on the aforementioned quotes and discussion, timing can be defined as: distribution of pauses, distribution of the elements of the text, and/or interaction with other speakers.⁶²

Interestingly, Attardo & Pickering restrict their focus to researching 'pauses and rate of speech' and exclude 'paralinguistic markers such as smiling voice and laughter.'⁶³ They refer readers to Pickering et al. (2009) for a discussion of aspect

⁵⁸ Salvatore Attardo and Lucy Pickering, "Timing in the Performance of Jokes," *Humor - International Journal of Humor Research*. 24, no. 2 (2011).

⁵⁹ Ibid., 233.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 234.

⁶¹ Neal Norrick, "On the Conversational Performance of Narrative Jokes: Toward an Account of Timing," *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 14, no. 3 (2001).

⁶² Attardo and Pickering, "Timing in the Performance of Jokes," 235.

⁶³ Ibid.

of prosody of humour performance.⁶⁴ The paper therefore could be said to reduce to a literal and narrow definition of a term that is evidently more metaphorical in conventional usage.

Following a discussion of the folk-theory of timing, they identify a collection of claims relating to prosodic timing and punchlines (PLs): pauses before PLs, PLs delivered faster (Norrick 2001), more clipped (Bauman 1986), and ‘with bells and whistles’ (Chafe 1994) than non-PLs. Attardo & Pickering state that the paper will not address changes in voice pitch and volume; and that according to the theory of prosodic timing, PLs ‘should be preceded by not only *noticeable* but also *significant* pauses’ (*italics in text*).⁶⁵

The data for their case is drawn from recordings (arranged independently by Dr. Jodi Eisterhold of Georgia State University) where ten students performed two scripted jokes—provided by Attardo & Pickering, one of which is reprinted below for comparison. Both of the paper’s referees raised what seems an obvious point: the skill level of students as joke tellers. Attardo & Pickering, while accepting there is merit in, and are planning to carry out, a study ‘contrasting professional comedians and amateurs’ report that according to evaluation by two independent judges, the performance of the jokes by the cohort of ten students was found to be average.⁶⁶

The recordings were analysed using ‘the pitch extraction function of a Kaypentax Computerized Speech Laboratory.’⁶⁷ This, however, meant that Attardo & Pickering were constrained by the number of recordings they could use, as ‘many of the recordings simply contained too much ambient noise.’⁶⁸ They measured rate of speech, pauses, pitch, volume, and observe voice quality characteristics. They noted that, as one would expect, ‘significant variations exist among individuals’ and therefore measured ‘prosodic differences between punch line and the set-up of the same joke to ensure that no inter-individual variation affected’ their results.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Lucy Pickering, Corduas, Marcella, Eisterhold, Jodi Seifried, Brenna Eggleston, Alyson and Salvatore, Attardo., "Prosodic Markers of Saliency in Humorous Narratives," *Discourse processes* 46, no. 6 (2009).

⁶⁵ Attardo and Pickering, "Timing in the Performance of Jokes," 238.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 239.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

Attardo & Pickering present a sample joke performance marked with emphases and timings. The first thing to note is that this particular student has not stuck faithfully to the script as written by Attardo & Pickering—an error that Attardo & Pickering seem to have overlooked. The student also forgets to include a vital detail of the joke's narrative (the engineer putting the frog in his pocket). There will be further discussion of these issues below.⁷⁰

Table 1 of the paper compares speech rate (on a syllable/sec basis). Based on an averaging out of the data Attardo & Pickering conclude, 'From these results, it is apparent that speakers tend to deliver the punch line of the joke at a rate that is neither significantly slower nor faster than the setup in both types of jokes. On average, the punch lines were slightly slower, but the difference was not significant.'⁷¹ However, this interpretation of the results masks some significant variations I have detected in individual speech rate. For example, at least 13 of the samples (65%) show a speech rate variation between set-up and PL in excess of 30%. Sample 2 is 49.88% slower. In fact, samples, 2, 4, 5, 6, 10, 14, 19, and 20, are over 40% (faster or slower). This level of variation might suggest that there is a high degree of variability when it comes to joke-telling competence. It does not necessarily prove or disprove claims about timing.

⁷⁰ It is questionable whether poorly performed canned jokes can be meaningfully compared with how professional/accomplished comedians perform material.

⁷¹ Attardo and Pickering, "Timing in the Performance of Jokes," 242.

Sample	Setup	Punch line	Time Variation
1	4.41	4.34	1.59%
2	4.21	6.31	-49.88%
3	5.45	5.18	4.95%
4	3.37	5	-48.37%
5	4.17	6	-43.88%
6	3.76	5.51	-46.54%
7	3.95	3.66	7.34%
8	3.44	3.07	10.76%
9	4.42	2.91	34.16%
10	3.53	5.18	-46.74%
11	5.14	3.18	38.13%
12	8.9	5.71	35.84%
13	3.79	3.33	12.14%
14	3.59	2	44.29%
15	4.1	2.58	37.07%
16	3.67	3.81	-3.81%
17	4.09	5.38	-31.54%
18	3.33	3.44	-3.30%
19	3.91	6.11	-56.27%
20	4.07	2.03	50.12%
Mean	4.26	4.23	0.70%

Table 1. *Rates of speech in the texts*⁷²

Here I present Attardo & Pickering's Table 1. I have added a column showing speech rate variation calculated by percentage to show the extent of variability. Regarding pauses, Attardo & Pickering report, 'The mean length of the pauses in the setup was longer than the mean length of the pauses before the punch lines by 0.094 seconds, but this result was not statistically significant. However, since the hypothesis predicts that the pause before the punch line should be longer than the average in the setup, we conclude that the hypothesis has been falsified'.⁷³

As has been mentioned above, the performance skills of the cohort cannot be reasonably compared to that of professional performers. Even so, not all jokes can be best told by using the same speech rate and pauses. Intuitively, a good performer will make performance choices based on whether details in the set-up

⁷² Ibid., 241.

⁷³ Ibid., 242.

need special emphasis. The punchline might be delivered as a throw-away line rather than emphasised. Arguably, the research data is more indicative of how few of the cohort can tell a joke with a high degree of performative competence. Given to a trained performer the line, ‘Look I’m an engineer. I don’t have time for a girlfriend, but a talking frog, now that’s cool’, is open to numerous performance choices as regards beats, duration and placement of pauses, and emphasis. Experienced voice-over artists, dubbing artists, are expert at lip synching, presenting scripts, varying speech, doing accents, altering pitch etc. Here are just two of several ways to perform a the engineer line.

‘Look I’m an engineer. I don’t have time for a girlfriend, but a talking frog, now that’s cool.’

‘Look... I’m an engineer (pause) I don’t have time for a girlfriend, (pause) but a talking frog, (pause) now, that’s cool.’

‘Look... I’m an engineer... I don’t have time for a girlfriend, but... a talking frog... now... that’s cool.’

It is self-evident that stand-up comedians are laughter-maximisers who will use facial expression, vocalisation, and a range of NVCs to excite an audience. Therefore, as shown in the sample from Jerry Seinfeld earlier, it is reasonable to assume that a priority in approaching material is to get more than one laugh by finding micro PLs. For example, ‘I’m an engineer.... I don’t have time for a girlfriend’ with a pause after it, can be worked as a PL. It is a self-deprecating line (I’m a loser, i.e. bad SO). By cueing this line to the audience as such, it is then possible to get two laughs. The second PL will then be ‘that’s cool’ (a good SO: loser foregoes romance for nerdy plaything). In the hands of a competent performer even more laughter can be milked from this joke through a range of performative skills, including act-outs and accents.⁷⁴ As the Louis CK section at the top of this chapter shows, competent comedians judiciously use verbal and non-verbal ways to communicate pauses and beats in performance.

Attardo & Pickering acknowledge and discuss some issues and objections:

- a) ‘the high frequency of serious performance errors in the performances of the jokes’

⁷⁴ Perhaps a good way to think about this is ask: how might the cast of *The Big Bang Theory* perform such a line? Performance competence clearly has a large bearing on timing competence.

- b) that such performance errors ‘can completely destroy the joke’⁷⁵
- c) their ‘subjects were college students, hence untrained in the performance of humor’⁷⁶
- d) The speakers were ‘alone while performing for the camera and the operator’ (ibid) and therefore not in ‘non-ecological’ conditions.

On point d), Attardo & Pickering doubt that the conditions distorted the data ‘because in many cases the camera operator laughed at the joke (thus contaminating the data; we had to discard those cases), which seems to attest to the fact that the speakers were in a fairly normal situation.’⁷⁷ But this raises what is potentially a devastating suggestion. If Attardo & Pickering discarded those samples where the camera operator laughed, does that mean that the cohort used is made up of performances where the camera operator didn’t laugh? If this is the case, how can the cohort be compared in any way to how professional comic performers use timing? If anything, Attardo & Pickering have inadvertently studied a cohort that bears no resemblance to professional comedians. After all, effectively timed and delivered comedy material should make an audience laugh.

Efforts to empirically test and analyse folk theory and practitioner accounts of humour are to be welcomed, but if anything can be drawn from the above experiment, it is that such research requires far more pre-science and unpacking. The present thesis proposes to describe humour performance in stand-up comedy. Timing will therefore be considered as a function of empathic engagement, cognitive play, and overall, a technique that enhances elements like wrong-footing. It identifies the performance of humour as the correct object of observation for humour studies. While acknowledging the complexities of capturing performance, the case can be made that rising to the challenge of capturing complexity is preferable to reducing complexity and capturing results that bear little resemblance to the object of research.

While understanding the urge to reduce the elements to be observed, such a reduction is problematic. Arguably, by corralling such an array of views and opinions on such ‘a complex and multifaceted topic’, removing the NVC and

⁷⁵ Attardo and Pickering, "Timing in the Performance of Jokes," 245.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 246.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 247.

paralinguistic elements, and reducing timing to a strictly chronological concept of time and a narrow measurement of prosodic timing, we are left with a very narrow band of performance communication. It might be akin to presenting dance on the radio or a video of a dance performance with the camera just showing the face of the dancers.

RASKIN'S CSP

Before wrapping up this chapter, it is useful to consider that CSP is not restricted to professional stand-up comedians. The use of humour in all manner of public address makes it possible to observe the performance of humour beyond traditional comedy venues. The following is a section of transcript from a keynote presentation by Victor Raskin.⁷⁸ What is of particular interest in the light of what this chapter has discussed about comic timing and delivery, is Raskin's use of pauses, wrong-footing, and *Kairos*.

(Time code: 2:23) Victor Raskin (**VR**) Sophia Stone (**SS**)

VR: Thank you, it's a pleasure, honour to be here and to follow one of my favourite students in humour seminars, Sophia Stone. I don't know why we were lied about [sic] the number of children it's not 1.5 it's at least 1.7.

Sophia was absolutely delightful, she disagreed with absolutely everything that she heard here from me and my co-instructor professor Julia Taylor.

And... eh, what she agreed with she didn't like either.

And she wrote a brilliant paper. That was when? Three years ago?

SS: It was 2008.

VR: 2008. And that was... a long time ago.

A purely textual analysis of this interaction requires a fair degree of filling in if one were to get a relatively accurate account of what happened. Were this section of transcript handed to a neutral group unfamiliar with the speaker, event, and with the word "humour" redacted, it would be difficult to detect where the humour in this section of presentation occurred. The interaction could be read as irony, or sarcasm. Perhaps some readers would detect the opposing scripts "one of my favourite students" vs. "we were lied about", and, "Sophia was absolutely

⁷⁸ Keynote address: "The Theory (Philosophy) and Practice (Applications) of Humor Research" at the 6th Biennial Philosophy and Literature Graduate Conference at Purdue University on March 28, 2014. YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qVYIA123n28>

delightful” vs. “she disagreed with everything that she heard here... and what she agreed with she didn’t like either.” If our readers were then informed that there are x-number of laughs from the audience and asked to mark where those laughs might be, even with this substantial clue it would still be somewhat challenging for script readers to estimate the correct number and location of the laughs accurately. There are in fact four discernible laughs (Two small, and two medium).

VR: Thank you, it’s a pleasure, honour to be here and to follow one of my favourite students in humour seminars, Sophia Stone. I don’t know why we were lied about [sic] the number of children it’s not 1.5 it’s at least 1.7. (ML) Sophia was absolutely delightful, she disagreed with absolutely everything that she heard (SL) here from me and my co-instructor professor Julia Taylor.

And... eh, what she agreed with she didn’t like either. (S.L.)

And she wrote a brilliant paper. That was when? Three years ago?

SS: It was 2008.

VR: 2008. And that was... a long time ago. (ML)

Now, with the four laughs marked, the text is somewhat contextualised as witty-friendly address and interaction. It’s still possible that a dire interpretation of the transcript could be made by, for example, a chronic gelotophobe or paranoid schizophrenic. But otherwise with the four laughs identified, the transcript becomes easier to interpret. And yet, gaps remain. Laugh 1 clearly refers to a play/mock disagreement whereby VR looks toward SS, and with a slightly bewildered vocal tone accuses SS of lying. One clue that an astute reader might pick up on is how VR includes himself in the a collective we and is not addressing SS one-on-one per se; but rather, he is discussing her as the voice of the audience expressing bewilderment and annoyance. There are in fact two opposing scripts:

1. The bewildered professor who seems to have gotten the wrong end of the stick, vs. the astute professor of computational semantics and the philosophy of humour who is pretending that he didn’t understand a piece of data in Stone’s presentation. Quite what the joke is, we don’t need to know; there is enough here to read that the humour is generated by the dumb/smart pretence. And,

2. Publicly calling out SS for lying, vs. somewhat teasing his former student of acting immorally. As a side point, the humour could just as well be explained via theories other than SSHT or GTVH.

However, it is the fourth and final line that is of greatest interest. Even with the above details of text and context established, how could the audience read humorous intent, and read it almost instantly? Looking to the fourth and final laugh, it becomes most apparent that paralinguistic cues account for the bulk of the humour transaction on the final line. The line, ‘And that was... a long time ago.’ alone, is hardly recognisable as intended humour. Where is the script opposition? Why is a room of reasonably intelligent graduates laughing? What is the joke?

Here, I argue, is a challenge to both GTVH and Attardo and Pickering’s paper on timing and delivery. It is Victor Raskin’s adroit comic performance, his quick-witted and intuitive use of delivery, timing, pauses, beats, rhythm, facial expression (or lack thereof), and vocal tone that converts an otherwise banal line to a laughter-raising joke. Even though he employs what some, including perhaps Raskin, would describe as a dead-pan delivery style, it is mostly the significant use of paralinguistics in his presentation that drives the humour.

He looks to his right into the audience where Sophia Stone is seated. He looks directly ahead at the audience. He shakes his head to indicate disbelief “...it’s not 1.5, it’s at least 1.7.” He raises his eyes as if struggling to calculate the number of years that have passed between the present event (2014) and 2008, before responding, “a long time ago.” An alternative interpretation of the joke could be that Raskin considered 2008 (six years previous) a long time ago. It suggests his sense of the passing of time has let him down. What he intended and what the audience laughed at remains open. But, again it suggests the complexity and the potential for over-determination. It is possible for individuals within an audience to laugh for different reasons at the same punchline.

But the most relevant point to be made here is how Raskin leaves a pause before his punchline. It could be argued that the punchline would not work as well, or at all, without the pause. In order to wrong-foot his audience, he leaves a little thinking time for them to complete his sentence, and then he delivers a SO. The use of the pause on the final line is crucial to the humour. Perhaps the expected

response there is: “2008. And that was six years ago.” But instead, VR pauses and offers “... a long time ago.” He confounds the expectation by leaving a beat before the punchline. Which is exactly the recommendation suggested by the folk theories of comic timing that Pickering and Attardo’s paper claims to refute.⁷⁹

CONCLUSION

For all of its short-comings, Attardo & Pickering’s paper on timing is a milestone on the way to investigating the workings of stand-up comedy. While its conclusions seem unwarranted given the definition of timing employed and conclusions drawn from an experiment that was far removed from those found in stand-up comedy, the project sets down a marker for further and future research. However, my suggestion would be that research would do well to engage comedians and comedy professionals in discussions of context and audience-based performance. The ‘how-to’ literature cannot be taken as an exact proxy for the views of comedians, and given the diverse nature of stage persona, performance strategies, and approaches to stand-up comedy, it is perhaps a little premature to draw conclusions based on a limited survey of the practitioners’ view of craft and practice.

It might well be said that the linguistic study of humour and stand-up comedy research is still in the early phase of development and, therefore, we would do well to consider Sir Karl Popper’s view as expressed in *Conjectures and Refutations*:

⁷⁹ See: Ajaye, *Comic Insights : The Art of Stand-up Comedy*, 20. Ajaye advises would-be performers to ‘light the fuse’ of their joke by ‘taking a pause before you deliver the punch line.’⁷⁹, and Dean who suggests ‘Comic timing happens in the moment, in the feedback loop between the comedian and each individual audience.’ Greg Dean, *Step by Step to Stand-up Comedy* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000), 127.

Science must begin with myths, and with the criticism of myths; neither with the collection of observations, nor with the invention of experiments, but with the critical discussion of myths, and of magical techniques and practices.⁸⁰

The Estonian folklorist, Avro Kirtman, expresses similar reticence about the development phase of humour studies. Having surveyed humour theories, including GTVH, he writes:

My final conclusion of this brief survey of contemporary linguistic theories of humour tends to be agnostic. It is hard if not impossible to find criteria to evaluate the 'objective' state of development of the theories of the humanities: they can be equally regarded as being still in their incipency, or as enjoying their heyday, or as approaching their end.⁸¹

Perhaps at the heart of the problems set out in this chapter are the different concerns of GTVH and stand-up comedians. The former is concerned with what linguistically defines a joke, while the latter are concerned with what will make an audience laugh. The two are often opposing, hence the need to look beyond linguistics and into the human side of humour in stand-up comedy. While the eminent sociologist and humour scholar Christie Davies hails GTVH as potentially 'a proper scientific theory,'⁸² what needs to be considered for my purposes is how GTVH fares in its potential to analyse a particular form of verbal humour; i.e. stand-up comedy.

It might be suggested that humour studies must guard against the risks of theoretical dogmatism if it is to avoid becoming disconnected from what Oring refers to as the study of the materials themselves and how jokes do their work. To that end I set out in the subsequent chapters NIGHTS (Notionally Integrated General Humour Theory of Stand-Up) as a model that describes CSP and its formation as an adaptive process based on, among other elements, how comedians describe themselves and their process of performance. The theory is notional in that it studies the process of stand-up comedy and how comedians do their work in a way that remains open to prescience exploration, folk theory, and tentative indications of compatibility. It estimates and outlines a pragmatic account of the

⁸⁰ Karl R. author Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations : The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*, 2nd edition. ed., 66.

⁸¹ Arvo Krikmann, "Contemporary Linguistic Theories of Humour," *Folklore* 33 (2006): 55.

⁸² Davies, "Victor Raskin on Jokes," 380.

process of stand-up comedy and how cognitive accounts, humour theory, social psychology, and cognate disciplines can bridge subjective and folk accounts of the processes involved. In essence, the approach is compatible with Dennett's heterophenomenological approach to consciousness, in that NIGHTS considers CSP as a concept like human consciousness that is considered private, subjective, and somewhat mysterious. However, with a collaborative approach it is possible to assess stand-up comedy as a process and bridging the subjective/objective chasm through a collaborative approach .

Consider what Dennett writes in his 2003 paper "Who's on first? Heterophenomenology explained":

On the face of it, the study of human consciousness involves phenomena that seem to occupy something rather like another dimension: the private, subjective, "first-person" dimension. Everybody agrees that this is where we start. What, then, is the relation between the standard "third-person" objective methodologies for studying meteors or magnets (or human metabolism or bone density), and the methodologies for studying human consciousness? Can the standard methods be extended in such a way as to do justice to the phenomena of human consciousness?⁸³

Like the study of human consciousness, the study of stand-up comedy and CSP is dogged with similar problems. As the earlier discussions of stand-up comedy and persona show, some—including comedians—say comedians are 'themselves' on stage. Others say they have a persona. There are first- and third-person accounts, and every possible variation along the spectrum of subjective and objective reporting and methodology. What I propose therefore is an approach that is compatible with Dennett's. This allows for the inclusion of scientific research findings and, most importantly, a way to meaningfully accommodate the necessary wide range of subjective accounts and insights including performer and folk accounts of stand-up comedy.

Heterophenomenology is 'a straightforward, conservative extension of objective science' whereby 'human subjects collaborate with experimenters—making suggestions, interacting verbally, telling what it is like'⁸⁴ to be a human subject. According to Dennett, it is a method that has the potential to take human

⁸³ Daniel Dennett, "Who's on First? Heterophenomenology Explained," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 10, no. 9/10 (2003).

⁸⁴ Ibid.

subjectivity seriously; and while it seems ‘at first blush it may seem to be a first-person (or, with its emphasis on communicative interaction with the subjects, second-person) methodology,’ it is ‘...a third-person methodology if conducted properly.’⁸⁵ Taking what subjects say about the phenomenon under investigation, the method proposes interpreting what subjects. By examining the folk theory in the form of ‘how-to’ literature, blogs, interviews with comedians in the press and in research etc., and treating them as ‘speech acts, reporting, questioning, correcting, requesting, and so forth’⁸⁶ investigators are thereby able to, as Dennett puts it:

compose a catalogue of what the subject believes to be true about his or her conscious experience. This catalogue of beliefs fleshes out the subject’s heterophenomenological world, the world according to S—the subjective world of one subject—not to be confused with the real world. The total set of details of heterophenomenology, plus all the data we can gather about concurrent events in the brains of subjects and in the surrounding environment, comprise the total data set for a theory of human consciousness. It leaves out no objective phenomena and no subjective phenomena of consciousness.⁸⁷

Humour without its psychosocial dimension becomes a deeply problematic concept. The current chapter shows how purely linguistic approaches such as GTVH (Attardo & Raskin) and Pickering & Attardo’s investigation of comic timing fail to capture both the non-verbal and psychosocial aspects of comedic performance. While both approaches have enormous utility and merit, they are not equipped to describe the process of stand-up comedy. For this and other reasons, the thesis follows Dennett’s position set out in *Consciousness Explained*:

You are not authoritative about what is happening in you, but only about what seems to be happening in you, and we are giving you total, dictatorial authority over the account of how it seems to you, about what it is like to be you. And if you complain that some parts of how it seems to you are ineffable, we heterophenomenologists will grant that too. What better grounds could we have for believing that you are unable to describe something than that (1) you don’t describe it, and (2) confess that you cannot? Of course, you might be lying, but we’ll give you the benefit of the doubt.⁸⁸

The heterophenomenological approach therefore offers a way to engage with folk accounts and to integrate these accounts with theoretical accounts from a variety of fields connected to humour studies. The next chapter sets out approaches that

⁸⁵ D. C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, 1st ed. ed. (Boston: Little, Brown and Co, 1991).

⁸⁶ Dennett, "Who's on First? Heterophenomenology Explained."

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ *Consciousness Explained*, 96-7.

reveal elements of stand-up comedy, folk accounts, and shows how consideration of both works to unpack the process of stand-up performance and CSP.

CHAPTER 3 – CSP AS SOCIAL INTERACTION

INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1 problematized and discussed comic stage persona as an adaptive phenomenon in the performance of stand-up comedy. It identified the socio-cultural and linguistic ability of the comedian to mentalize¹ and negotiate audience interactions. It set out an intuitive process involving the gradual formation of comic stage persona as an adaptive solution to the performance challenges of engaging audiences and mastering humour and audience interactions. The concept of licence was introduced as the comedian's sense of audience permission, and so extended the psychosocial description of performer-audience engagement.

The theoretical model proposed sets out a compatible interdisciplinary matrix that views the phenomenon of comic stage persona via the cognitive science approaches in Hurley et al. (*Inside Jokes*), Bruce McConachie (*Engaging Audiences*), Erving Goffman (*The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*), and the research work of theorists in humour research and personality studies. These selected strands provide viable descriptions of humour in social interaction and performance and support an environmentally adaptive account of comic stage persona formation.

Chapter 2, through the critical analysis of the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH), showed how linguistic approaches to humour are problematic for understanding the workings of stand-up comedy. It demonstrated how text isolated from performance chronically and spatially de-contextualizes a stand-up comedy performance. Via an analysis of a section of a Louis CK performance, the elements of craft, histrionic self-presentation, intention, performance skills, and non-verbal communication (NVC), are shown as essential to the humour. By identifying how and where GTVH relates to and dissociates from the workings of humour in stand-up comedy, the chapter makes the distinction between stand-up

¹ Terms such as 'mentalize' and 'mentalization' are drawn from Theory of Mind as discussed in Chapter 1. It speaks to the capacity to read into other minds. In the case of the comedian it is the capacity to predict possible responses and reactions to material and performance.

comedy and joke-telling and, in turn shows that an essential part of being a stand-up comedian entails audience engagement and the type of mind-reading and wrong-footing described in the cognitive science approach to theory of mind.

The chapter shows that stand-up comedians intuitively develop a model of performance self and audience that entails apprehending such concepts such as audience knowledge of stereotypes and attitudes. They build this type of tacit intelligence and nous through interaction and engagement. They apply this in the process of writing material and presentation/performance style, and test it in front of audiences. The chapter concludes that accumulated intuition/tacit knowledge of their sociocultural milieu is what informs a comedian's self-presentation in both writing and CSP.

Finally, the examination of research on comic timing using linguistic analysis alone, suggests, perhaps, the need for reflection, caution, and a wider engagement with other branches of humour research. Given the complexity of humour and its performance, the chapter suggests the need for researchers to engage with performers and the so-called folk theory. An example of such an approach is set out in Hurley et al.'s *Inside Jokes*, where the authors propose a half-way house approach that blends the craft insights of practitioners with those of the scientists.² (More on this in the next chapter dealing with the psychosocial and cognitive science approach to humour, stand-up comedy, and personality).

Keeping in mind Popper's pre-science approach, the present chapter examines those compatible strands of research that investigate live stand-up performance, the how-to/instructional literature, and interviews about craft with stand-up comedians. Through a combination of examining the myths and what previous researchers have established, I aim to show important linkages that support this thesis. The focus of the examination is to demonstrate the case for CSP and its formation as a theoretical model in the research and literature. All these selections show that dynamic audience engagement and feedback are essential to live stand-up performance.

Consistently, the ritual and rules of interaction function in a largely tacit and non-verbal way. All the research examples show strong evidence for the view

² Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, *Inside Jokes : Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*, 130.

that the humour of stand-up is a socially manufactured and shared experience. My aim, therefore, is to show that mastering audience interaction is the *sine qua non* of stand-up comedy, and that effective CSP formation is an environmentally adaptive phenomenon that entails mentalizing audience interactions, negotiating the sociolinguistic and cultural milieu—including a sense of licence. This lays the ground for discussion in Chapter 4 that demonstrates CSP as compatible with general principles of psychosocial and cognitive science models of humour interaction and personality development.

Through investigation of rhetoric, timing, delivery, and content, the current chapter makes a link back to language in a performance context. The sharing of rhetorical structures is shown to be an important part of the tacit process of becoming a stand-up performer. In interview with Franklyn Ajaye, the American comedian Chris Rock talks about listening to great preachers and orators. Ajaye himself speaks about how repeatedly observing Richard Pryor performing live influenced his performance development.³

Comedians, as the interviews show, are aware of fellow comedians and the audience response to other comedians. The influence of others can therefore be conveyed through emulating physical and linguistic rhetorical styles. This phenomenon is also shown to be part of the comedian's reflexive capacity to adapt, write and perform comedy with an audience in mind. The examination of Andrea Greenbaum's work, in particular, shows that notions of timing in stand-up comedy should be considered not as chronological timing, but rather as in the Greek concept of *Kairos* (interpreted as the opportune moment).

Audience engagement via a well-developed comic stage persona is also shown to be an effective way to break down distance between comedian and audience. It is shown how a well-developed and established CSP negates the need to contextualise each and every joke set-up to the same extent. In this way, a well-formed CSP makes it possible to generate humour based on persona as a biographical meta-set up. Effectively established, the CSP makes the comedian a known quantity for the audience. Once the CSP is, for example, established as dry

³ Ajaye, *Comic Insights : The Art of Stand-up Comedy*.

and sarcastic, then a line such as 'My heart goes out to them' is easily interpreted as insincere.

Finally, in preparation for Chapter 4, the concluding section of the chapter turns to the psychosocial case for CSP as a model for stand-up comedy. Picking up on John Morreall's criticism that the revised GTVH is a theory that 'makes no claim to psychological reality, certainly not for joke-telling, and not even for joke-creation'⁴ I outline approaches in general principles in social psychology (Crisp & Turner) that show the cogency of CSP as an adaptive model for performative humour interaction in stand-up comedy.

RUTTER AND AUDIENCE

As set out in the introduction, this thesis firstly supports the claim that audience engagement is the *sine qua non* of stand-up comedy. Mastering audience interaction is the defining skill of the stand-up comedian, and therefore the rationale underpinning an environmental adaptive approach to the formation and development of CSP. However, as the examination of humour studies in the last chapter shows, theories of humour such as GTVH and stand-up comedians have distinctly different concerns. Humour scholars, as Jason Rutter argues, overlook the audience:

In short, these theories lack any debate with the plurality that humour demonstrates and its manifestation within our everyday lived experiences. They create an abstract notion of what is laughed at and work from that laughter towards a hypothesis of what caused it. Through the assumption that laughter is the product of a single and identifiable experience they refuse to investigate how humour and laughter are negotiated, shared and manufactured in a social experience.⁵

What Rutter points up is the lack of plurality and the assumption of single cause within humour theories. More importantly, he acknowledges the unfeasible, abstract notions that fail to recognise how humour and laughter are negotiated, shared and manufactured. Accepting audience engagement and interaction as the *sine qua non* of stand-up comedy is an essential first phase to understanding its workings. The text is but one element in the overall humour event.

⁴ Attardo and Raskin, "Script Theory Revisited(Ed)," 340.

⁵ Jason Rutter, "Stand-up as Interaction : Performance and Audience in Comedy Venues. [Electronic Resource]," University of Salford.

The performative elements of stand-up comedy are therefore woven into the writing and vice versa. Both writing and performance are essentially informed by considerations of audience engagement and interaction. This will become even clearer in the examination of the folk theory and interviews with comedians set out later. Stand-up comedy is more than a set of text-based jokes. Timing and delivery, for example, suggest non-linguistic phenomena that relate to relating. Relations between teller and audience are essential. Regardless of how ‘funny’ one considers a joke to be, the meta-factors such as performance craft, engagement skills, improvisational instincts, who is telling the joke to whom, where, and in what context, matter. In turn, the writing of effective stand-up comedy material is influenced by these meta-factors.

As Rutter puts it, humour and laughter are negotiated, shared, and manufactured as a social experience. In the humour construction the writer/comedian has performance and audience in mind. Just as a bullet has the potential to be a viable ballistic mechanism, it ultimately needs the right weapon and an effective shooter capable of weighing up the local conditions to achieve that potential. While theories such as GTVH describe the general principles of joke mechanisms, just as ballistic theories describe munition mechanisms, they are ultimately underdetermined and insufficient in terms of explanation. Joke-telling is more than exchanging texts. Many of the texts in stand-up comedy do not constitute standalone joke-texts (canned jokes). And though text analysis is essential, it is far from a complete explanation of stand-up humour. The recognition of script oppositions, wrong-footing, incongruities, benign violations, sudden glory, release of tension, in and of themselves fall short of explaining a stand-up performance. A more integrated and complete account encapsulating performer/audience interaction is required in order to avoid the under-determination problem.

Rutter’s broadly ethnographic approach (in situ observation) using conversational analysis offers ‘an alternative view of audience laughter which links it not solely with joke punchlines but rather with a set of rhetorical devices which set up opportunity for laughter rather than directly stimulate it’.⁶ Looking back to

⁶ Ibid., 4.

the script example from Louis CK in the previous chapter, Rutter's approach presents a more meaningful frame than the purely text-based analysis proposed by linguistic analysis alone. It shows that there is far more than punchlines at play. As Rutter goes on to say, 'an audience is not "made" to laugh by joke punchlines as has often been assumed. Rather, the way comedians perform jokes lets an audience know that laughter is expected and acceptable. Responsibility for a laughter response is passed on to the audience'.⁷

Looking again at the video clip from Louis CK, it is possible to identify both the macroscopic presentation of CSP in the form of a self-deprecating, morally flaccid everyman who 'has a lot of beliefs and lives by none of them', and the microscopic details of how he works with the audience through gaze, vocal tone, gestures, and act outs. The delivery of lines 1 and 2 is paced vocally and marked as intended gags, with facial and hand gestures that invite the audience to reflect as CK performs his thought processes. By way of context, the routine immediately prior describes involves CK being admonished by a friend for throwing litter on the street in New York. By means of an elaborate explanation CK rationalises his littering. He has established through several routines his capacity to explain away ostensibly poor behaviour and attitude as reasonable, almost to the point of virtue. Through these rhetorical structures he self-deprecates by revealing himself as a high-minded hypocrite. In this process he simultaneously employs a form of wrong-footing in the following way: firstly, he speaks in a sincere discursive tone about his beliefs and thoughts on how one should behave, almost preaching to the audience. Secondly, he describes what he actually does that violates his presently professed ethics.

However, the manufacturing of humour from the material is heavily reliant on CK's performative techniques—as Rutter suggests, the humour is negotiated and shared. To transition into his 'White People' routine, he paces stage right and turns back to face the audience and delivers the opening words of line 1 (I mean) as if presenting a further piece of corroborating evidence in a polemic. He feeds out the sentence weighing out the words in beats. 'I mean, everything we introduce to the world is shitty...' On the word 'shitty' he flashes a half smile that draws the left

⁷ Ibid.

side of his mouth open momentarily and looks directly across the front rows and quickly says, 'meaning white people' and smiles broadly. The audience is now laughing. CK says, 'Because...' and laughs along with the audience. The image now is of CK the polemicist momentarily 'corpsing' on stage. By physically pacing while delivering the lines and using hand and facial gestures, CK has used timing and gaze to create the humour moments. Like a conductor he use his body movement (in particular face and hands) to establish a rhythm. This form of NVC in turn cues the audience as interlocutor. The pace of delivery has invited the audience in, as it were. He has offered them a humorous point to accept. With the smiles he has indicated humorous intention. But more accurately this could be read as anticipatory glee or devilish delight in what he is doing. There may be more than one way of reading CK smiles, but there can be little doubt he is structuring the interaction by cueing his audience, and marking these utterances as punchlines.

As will be seen in Andrea Greenbaum's research later in this chapter, there is a rhetorical and ethical structure to much of stand-up—it can certainly be said that CK is following lines of argument, dealing with personal and public ethics. In the twenty minutes prior to his 'White People' routine, CK has presented several routines that establish his high-minded beliefs juxtaposed by his behavioural indifference. Below is a transcript example of how he plays with ethics by raising an issue (donating one's body after death). He sets out the case for donating one's body to medical science. He then explains why he is not going to do it.

Time code: 03:20 – 04:10⁸

1. Some people try to do something noble with their bodies. They try to have their bodies have some use after they're dead, which I think is a good thought...
2. You're only borrowing your body, you're only borrowing everything. If your body is worth anything when you're done with it, you should pass it on.
3. It's something I really believe...
4. I mean, I'm not gonna do it....
5. Because..... (big smile, scans eyes across front rows)...

⁸ C.K., "Louis C.K.: Live at the Beacon Theater."

6. I don't wanna... ooooooh (Act out disgust face)
7. It's mine (bringing hand to chest).
8. I have a lot of beliefs. And I live by.... None of 'em!
9. That's just the way I am.
10. They're just my beliefs (he says while acting like a child hugging a cuddly toy or comfort blanket to his chest).
11. I just like believing them. I like that part.
12. They're my little "believies", they make me feel good about who I am.
13. But if they get in the way of a thing that I want, or I want to jack off, I fuckin' do that.

By way of context, the previous routines were about death. On line 1, CK strikes a sincere tone as he explains his ethical position on body donation. Line 2, he emulates the kind of phrasing one might hear in everyday ethical discourse on the transitory nature of our lives and how we ought to consider ourselves not as owners of anything, simply borrowers. Line 3 works to focus the ideas of lines 1 and 2 into a set-up for the punchline on line 4. In terms of structure, here is how he is playing with his audience. For audiences, a reasonable expectation should be that everything the comedian says is leading to a punchline. At the same time, concealment is critical to the structure of stand-up routines. What is worth noting here in CK's approach is how he affects the sincerity of an individual discussing a relatively serious topic. At the end of line 1 he expresses approval for body donation. On line 2 he doubles down on the sincerity and crosses into an almost preaching tone. This is subtle and significant. The audience might reasonably be wondering: where is he going with this? Is the monologue going down the road of lecturing on how one should live? It almost presents like CK is playing a game of chicken; putting the audience on edge.

Line 1 has a third-person structure: where he describes what 'people' and 'they' do that is ethical. Line 2 has a second person structure: "your body", "you're only borrowing", and "you should". Line 3, has a first person structure: "I really believe". In this sense CK starts by referring to a non-present them. On line 2, he addresses a present 'You' plural. On line 2 in particular he creates tension. On line

3, he directs attention to the first person. It is a sequence of moves that opens up the topic, puts the spotlight on the audience, and then turns attention on himself. The monologue is structured in what Rutter describes as a system of moves and sequences, while on another level the routine supports CK in establishing his CSP as morally hypocritical and hedonic. In fact, the sequence can also be viewed in how he builds moral tension followed by hedonic relief. In the set-up he comes across like a preacher; in the punchlines he comes across as devil-may-care. CK puts the audience under pressure and then supplies comic relief. In this sense escape from moral stricture is part of the hedonic hue of comedy's appeal.

What Rutter presents is a model of stand-up comedy performance that is structured and socially organised by agreements and mutually understood routines and rituals. As Rutter puts it, a stand-up comedy show is 'a system of moves which are used by and contributed to by performer and audience to manufacture the stand-up sequence'.⁹ The same systematic organisation, I argue, extends to the presentation of CSP. Just as formation of personality itself has a psychosocial dimension, so too with comic stage personae. Engaging with the structure of stand-up performances, audiences, modelling exemplars within the community of other comics, constitutes this psychosocial domain. A comedian therefore structures monologues and self-presentation in a way that is compatible with the system of moves and sequences within the stand-up comedy performance structure. As shown above, a comedian writes and prepares performance and presentation with audiences in mind. Specifically, the structure of set-up, concealment, creating tension and relief, wrong-footing, cueing and marking punchlines, are all shaped by a pre-emption of audience response. Playing with live audience, therefore, shapes the material, performance, and CSP.

AUDIENCE AS DYNAMIC ENVIRONMENT

As mentioned, central to Rutter's approach to the analysis of stand-up is the claim that humour studies as a discipline has, in the main, overlooked the audience. He makes the case that treating the audience as passive entity is problematic. In setting out a brief history of audience research, he describes three separate phases: Effects

⁹ Rutter, "Stand-up as Interaction : Performance and Audience in Comedy Venues. [Electronic Resource]."

Model, Encoding/Decoding, and Ethnographic Approaches, and how these phases relate to phases in humour research.¹⁰ According to Rutter, the effects model assumes the audience to be passive consumer and the text to be active and influential ‘...on the behaviour or beliefs of those exposed to it’.¹¹ He goes on to say that this ‘neat and simple view of audiences and its strong behavioural appeal...’ established a type of research that focussed on what texts ‘do to their audiences’.¹²

Such a methodology, Rutter says, ‘can be seen to have strong parallels with much of the social psychological work on humour discussed above (see Rutter p.52—61 for discussion of audience research). While the encoding/decoding model is an improvement on the effects model in how it recognises the impact of factors such as socio-economic position on the understanding of media texts, the model remains problematic in how data is collected ‘after and separate from the viewing experience’.¹³ This raises, among other issues, the questions of whether individuals in a focus group are responding to their viewing experience or are influenced by the dynamics at play in a research focus group.

These issues are important to my thesis, as they support the intrinsic claim that audience is the factor comedians must intuitively negotiate. Over time, comedians develop a professional empathy for audiences and performance settings. The same stand-up routines and texts are unlikely to be presented and performed in the same way based on the accommodation of audience and setting variations. For example, over a month-long run at the Edinburgh Fringe Comedy Festival, a comedian may perform ten minutes of his or her Edinburgh show on Thursday lunchtime as part of a comedy showcase to an audience of 60 that may include parents and children. The same comedian may also perform their full-length show with adult content at 10pm at a 300-seater lecture theatre. At 2am on Saturday, the same comedian might perform a 15-minute set to an audience of 500 intoxicated and boisterous revellers at a late-night festival event.

The three shows vary by day of the week, hour of the day, location/setting, acoustics and atmosphere, attention spans, generalised tastes, preferences and

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 62.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 63.

moods. The choice of material and its delivery will vary. For a raucous and boisterous audience, for example, a comedian must respond accordingly or risk dying on stage. Hurley et al. describe this adaptability in the following way: 'Comedians know to target their audiences with content that resides in highly accessible knowledge stores, where it is more quickly activated. So they tailor their routines to fit the crowd: stock market jokes for business people, jokes about spouses for crowds of married folks...' ¹⁴ In the environmental adaptive approach I propose for comic stage personae, the emergence of stage personae is as an intuitive and pragmatic response to performance environments.

Considering the above-mentioned variability, Rutter makes the case for a more nuanced approach. Ethnographic approaches, rather than focus on factors such as class, power, and the text as active agent impacting on a passive audience, focus instead on where and how the text/performance is consumed by active agents in audiences. On this basis Rutter sees this as 'the most appropriate audience research paradigm from which to start an exploration of stand-up'. ¹⁵ As will be repeatedly shown in interviews with comedians and extracts from the how-to literature on stand-up comedy, the *in situ* audience relationship is fundamental to both the formation and development of the comedy material and the formation and development of comic stage personae.

The model of comic stage persona I present in this thesis considers the audience as active and dynamic. But more importantly, the comedian is therefore not just presenting a prepared humour script but interacting with how a live, relatively unpredictable, and dynamic audience is responding in the moment to the script, the comedian's presentation of self, the response of other audience members, and an array of fluid, local, socio-cultural and environmental factors. Over time, performative wits and intuition are sharpened. The inspection of this environment and these interactions is fundamental to grasping the concept of CSP; it is the stuff of performance fabric (pace Weitz) and the workings of stand-up comedy.

¹⁴ Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, *Inside Jokes : Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*, 275.

¹⁵ Rutter, "Stand-up as Interaction : Performance and Audience in Comedy Venues. [Electronic Resource]."

The development of comic stage persona is, therefore, through an interactive relationship with audiences. Writing and performing with audiences in mind, stand-up comedians must form a view of audiences while remaining responsive to the live and somewhat unpredictable/unknowable reality of the event. The performance of comic material and the presentation of self as comic is not a one-size-fits-all case. Audiences and performance situations are variable. Comedians must therefore possess or develop the necessary flexibility to, as psychologists Fabiola Scarpetta and Anna Spagnolli suggest, 'constantly orient to this interactional context during the show.'¹⁶

What researchers such as Rutter, Scarpetta & Spagnolli, among others, show again and again is the interactive elements between comedian and audience. This interplay keeps pointing to comedians accommodating and moderating audience response. Rutter, for example, refers to CTAs (calls to action) in the Emcee sequences.¹⁷ Stand-up shows can therefore be considered in terms of performance rituals, with broadly understood rules of how the conversation-like interchange between performer and audience is conducted. To those familiar with stand-up comedy, these structures are so familiar it might be easy to overlook them. But, as discussed in Chapter 1, Bruce McConachie's description of theatre audience engagement and spectating shows that much of the complex and elaborate cognitive and psychosocial phenomena can be easily taken for granted. The ritual and rules of interaction in stand-up performance function in a largely tacit and non-verbal way.

ACCEPTABILITY OF HUMOUR AND THE INTERACTIONAL CONTEXT

Researchers Fabiola Scarpetta and Anna Spagnolli, in their study, focus on the interactional context of stand-up performances. The study involved four shows by African-American comedians performed in front of African-American audiences and Caucasian-American audiences. The racial/cultural profile variance of the audiences, the authors suggest, leads to a variance in how the comedians manage joke acceptability. In other words, comedians respond to variance in interactional context. They make the claim 'that comedians constantly orient to this interactional

¹⁶ Scarpetta and Spagnolli, "The Interactional Context of Humor in Stand-up Comedy," 211.

¹⁷ Rutter, "The Stand-up Introduction Sequence: Comparing Comedy Compères."

context during their shows and that the way in which this context is shaped facilitates the acceptability of the specific jokes presented'.¹⁸ In developing their case they describe the interaction of comedian and audience as being akin to a conversation where laughter is, in fact, one of the responses in that conversation. This approach is compatible with how I describe the interactive engagement central to the comedian's process. In this way, the authors make the case for 'treating irony (and humor) as an intersubjective achievement'.¹⁹

Again, this recognition of the intersubjective character of stand-up comedy performance is in line with my theory that comic stage personae are informed and shaped by both the humorous aspirations of comedians and the prospecting-like nature of establishing rapport and engaging variable audiences. In practical terms, the comedian writes material that he or she must then present to a live audience in a conversational guise. From performance to performance the stand-up comedian, via direct address, receives multiple responses (including laughter) from a range of audiences (varied by clubs, audience size and profile, locations, and days of the week). Citing McIlvenny, Mettovaara, & Tapio (1993) the authors show a range of audience responses that are affiliative (laughter, applause, cheers, whoops, or whistles), and disaffiliative responses (jeers, boos, and verbal heckling). To this list of acoustic forms of feedback, I would add positive and negative visual forms of body language such as smiling, nodding, staring, blinking, yawning, and signs of distractedness. This, of course, is not an exhaustive list. The point here is, just like a one-to-one engagement, the speaker is reading the reaction of their interlocutor. Effective communicators simultaneously speak while attending to response.

This thesis entails the claim that comedians process multiple forms of audience responses and reactions as in a hot/cold game of engagement. This process is well captured in Spagnolli & Scarpetta's description of affiliative/disaffiliative audience feedback set out above. The processing of this feedback in turn plays a role in how comedians develop their CSPs, comedy material, and framing. As has already been mentioned, there are other contributing factors, including the

¹⁸ Scarpetta and Spagnolli, "The Interactional Context of Humor in Stand-up Comedy," 211.

¹⁹ Ibid.

role of watching fellow comedians' interactions with audiences and the stage personae and performance styles of heroes and exemplars.

That said, what the work of Scarpetta & Spagnolli offers is a demonstration and analysis of how comedians tack and adjust their self-presentation. In this description of audience interaction there are certainly strong echoes of Erving Goffman's concept of impression management. But what is most notable is the in-the-moment fluidity that points to how acceptability takes precedence over being fixed. The need to 'maintain a positive identity relative to meaningful others,'²⁰ as Fabiola & Scarpetta put it, presents a very real challenge to the comedian who on the one hand wants to be daring and truthful, while on the other hand needs to keep the audience on side in order to make them laugh.

One of the limitation of Fabiola & Scarpetta's account of the comedian/audience relationship is that it does not explain why or how some comedians can be abrasive or obnoxious and still keep audiences on side, while others who might be considered deferential do not engage. While accepting audiences as the comedian's 'meaningful other' (as it were), the term 'positive identity' can be highly relative and therefore problematic. For example, politeness is generally considered a positive quality; however, it is hardly the type of quality one might seek out in a comedian. Louis CK's CSP, as discussed above, at various points can be considered abrasive, indifferent, cruel, and mean-spirited. In terms of CSP, positive identity, and comedy, the ultimate definition is what engages the audience in laughter. In terms of comic identity/CSP, misanthropic, anarchic, cutting, and acerbic are more likely qualities than, say, pleasant, polite, kind, and helpful. Kindness and politeness are not, in the main, qualities associated with the CSP of comedians. In fact, the former group of qualities in the off-stage setting might generally be considered negative.²¹ Therefore, Fabiola & Scarpetta's (pace Goffman) regarding positive identity can only be feasible if positive qualities are relativized to what the meaningful other (audience) finds positive.

²⁰ Ibid., 210.

²¹ In the next chapter the concept of 'negative valence' in humour as set out in Hurley, Dennett, and Adams (*Inside Jokes*) is discussed. Much of humour has a negative bent. It should be expected therefore that CSP also follows these tendencies.

Suffice to say it raises what appears to be a paradox in performative engagement; the maintenance of a positive identity does not preclude being controversial and alienating the views of some of his/her audience. A shock comedian, for example, could not engage audiences and build a career without somehow both alienating and fascinating audiences. As I will show later, this paradox can be resolved by applying Bruce McConachie's cognitive approach.

This issue of controversial disposition is not just problematic for stand-up comedy, but it seems more pronounced in the case of comedians. Even though a public figure or entertainer such as Frankie Boyle, Jimmy Carr, or Diceman may say what are egregious and offensive things for some, many may assume that what's being said is for effect as part of a publicly performed persona. This leaves room for all sorts of ambiguity. Why do some take offense, while others assume a form of good faith that does not take what's been said at face value?

Arguably, McConachie's account of spectating in *Engaging Audiences* offers a way to resolve this conundrum. He shows how it is possible for a spectator to simultaneously respond to a character on stage in the context of a play while also responding with admiration for the craft of the actor playing the character on stage. Just as an audience can simultaneously engage with the character portrayed and the craft of the actor behind the portrayal, it is possible to have simultaneous and separate responses to the utterances of a comedian. The acceptance or not of playful bona fides is a crucial element in comedy performance. This seeming paradox raises important issues relating to the hedonic and oppositional potential of CSP that was discussed previously in relation to Louis CK's CSP.

KAIROS, TIMING, AND RHETORICAL CRAFT

Scarpetta & Spagnolli pick up on how comedians use body movements and physical pacing, and thereby demonstrate how comedians weigh up the audience and work off feedback and response. Through linguistic analysis they also show the same processes at work in stand-up performance. A somewhat overlapping yet distinct approach is offered by Andrea Greenbaum. She makes germane and insightful connections between Greek rhetorical concepts and the tacit strategic objectives of stand-up comedians. In particular, it is her description of *Kairos* that offers a richer

and more plausible account of comic timing than a strictly chronological definition discussed in Chapter 2, regarding Attardo & Pickering's research of comic timing.

Greenbaum, in her ethnographic research approach, claims comic narratives are consistently rhetorical, designed to persuade audience members to adopt certain ideological positions, and constructed within a classical rhetorical framework. According to this view, stand-up comedians create and maintain comic authority using Aristotelian notions of *ethos* and Isocratean concept of *Kairos*.²² They adapt and tailor their narrative to their particular regional audience. It is the latter claim in particular that is most applicable to my thesis of CSP.

While maintaining an agnostic/sceptical position on some of Greenbaum's claims and conclusions, it is still possible to accept her observations of rhetorical mechanisms without accepting claims of intent and impact beyond these observations. Though Greenbaum insists 'stand-up comics can only be successful in their craft when they can convince an audience to look at the world through their comic vision,'²³ this somewhat overstates the importance of the political/ethical objectives over the primarily entertainment objectives. I therefore argue that stand-up is by nature rhetorical. By considering Raskin's scripts opposition, any incongruity theory, and DHA's concept of wrong-footing, it is evident that humour exemplifies a playful form of iconoclastic, rearrangement of familiar topics, ideas, notions, or concepts. But convincing an audience should probably be better described as seducing or charming an audience. Therefore, Greenbaum's use of *Kairos* offers two intriguing insights:

- a) the comedian's capacity to connect and engage audiences, and
- b) a more suitable way to think about comic timing than the strictly chronological concept presented by Attardo & Pickering.

Kairos suggests a form of timing that is not strictly chronological—as in Pickering & Attardo—but rather a sense of the opportune and decisive moment, waiting, watching, listening, for the right time to strike, for example. According to the

²² Andrea Greenbaum, "stand-up Comedy as Rhetorical Argument: An Investigation of Comic Culture," *Humor* 12, no. 1 (1999).

²³ *Ibid.*, 33.

Oxford English Dictionary, *Kairos* means, 'Fullness of time; the propitious moment for the performance of an action or the coming into being of a new state.' The term 'propitious moment' suggests opportune, well-suited, and conducive.²⁴ Again, the definition centres on ideas like adaptivity, contingent circumstances, and *in-the-moment* opportunities. The entry for *Kairos* in Liddell's Greek-English Lexicon includes words and phrases such as: "beyond measure", "exact or, critical time, season, opportunity", "time and tide waits for no man".²⁵

According to the philosopher John Edwin Smith, 'classical literature reveals two Greek words for 'time'—*chronos* and *Kairos*.' Writing in *The Monist* in 1969, he elucidates the importance of these two distinct definition of time for scholarly endeavour. *Chronos* can broadly be described as a quantative measure of time, while *Kairos* relates to its qualitative nature. Using an example of Caesar crossing the Rubicon, he explains how the mere chronological facts and dates of such events reveals nothing of its historical significance, purpose, contextual meaning, and consequences. He sets out three features of *chronos* as follows:

There is, first, the three essential features of *chronos*. The first, the element of change, of motion, of process which lasts through or requires a length of time [...] Secondly, there is the fact that, a measuring unit being given, the quantity of the movement and the elapsed time can be numbered. Thirdly, there is the feature of serial order or direction expressed in the terms "before" and "after".

Time so conceived is both a frame or container in and through which events take place in an actual order of happening; *chronos* time is a grid upon which events can be plotted for the purpose of historical writing and interpretation.²⁶

The concept of *chronos* as a grid upon which events can be plotted, measured, and located, is not that of *Kairos*—our shared human subjective sense of quality time. *Chronos* is not what we are referring to when we say that we had a great time at an event. The 'great' in 'great time' is not referring to any measure or quantity of time but, rather, the quality of that experience. This seems to suggest that *Kairos* is not

²⁴ H. W. Fowler, F. G. Fowler, and J. B. Sykes, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, 6th Edition. / Ed. by J. B. Sykes. ed. ([S.l.]: Clarendon Press, 1976).

²⁵ Henry George Dean of Christ Church and Scott Dean of Rochester Liddell et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon ... A New Edition, Revised and Augmented Throughout by Henry Stuart Jones ... With the Assistance of Roderick McKenzie ... And with the Co-Operation of Many Scholars*, 9th edition ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), 859.

²⁶ John Edwin Smith, "Time, Times, and 'the Right Time'; "Chronos" And "Kairos"," *The Monist* 53, no. 1 (1969).

associated with measure. That said, *Kairos* does involve what can be said to be a sense of measure. Before expanding on this concept ‘sense of measure’ it is useful to note how Smith sets out *Kairos*:

Three distinct, but related, concepts are involved in the notion of *Kairos*. It means, first, the ‘right time’ for something to happen in contrast with ‘any’ time; this sense of *Kairos* is captured by the English word, ‘timing’, as when we say, “The general’s timing was poor; he attacked too soon and lost his advantage.” Second, *Kairos* means a time of tension or conflict, a time of ‘crisis’ implying that the course of events poses a problem which calls for a decision at that time. Third, *Kairos* means a time when an opportunity for accomplishing some purpose has opened up as a result of the problem that led to the crisis. [...] the time when an opportunity is given for creative action or for achieving some special result that is possible only at ‘this’ time.²⁷

Note first that Smith defines the English word ‘timing’ as the Greek concept *Kairos*. As I set out previously, this is clearly at odds with treating comic timing as a strictly chronological concept as in Attardo & Pickerings approach to timing in stand-up comedy. The second point about *Kairos* being a point of crisis may well fit well with the tension that is often present between the end of a joke set-up, and the resolution achieved in the punchline. For example, the canned jokes in GTVH present a riddle. The hearer attempts to resolve the riddle—hence the tension. The relief is brought about by the punchline. Likewise, in a stand-up routine the comedian creates points of tension and release. This example from Louis CK discussed earlier shows how CK creates tension in his set-up:

1. Some people try to do something noble with their bodies. They try to have their bodies have some use after they’re dead, which I think is a good thought...
2. You’re only borrowing your body; you’re only borrowing everything. If your body is worth anything when you’re done with it, you should pass it on.
3. It’s something I really believe...
4. I mean, I’m not gonna do it....

Line 1 introduces the topic. At the end of the line he says: ‘which I think is a good thought...’ He could skip to line 4 (punchline). However, lines 2 and 3 could be

²⁷ Ibid.

viewed as strategically ratcheting up the tension of the joke. Firstly, some members of the audience could be asking themselves, ‘where is this bit going?’, ‘Have I/we missed a punchline?’, ‘Has Louis gone all serious; is he really a passionate believer in organ donation?’ Secondly, by stretching the point between the end of line 1 to the punchline on line 4, CK is tricking the audience to a greater extent and hence exploiting the audience gullibility in a playful way. The central point is: by playing lines 2 and 3 with sincerity, CK builds a bigger pay-off on the punchline having created more tension. This demonstrates how a comedian plays with time (*Kairos*). It is, I argue, an empathic skill that is developed and honed performance after performance. By creating moments of sincerity, allowing moments of tension to build, and attending to audience feedback, a comedian plays their CSP in the live event intuitively.

Smith’s third point on *Kairos* as, ‘the time when an opportunity is given for creative action or for achieving some special result that is possible only at ‘this’ time...’ certainly fits with the key moments of audience interaction when comedians apprehend the moment for engagement. The important next step in completing this account of stand-up performance is to consider the comedian’s ‘sense of measure’ as I phrased it above. In terms of *Kairos* the question is: how does anyone apprehend the opportune moment? Intuitively we have a sense of the concept of moment and opportunity. We have a notion when our timing is good, or we say things like, ‘my timing was off’. But, again, no one suggests that poor timing in life events can be improved by a stopwatch. Yet, we do have a notion that such timing is a matter of judgement—and judgement requires some way of weighing up, measuring, and calculating a situation. I suggest that the capacity to perform these feats of judgement is via empathy as described by Bruce McConachie, not as a character trait but as a process. Comic timing and the formation of CSP are invariably linked to empathic attention to audiences.

All of this suggests a more metaphorical and, perhaps, subjective-experiential sense of time. In this sense applying a chronological sense of time to an expression like, ‘timing is everything in comedy’ clearly misses the point that the speaker is expressing a subjective view and attempting a qualitative description of an event. Great timing is rarely if ever a matter of purely chronological measure. In performance a sense of timing is rarely if ever associated with the stopwatch

accuracy or consistency of a performance. Rather, it is a term that is more likely associated with the performer's sense of feeling the live, in-the-moment dynamic of the performance situation. As will be shown presently in an analysis of Stewart Lee's work, timing is central to performative improvisation, responding to what the audience situation throws up rather than rigidly and chronologically ploughing through the script. It suggests the comedian's capacity in the live event to seize windows of opportunity to connect and maximise engagement and humour.

The live interaction between comedian and audience entails moments that can build the connection, jar it, or allow it to ebb away. A comedian possesses a script and a set of punchlines. However, without engaging the audience through effective set ups and natural banter, the punchlines lack the ambush-like surprise and natural buoyancy that comes through conversational engagement. The essential part of this process is the comedian's capacity to read the room/audience as described above. It is by reading the room that the comedian apprehends the need to retrench or go forward.

"YOU AS GOOD AS MURDERED ROBIN WILLIAMS!"

The following extract from Stewart Lee's *Comedy Vehicle*²⁸ clearly illustrates aforementioned principles including *Kairos*, engagement, and timing. This extract is laden with disfluencies, ums and ahs, and false starts, whereby Lee judiciously leaves sentences incomplete—the effect of which gets his audience to assemble his implied punchlines. This method of performance is key to Lee's stage persona: the emotionally shambolic broken man who starts to speak of disappointment, futility, anger, and frustration with the evolving situation he finds himself in as a comedian. Rather than speak in complete sentences, he gives up half-way through leaving the audience to fill in the gaps. By getting the audience to complete his thought processes, he is making them complicit in his process of self-deprecating pathos.

The piece develops to the point where Lee admonishes a large section of the audience, saying, 'I mean, audiences like you, you as good as murdered Robin Williams.' The theme of the show is childhood. The set-up of the gag he has just told is about being on holiday in Malta. He describes having a pee alongside his

²⁸ Tim Kirby, "Stewart Lee's *Comedy Vehicle*," in *Season 4, ep.6* (BBC, 2016).

grandfather who was a RAF fighter pilot in World War 2. Lee's grandfather is attempting to aim his stream of urine to shoot down large flies buzzing around the urinal.

(As he bends down to pick up a bottle of water front of stage he delivers a punchline)

1. You know, for a lot of men of his generation I think the war never really ended.

(Audience laughs. Stewart Lee drinks from bottle. As he replaces the cap on bottle his eyes dart back and forth scanning the audience with a pained smile of frustration. He indicates to a table stage right).

2. Still just you, isn't it? It's still just you.

(Lee is now admonishing the audience)

3. You know what? I've been running this in live for about six months and there is normally applause there.
4. And it is fucking sod's Law that the night you come to... record it, it's just one pocket of people going...
5. That's why I always... that's why I always drink the water at this point... cos I...

(twice lifts water bottle to his lips but not drink)

6. I drink the water sort of magnanimously while I wait for the... (He is clearly baiting the audience to applaud)
7. Don't... no..., no... no... no... no.... no, no, no, no.

(The audience is laughing and some are applauding but Lee is urging them to stop; he's having none of it).

8. We play the hand we are dealt in this game. Right.
9. Play the room as it lays. Right. What the fuckin'... unbelievable.
10. It's a good routine this.
11. Right... there's a lot of scepticism in the room.

(Gesturing at the front row)

12. You particularly, sir. You've not...

(Now looking away from man in front back to the wider audience)

13. People in the front row, going....
(shows puzzled sceptical expression)
14. This is a good bit. The problem is...
15. This plays into what you think of us as well. You think... we're mad... comedians...don't you... sort of crazy, desperate figures... sort of... eh... low self-esteem... you know... wanting.... the approval of strangers all the time. Perhaps because of some childhood trauma.
(Audience laugh)
16. Okay! This is why this is unworkable, right. Because there's people (pointing to people at table stage right). There's a table here... finding things that aren't there. Right.
17. And yet here (indicating row in front of him), the bearded guy (pointing to his right), this front row... and yet I'm supposed to steer a course (gesture with his hand as if at stepping stones throughout the room) through this.
18. I'm glad this is being captured cos it shows what an impossible.... every now and then this is a very difficult job this. You know we... well! We lose... it's very stressful we lose a lot of people to the eh...
19. You know, like Hancock and Lenny Bruce... and all these guys. Cos it's, it's the... you... have got a bit and it always goes: bang, bang, bang (snapping fingers).
20. And then you have a night and you feel it melting right under you... and you...
21. I mean, audiences like you, you as good as murdered Robin Williams.

Line 6 is key. Lee plays the audience. He bemoans the fact that for six months the bit has worked. But on the night that he is recording the show the audience has let him down. Through a mix of performed poor-mouthing and shaming he baits them to applaud, and when they do he turns on them for applauding. Lee has done this style of show before. In a previous show (*If You Prefer a Milder Comedian, Please Ask for One*, recorded for DVD on 15 March 2010 at the Citizens Theatre, Glasgow)

Lee complains to the audience that their response to a previous punchline is disappointing:

OK, now normally people would come in faster on that. The was a... There was a pause, wasn't there? And then some people down here, and then nothing here, and then after a few seconds some other people, er... laughed. Now, we, we, this is for... I'm recording this for, er, a DVD release tonight and I would, I would appreciate it if you'd all just start to concentrate a bit more and try and come in faster on the... Try and come in faster on things, 'cause it was... OK?²⁹

There is something of the performative matador about Lee's stand-up technique that draws his audiences into his comic world. Co-opted to complete the lines, the audience are engaged in Lee's comedy of collapse and failure. In the footnotes to the script Lee writes:

I chose to make the failure of the joke part of the general process of lowering my status throughout the show as if I felt the audience were at fault for not appreciating my genius. I assume that the punters are joining in with this conceit, and on a good night the audience en masse sort of played the part of an angry crowd that didn't get the joke and allow me to harangue them, rather than an audience that ignored it. Usually they seem to enjoy this bit of role-play.³⁰

This shows Lee's awareness of the possibilities with an audience. He chooses low status to engage the audience. He casts the audience as his nemesis, and in so doing he paradoxically co-opts them to engage in role-play. What Stewart Lee shows in this performance is well-developed timing. Through the use of disfluencies and false starts, he creates awkward moments that draw forth laughter and engage the audience in a deep illusion that what they are witnessing is real and not scripted, while simultaneously it is possible to appreciate his masterly scripting and performance. He appears to feel out the opportune moments. This is not the stuff of stopwatch timing, this is *Kairos*—the form of timing that entails the tacking and adjusting to changing conditions in the live event. It is possible to see how the moment-to-moment micro elements of such processes of *Kairos* and empathy can be scaled up to the macro-composite of stage persona. Over time, it is possible to see how a performer hones such capacities and embeds them as intuitions of performance craft, presenting a more comically effective stage version of self. In this respect Greenbaum's use of *Kairos* has much to recommend it.

²⁹ Lee, *Stewart Lee! : The 'If You Prefer a Milder Comedian, Please Ask for One' Ep*, 26.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

LIVE AND DYNAMIC COMIC INTIMACY

The Canadian folklorist Ian Brodie describes stand-up comedy as a form of talk. Stand-up performance 'implies a context that allows for reaction, participation, and engagement on the part of those to whom the stand-up comedian is speaking'.³¹ Brodie's focus on, and analysis of, context in stand-up comedy identifies that most essential of processes that is both of and beyond the script. What Brodie shows is that the stand-up comedy text is brought to life through performances that establish relationship and context between performer and audience.

To demonstrate the centrality of context in stand-up, Brodie, referring to the challenge of repackaging their stand-up routines into book form, highlights the deficiency of a purely script-based approach to stand-up comedy. This leads him to conclude that '...any study of stand-up comedy [must] consider not only the verbal text but also its performance context, and the intentional adaptation by the performer for subsequent mediations' (p.154). Therefore, I argue, a central function of CSP is contextualising text.

Brodie compares the content of stand-up comedy routines as similar to legends in that 'legends are private and interpersonal: they imply an underlying truth proposition, and they become opportunities for its negotiation'.³² In particular, it is Brodie's identification of the collaborative nature of legends 'wherein the principal performer builds the narrative through the reactions of the listener, such as indications of belief and disbelief, requests for clarification, or corroboration through the presentation of similar evidence or parallels'³³ that offers the most persuasive case for similarity between legend and stand-up performance. It is possible to see, therefore, the commonality between skilled comedians and storytellers in how they engage and negotiate with audiences. Importantly, what Brodie points out is that the stand-up comedian through employing all of the above skills is creating 'the illusion of intimacy'.³⁴

³¹ Brodie, "Stand-up Comedy as a Genre of Intimacy," 153.

³² *Ibid.*, 155.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 156.

This recognition of illusion of intimacy in stand-up comedy supports the view that CSP as a concept not only exists, but also is essential to understanding the workings of stand-up comedy performance. Like the microphone, CSP can be considered as a solution to a performance problem. In discussing the role of the microphone in performance, Brodie elucidates the performance impediments overcome by its use. The microphone, by negating the need to project vocally, allows the performer to speak at a natural register. What is particularly important to note here is how Brodie problematizes performance in terms of barriers to connection between the comedian and audience. Be the obstacles technical or interpersonal, the onus is on the performer to bridge and overcome these barriers and obstacles. In a similar way, I argue, a well-developed CSP, like the microphone, has a tool-like function in stand-up comedy. CSP resolves performance challenges for the comedian. Well-devised, a CSP works to break down distance between comedians and audience. It rapidly facilitates a sense of familiarity and knowing which in turn negates the need to contextualize each and every joke and set-up to the same extent. It makes it possible to generate humour based on persona as a meta-set up.

Brodie also picks up on the pragmatic reality of adapting to performance environments. He provides a good example from the emergence of British alternative comedy that demonstrates how the comedic style of Ben Elton can be attributed to the antagonistic atmosphere of the London Comedy Store. Realising the chances of being interrupted by hecklers were high, Elton ‘developed a performance style in which he would not pause’.³⁵ The suggestion therefore is: if a comedian develops within an environment where a more aggressive persona is required (such as the Comedy Store), they must therefore develop a stage persona that befits survival in such an environment. This observation is in line with the claim I make that comic stage persona is an environmentally adaptive phenomenon. The predictive power of such a claim is that we should expect to find a certain degree of clustering when we examine CSPs. For example, the emergence of an Eddie Izzard, Joan Rivers, Chris Rock, Bill Hicks, or Sara Silverman, is likely to inspire others who will to a lesser or greater extent emulate that style. And, comedians emerging from clubs like the Bitter End in New York, or the

³⁵ Ibid., 162.

workingmen's circuit, in the UK at a certain period are likely to share common ground and overlap in terms of style, material, and content. The two proposed influences are the effect of exemplars, and the nature of the audiences and atmosphere.

One final point from Brodie describes the autobiographical aspect of stand-up, and how over a career a comedian establishes some form of persona that 'makes material unique to the performer...' and provides 'a framework for how to interpret a specific performance'.³⁶ I argue, however, that the emergence of comic stage persona is over a shorter time span than Brodie suggests. From their first performance, comedians have a comic stage persona. As the work of Renner, Heydasch, and others shows, effective joke tellers affect a histrionic presentation style. The point about the nascent comic persona of the novice is that it has yet to be shaped by the demands of negotiating audiences of strangers (an anonymous public). CSP is therefore a mutable concept. It is highly unlikely that the persona at the beginning of a career will be as effective as the one that evolves over years of performance experience and audience engagement. As writer/performers their progression through life is formed in narrative. As Brodie puts it, 'Stand-up comedians are characters in their own narrative, of their own making'.³⁷

The work of Rutter, Spagnoli & Scarpetta, Brodie, and Greenbaum, contains the common threads of an adaptive approach where the comedian both accommodates and moderates. And, as will be discussed in the next chapter discussing the cognitive psychosocial perspective, in this respect, stand-up comedians are about, what Goffman describes as 'Impression Management'.³⁸ On these grounds I make the case that becoming a stand-up comedian entails attending to, reflecting upon, and adjusting to audience interactions. It does not of course mean that comedians either crowd-please; on the contrary, as shock comedians show, some comedians deliberately provoke. However, what I am claiming is that the process of becoming a stand-up comedian entails the empathic cognitive processes of observation, reflection, and adjustment. Such adjustments, I suggest, are gradual and, depending on the individual, largely imperceptible.

³⁶ Ibid., 174.

³⁷ Ibid., 175.

³⁸ (see: discussion of Erving Goffman in ch.4)

The formation of CSP is a function of the intuitive and unconscious shifts and changes to accommodate and moderate. The moderation of audience and presentation of CSP are not deliberate acts of dissembling, but rather the natural adaptive process of pursuing performance and writing craft. Engaging audiences requires craft and therefore altered forms of comic self-presentation. The challenge therefore is to find a way to describe and discuss a natural process that the performer may be either oblivious to, or, resistant to acknowledge for various reasons.³⁹

Rutter shows how stand-up is a ‘shared and manufactured social experience’.⁴⁰ It is not the telling of canned jokes or script. The jokes told, and how they are performed, are shaped by the event. Accepting the audience as active and dynamic participant, I argue that for comedians, audiences function as a significant other they must accommodate and negotiate with. As Scarpetta & Spagnolli show, effective interactions with audiences make otherwise risky material, acceptable. Also, crucially, they show how both affiliative and dis-affiliative audience responses form part of the feedback from audience to performer. I address how the description of ‘positive qualities’—as suggested by Scarpetta & Spagnolli—has to be viewed as relative to what is considered positive for a comedian in the eyes of the audience. Such positive qualities are a matter of individual and even collective tastes. In this way comedians both build audiences and audiences build comedians. It is not a unidirectional process. The personae of comedians are therefore reflective of various audience niches.

The discussion of Greenbaum creates several germane lines of linkage. I have drawn upon Greenbaum’s work to highlight to link comic timing to the Greek concept of *Kairos* (as opposed to the chronological). I have also set out that the apprehension of *Kairos* requires the process of empathy.⁴¹ Without the capacity to apprehend the moment it is not possible to seize it. This, I believe, unlocks some of the issues that have dogged humour studies.

³⁹ Reasons may include cognitive dissonance or concerns regarding authenticity.

⁴⁰ How it is shared and manufactured for a comedian such as Bo Burham—a predominantly online phenomenon—is an interesting, though, perhaps an entirely separate matter. What is essential is that audiences impact comedians.

⁴¹ See: next chapter for discussion of empathy as a process.

Brodie places emphasis on stand-up comedy as a form of talk and storytelling that entails the illusion of intimacy created between performer and audience. He demonstrates how context and environment impact on performance styles. Building on Brodie, I make the case that CSP is a mutable concept—somewhat reflective of the comedians’ response to their social milieu—and narrative in nature. At play are empathic cognitive process of observation, reflection, and adjustment. Stand-up comedy-writing and performance should therefore be considered in terms of social cognitive processes and phenomena, an account of which is developed more thoroughly in the next chapter.

FOLK THEORY AND COMIC INSIGHTS

As discussed above regarding the nature of audience interaction, and in the previous chapter regarding the need to unpack common sense claims, there is merit in examining the folk theory of stand-up comedy and engaging with what comedians and coaches have to say about comic stage persona. Such an examination provides an insight into how the community of comedians, trainers, agents, and producers conceptualise stand-up comedy, and in particular comic stage persona. Following Attardo and Pickering, I refer to this as the ‘folk theory’. Within the how-to literature on stand-up comedy, persona is broadly described as a mix of performative strategy, natural attribution, and audience-interaction-selected feedback. My aim here is to show that CSP is a central topic for practitioners and the wider community/industry. But more particularly the aim is to demonstrate the varied and sometimes contradictory views of CSP and how it emerges and functions.

The English comedian and academic Chris Ritchie, for example, discusses the formation of CSP as follows. He writes:

Comedians construct their performance identity in various ways, but the process always requires some thoughtful decisions. Most comedians base their persona on themselves and their experience, but 'heightened' — that is, they emphasise certain aspects of their true personality and their life while playing down others.⁴²

Ritchie's view that comedians construct their performance identities raises questions of cause and motivation. Why the need for a performance identity? What aspects do they play up, and what aspects do they play down, and, based on what criterion are these aspects played up or down? This thesis claims that comedians are shaped by elements such as audience response, the craft of comic exemplars, the wrong-footing macro of incongruity (the trickster's spirit), and their wider social milieu.

Central to my claim for CSP are points made in the opening chapter. The etymology of 'persona' suggests a mask that both reveals and conceals. Extending this idea to narrative, autobiography makes it possible to see how stories and self-presentation are prone to alterations based on a myriad of factors, including the context of who is telling what to whom and for what purpose. A story of addiction, for example, can be told in a support group or on a comedy stage. The details and style of telling will vary based on the aforementioned factors. In this way it is useful to consider the formation and adjustment of persona and self-presentation as a strategic editorial process. With this in mind, I propose that consideration of subsequent audience response must be considered as a significant influence in persona formation and adaptation.

Interestingly, Ritchie suggests that the formation of a performance identity is a process that 'always requires some thoughtful decisions'. This may well be the case for many comedians to varying degrees; however, as has been shown in the opening chapter, the existence of CSP is disputed. At the very least the mechanism of how it comes about is contested and questioned. As mentioned previously, there are clear tensions between Ritchie's view and those who claim they are themselves on stage. Perhaps ideas of authenticity jar with ideas of CSP construction. What is central to this thesis is firstly, the claim that CSP is a viable concept, and secondly, presenting a theoretical framework to describe how its formation and workings

⁴² Chris Ritchie, *Performing Live Comedy*, 25-6.

might be understood. Arguably, Ritchie seems to claim too much conscious agency on the part of the comedian. If the formation of CSP, at least partially, tracks the formation of personality, then part of the process will be quasi-intuitive/unconscious.⁴³

Another example of how CSP is considered and discussed within the folk account can be found in British comedian and comedy coach Logan Murray's book, *Be a Great Stand-up*. He describes getting novice comedians in his workshops to focus on their attitude to the material and topics they choose to present. He suggests they try out different attitudes. As a result of this trial-and-error approach a stage persona emerges. He writes, '[S]ometimes new comics find a particular attitude so liberating that they learn to present this 'face' to their audience to the exclusion of all others. Thus a deadpan depressive is born, or a hate comic. Comedians begin to develop a distinct 'persona', separate from their everyday self.'⁴⁴

Murray makes a good case for comedic flaws being useful to the comedian and how flaws can ideally complement with whatever attitude the comedian might be acting out. He writes:

... you may play love, hate, worry or contempt in the course of five minutes. But those attitudes will play out differently if you have revealed the underlying character flaw of being a slob rather than being a little bit anally retentive.⁴⁵

Considering Louis CK's 2011 show previously discussed, CK prior to his 'White People' routine has over the preceding twenty-two minutes identified himself as a thoughtless, self-aggrandizing, virtue-signalling hypocrite, and/or a morally-flaccid slob. A case can therefore be made that a macro-script supports the micro-script within the white people routine. CK has a punchline, 'I mean, everything we introduce into the world is shitty. Meaning white people.' Arguably, without having established his stage persona this line could not have humorous impact. The subtle significance of his clarification, '[M]eaning white people' comes from how he has

⁴³ Timothy Wilson in his book *Strangers to Ourselves*, describes how so much of what we claim as self-knowledge is an illusion. The intuitive unconscious does a lot of the heavy lifting in our formation. Likewise with CSP, I suspect that the process of adaptation and formation is nowhere near as deliberative as some suggest. Rather, it is a mix of conscious and unconscious/intuitive processes.

⁴⁴ Logan Murray, *Be a Great Stand-Up*, [New] ed. ed. (London: Teach Yourself, 2010), 66.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

established how he talks about having good moral intentions but in fact they are just platitudes. Therefore, it can be suggested that a well-structured, functioning comic stage persona—however defined—provides macro-set-ups that service multiple reversals and punchlines.

Murray raises the issue of comic archetypes. Like any other artist, comedians are of a cultural time and place. They are influenced by the community of comedians from which they draw their reference points and social rules. To a greater or lesser extent, they develop by observing peers and iconic comedians as influences and exemplars. And as Jason Rutter set out extensively, audience plays a significant role in shaping of the stand-up comedy event and environment. However, the modern era of global mass communications and the expectation of originality and authenticity has arguably added an extra degree of challenge. Contemporary comedians are expected to write their own material. Copying or ‘stealing’ another comics material is frowned upon.

Perhaps given his cultural reference point, Murray—a London-based product of the modern wave of stand-up comedy that distinguished itself from an earlier wave that did not insist on self-written material—is perhaps more critical of emulation of exemplars than say a coach from a community that did not so highly prize original authorship or notions of authenticity and individuality. In terms of understanding comic stage persona, such a bias—albeit understandable—impedes understanding persona as a more value-free pragmatic concept. The primary aim of comic stage persona, as this thesis argues, is to engage audiences, frame humour, and enhance performance transactions within the limits of the comedian’s stage-self schema. It makes no moral claims as to how comedians should form CSP; it identifies, rather, the dominant factors that influence CSP formation. Therefore, the notion of ‘authenticity’ is considered as somewhat questionable. The primary, pragmatic concern of a comedian is to engage an audience in order to get the audience to laugh. Authenticity as a condition is therefore problematic. One may well be authentic, un-engaging, and unfunny. It raises a question that ‘authentic’ is perhaps a proxy for other elements such as: engaging, plausible, and having the ring of verisimilitude. At the very least, recommendations to, ‘be yourself’, ‘be authentic’, and ‘be original’, raise more questions than answers.

In *The Comedy Bible*, American comedy coach, Judy Carter, uses the word ‘authentic’ in the title of three of the book’s subsections. She writes, ‘Probably the biggest and hardest part of my job as a comedy coach is helping my students not settle for doing material that has already been extensively done by other comics.’⁴⁶ The general advice of the book is: that having learned the rudiments of joke structure, novice comedians ought to write and perform material that reflects their authentic self. Carter writes, ‘... whether you’re a comedy writer or a stand-up comic, your main goal as a creative funny person should be to create material that comes from who you are as an individual—your persona.’⁴⁷

To drive home her points, Carter provides quotes from well-known and established comedians, development executives, and talent managers to support the case for being authentic, original, and not being ‘hack’. In two of her ‘Pro Talk’ sections, she cites the American comedian Richard Lewis as follows:

It’s impossible to be as good as you can be if you hold back. If you start editing yourself, you might as well just stop, you won’t be as pure as you can be, and why not go for gold? You are only as authentic as you allow yourself to be. And if you start putting roadblocks up voluntarily, you are just headed toward mediocrity.⁴⁸

And further:

If you take yourself too seriously on stage, then it just screams of self-indulgence, but if you share pain in a humorous way and have some luck and some talent, then you are in good shape professionally.⁴⁹

The broad tenor of the advice in Carter is an emphasis on personal authenticity, originality, and unique humanity. However, Lewis indicates—albeit fleetingly—a potentially difficult balancing-act facing the comedian: achieving a balance between generating material that is authentic, original, relatable and ‘not hack’, versus generating material that gets laughs. It seems like a paradox. Arguably, it is a question of competing priorities: idealism or pragmatism, authenticity versus effectiveness. Early career comedians get booked, and paid, based on audience laughter.

⁴⁶ Carter, *The Comedy Bible : From Stand-up to Sitcom : The Comedy Writer's Ultimate How-to-Guide*, 102.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 105.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 111.

That said, establishing oneself as both funny and original is the way to further career progression. Indeed, Carter also provides chapters of advice on how material should be altered or cut if it does not get the desired response from the audience. The case made in this thesis is: Ultimately, audience response is an essential part in the formation of the comedian. Authenticity and originality are indeed laudable, but in a stand-up comedy a performance without audience laughter is laughable—but not in a positive sense. I see Carter, Ritchie, and Lewis’s advice as sincere but problematic. The just-be-yourself theme is trite in that it can never be the primary criteria and may violate the absolute law of stand-up comedy, i.e. make the audience laugh. If being authentic or sharing your true life experiences doesn’t make audiences laugh, and being a total cowardly fraud makes the audience laugh, then the latter option is the correct one. Nice, authentic, and true have no place if the audience is not laughing. The point is fundamental: stand-up and audience laughter are necessary, but authenticity is optional—and can be a performance in its own right (as in Goffman’s account in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*).

Taking what could be described as a more revealing approach, Franklyn Ajaye sets out his strategic attempts to enhance his early stand-up performances. In his book *Comic Insights*, he provides a mix of instructional tips, interviews and discussions of comedy craft with established comedians and industry professionals (agents, club bookers, and producers). During his first year in Columbia Law School, he made his amateur debut at a club in Greenwich Village and bombed. He describes a forensic-like compulsion to figure out why he bombed, a drive to become a better stand-up comedian, a studious approach to studying closely the work of comedy exemplars, and a quest, as he describes it, ‘to discover the key to my comedy essence for public consumption.’⁵⁰ What is most notable in the previous quote is the phrase ‘comedy essence for public consumption’. But also there is the emphasis on comedy exemplars and the process of figuring out how to formulate and manage a comedic impression.

In this regard Ajaye, initially at least, offers what is a more authentic account of the drive of any artist to improve. However, similar to Carter’s instructional tips,

⁵⁰ Ajaye, *Comic Insights : The Art of Stand-up Comedy*, xi-xii.

Ajaye is also drawn to advising on the primacy of being authentic by insisting upon the importance of having ‘A distinctive points of view’.⁵¹ Arguably, such advice, while sounding meaningful, offers nothing. Without procedural approaches to material development, editing, performing, and proactively employing a reflexive process, the comedian can’t possibly get far by following the advice to be authentic, original, or distinctive.

Ajaye does, of course, offer pragmatic advice that gives an insight into how immersion into a comedy community of exemplars and peers demonstrates the type of psycho-social model of stage persona formation that this thesis proposes. Ajaye describes how after watching Richard Pryor live shows for a week at the Comedy Store, he (Ajaye) began to physically change the way he presented on stage. He began pacing the stage and, he explains that, ‘more importantly, I started to act out the behaviour of the high-school characters that I had previously only talked about, which improved my performance immensely’.⁵²

One aspect of Ajaye’s description of how he felt influenced by Pryor’s stage physicality speaks to a central claim of this thesis. The process of developing a comic stage persona is not dissimilar to personality development. There are elements that one may be aware of, and others, like accent, body language, phraseology and expressions, attitudes, and non-verbal communications, that are incorporated/embodied imperceptibly. Just as Ajaye noticed how watching Pryor’s physical movement changed how he himself moved on stage, he may not have noticed that adopting Pryor’s pacing may reasonably be extended to a form of embodied mimesis that informs rhetorical style.

As the comedian paces the stage, the rhythms of the material conform to match. Therefore, by adopting Pryor’s stage physicality, Ajaye, by extension, adopts to some extent the beats, cadence, and character of Pryor’s rhetorical structure. Interestingly, the concept echoes in Ajaye’s chapter featuring Chris Rock. Ajaye describes Rock’s stage physicality as follows: ‘Dressed in black and prowling the stage like a gospel-preaching panther, he had people comparing him to Richard Pryor.’⁵³ However, it is not the comparison with Pryor that I see as most interesting

⁵¹ Ibid., xii.

⁵² Ibid., 5.

⁵³ Ibid., 175.

here in terms of the physical influence. In the interview that follows, Ajaye asks: 'One of the things I notice was a preacher-like element in your delivery. Is there a lot of church in your background?'⁵⁴ Rock responds, 'My grandfather's a reverend, and when I started doing comedy along with my comedy albums, I bought the albums of orators like Dr. King, Malcolm X, and JFK just to listen to them talk, and see how they commanded audiences, because I felt that even if you don't think it's funny, I don't want you to think it's boring'.⁵⁵

The link between preaching and stand-up comedy is an interesting one from the perspective of CSP and the overlaps between the communicative objectives of rhetoricians. Chris Rock speaks above about figuring out how to command and audience. Reflecting back on Greenbaum, Scarpetta & Spagnolli, and Brodie's descriptions of comedians pacing the stage and feeling out their audiences' responses and adjusting accordingly, it becomes apparent that there are overlaps between the presentation craft of preachers, rhetoricians, and comedians. Not only does preaching offer templates in homiletics and rhetoric, but it also offers a performative model of NVCs that can then be emulated by novice comedians as described above by Ajaye discussing how he was influenced by NVCs of Richard Pryor.

MATERIAL/PERSONA SPECTRUM

So far in this discussion and review of folk theory, I have focussed on comedians whose CSP works so that the material does not have to do so much of the heavy lifting. The style might be generally described as more discursive and natural. Unlike the canned jokes, the material is within the context of story, rhetoric, and CSP. However, it is useful to consider the style of comedians who are perhaps the least personality driven, and maximally material driven, i.e. one-liner comedians. The rationale here is that one-liners are as close to the type of Polish jokes demonstrated in GTVH and ostensibly the least reliant on persona and audience rapport. I aim to show that even the one-liner comedian is audience-orientated in terms of material and presentation.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 182.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

British comedian Tim Vine is known as a one-liner comedian with a particular emphasis on puns. In a London Independent interview, he describes how his shows contains almost 200 one-liners: 'Some are borne of idle conversation, others from intensive sessions where he locks himself in a library and writes all day long... I hear punchlines in everyday conversation and think, "How could we get there in a different way?" If someone says, "Serves him right," I'll think, "Right, OK... A friend of mine's got a left arm missing. Serves him right"'.⁵⁶ This concurs with what was described in the previous chapter regarding the possibility of writing jokes by starting with the punchline and working back (as in 'six of Juan and half a dozen of udders' discussed earlier).

What Vine shows is, even with a one-liner comedian, the process of developing material for stand-up comedy does not stop in with writing and honing on paper. Material must still be road-tested on audiences:

I know it sounds daft, but sometimes you think to yourself, "Which way round shall I put it?" Vine says. "I've got a friend who's a tent peg. He's driven himself into the ground." It doesn't really get much. But you could do, "I've got a friend who's driven himself into the ground. He's a tent peg." It may never get beyond a weak laugh and I'll drop it. Or I'll tell it and shout, "Come on!" after it. (ibid).⁵⁷

Interestingly, Vine works the audience response into the editorial process. With this particular tent peg line, it would be interesting from a humour studies perspective to investigate why the ordering of such a gag elicits varying responses. Perhaps, with the set-up 'a friend who is a tent peg', the set-up is absurd and not serious, whereas 'a friend who driven himself into the ground' can be interpreted as a potentially concerning matter. The latter set-up provides more relief with the SO⁵⁸ in the punchline. But, for an audience familiar with Vine's unserious joke form, it's unlikely he would raise serious issues. Regardless, Vine clearly mentalizes his audience and how they are likely to respond to both his jokes and CSP.

Vine, in interview with the *Guardian*'s Brian Logan, says that one-liner comedy 'attracts people who don't want to say much about themselves. No one learns much about me from my act, except that I've got time on my hands.'⁵⁹ That

⁵⁶ Alice. Jones, "Tim Vine, Winner of the Funniest Joke of the Fringe Award: 'Making a Quip as Funny as Possible Is an Art'," *The Independent*, 19/8/ 2014.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Script Opposition as set out in GTVH discussed in Chapter 2

⁵⁹ Brian Logan, "Masters of the Mini-Joke," *The Guardian*, 17/1/2011 2011

said, for a comedian who reveals little about himself on-stage, Vine is quite open off-stage. In another interview with in *Premier Christian*, Vine, a Christian, discusses his comedy and faith. Asked if he would like to tell longer stories like other stand-ups, he admits he's tried but gets nervous '...when the length between laughs is particularly long.'⁶⁰ Perhaps this problem (if it can be called that) resonates with what Judy Carter and Richard Lewis mean when they talk about being 'authentic' on stage.

Asked to what extent his faith affects his comedy, Vine replies:

I do sometimes come up with a rude joke by accident and, this is probably wrong, but I give them to other comics. I haven't actually given away lots of incredibly rude stuff, just once in a while I've thought of something that doesn't quite suit my act. I remember giving a joke to an act called Ian Cognito. He's very, very edgy. I gave him a joke once which never quite worked for me...⁶¹

It's possible to read from this a sense of how Vine curates his stage persona. Asked if there is anywhere comedians in general shouldn't go, Vine is clear. '[No], I think people should be allowed to do what they want. I think it's great that, particularly in this country, we've got an array of different comedy styles.'⁶² This demonstrates the type of impression management borne of audience interaction and reflexive processing that could only suggest a concept of stage persona. The sense that comedians, even with the most material-based acts, must formulate stage personae. Vine suggest something of the pressure a comedian perceives to make audiences laugh. The intensity of such pressure must be central to the formation of stage persona. For some comedians, no doubt, this pressure is a tyranny.

In a *Guardian* article, Milton Jones, another one-liner comic, speaks about varying and keeping apart similar styled one-liners, and adding musical and visual gags in order to conceal from the audience the joke mechanisms. He says, 'You mustn't let the audience see the workings... Sometimes when a joke doesn't work, I can feel them going, "I almost thought of that in the pub once." I have to stay well ahead of that.'⁶³ Again, this resonates with the fundamentals of reveal and conceal, the management of the audience interaction, intuitive engagement with

⁶⁰ Dave. Rose, "Profile: Tim Vine," *Premier Christianity* (2014).

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid

⁶³ Logan, "Masters of the Mini-Joke."

the audience mind. What Jones describes here is the conscious effort to conceal the craft behind what is invariably presented as off-the-cuff, natural conversation, banter, and spontaneous engagement. He reveals the type of back stage/front stage structure central to this thesis.

The examination of folk theory I've presented here is intended to show that there is value in unpacking and exploring further the myths and legends with folk accounts. Within what seems like a collection of generalised and perhaps contradictory ideas, there emerges evidence for CSP that show a degree of compatibility with empirically-based academic concepts within personality studies and social psychology. The examination of the folk theory shows that CSP is a central topic within discussions of stand-up comedy, craft, and performance. There is a recognition and acceptance of distinct off-stage/on-stage personae. It also shows the paradox between the off-stage and on-stage worlds of stand-up comedian. Is the obligation to be authentic or to generate laughs? Is the aim of authenticity to be truthful or to be effectively distinctive?

The discussion of Chris Ritchie's work presents a common-sense view of how aspects of offstage life are selected and modified to formulate performance identity (CSP). He suggests that a comedian's performance identity always comes about through thoughtful decision. While accepting performance identity as a concept, I challenge the view that it is always a thoughtful set of decisions on the grounds that it claims too much for individual conscious deliberation while overlooking the psycho-socio-cultural matrix.

Logan Murray provides a different angle on the same theme. His approach suggests a more experimental/trial-and-error model of CSP development, a view that finds linkage in the work of personality psychology. He also suggests how traditionally perceived negative character traits/ flaw are ripe for comic character. Building on this point, I show how a comedian—having established such a trait—may then leverage the flaw as a macro set-up for multiple jokes/punchlines. In this way, a well-chosen and develop character trait efficiently creates multiple comic payoffs.

Murray's discussion of comedy archetypes opens up the area of how a mix of archetypes and cultural time and place play out in CSP. The transitional steps from

earlier forms of vaudeville and music hall comedy entertainment—in both the US and UK—to what is considered the more authentic styles of modern stand-up, raises value-laden debates regarding authenticity, originality, and artistic integrity. Such debates, while interesting, can cloud the view of CSP. The ‘Just be yourself’ advice obscures the Herculean process of comedians who become recognised as authentically funny.

Judy Carter’s approach to comedy coaching further demonstrates the paradox of authenticity and making audiences laugh. Her advice, and that of established comedians she cites, shows the potential contradictions between being authentic/not being a hack, while at the same time avoiding comic death on stage through the use of narrative and performative structure. The approach to craft and technique also included listening carefully to audience feedback and adjusting. This once again raises questions about what is meant by ‘being yourself’ while at the same time changing based on the audience feedback.

Franklyn Ajaye, on the other hand, is candid about his studious attempts to discover his comedy essence for public consumption. Importantly, he describes how through physical proximity to Richard Pryor, he began to adapt the vocal and physical rhetorical style of Pryor. This is a good example of what I mean regarding the role of comedy exemplars in the formation of CSP. It also opens up to the transmission of NVC styles in the formation of stage persona and links well to what Andrea Greenbaum discusses in her research on comedy and rhetoric. The key points from Ajaye that support my thesis are various descriptions of how the formation of CSP is both physical and rhetorical. As the discussion with Chris Rock shows, the action and the word come together in the formation of CSP. And finally, the section on comedian Tim Vine shows how even the most text-based one-liner comic develops and leverages CSP, engages in a process such as audience mentalization and wrong-footing, and curates material as a form of impression management.

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY APPROACH TO CSP

This theory makes no claim to psychological reality, certainly not for joke-telling, and not even for joke-creation. You deny that the levels and the 'components informing the joke' are temporally ordered.⁶⁴

Perhaps it is the above quote from John Morreall that best sums up the limitations of GTVH as a theory for analysing the workings of stand-up comedy. Morreall's criticism speaks to the need for, and the centrality of, psychology in joke-telling and joke-creation. So far, this chapter has focussed on the group dynamic and interactive elements of stand-up performance. Then through discussion of the folk theory—instructional/how-to literature and insights on craft by comedians—thought and discussion has been given over to subjective accounts that describe writing and performing from the comedian's perspective.

The focus now turns to psychosocial approaches that support the claims I make for CSP. My aim in the closing section of this chapter is to provide a generalised account of a psychosocial approach before offering a sketch of a full-blown cognitive and socio-psychological account of CSP formation, humour, and self-presentation via the theoretical approaches of Hurley et al., Erving Goffman, George Kelly, Bruce McConachie, and others.

A central concern I have had in approaching this work is to create a theory that is amenable to scientific method. Following the approach of Bruce McConachie, I take the view that performance studies is best served by engaging with areas such as cognitive science and psychology. Given my professional background as a stand-up comedian and performer and my academic background in Mental and Moral Science (Philosophy and Psychology), it is perhaps natural that I see linkage between these disciplines and areas. The hope that one day elements of this approach can be validated or dismissed can only conceivably happen via the scientific method. Beginning with intuitions about stand-up comedy, I have attempted to find corroborating accounts in an array of compatible theories. Having spectated over two thousand stand-up comedy gigs, shared the company of comedians, attended humour conferences, read copious papers and books on craft and humour theory, and worked the process of writing and

⁶⁴ Attardo and Raskin, "Script Theory Revisited(Ed)," 330.

performing, I make the case that comedians develop their natural abilities by attending to the sociocultural elements of humour craft and audience interaction.

That is not to say that natural attributes such as I.Q. and verbal acuity have no part to play in stand-up comedy. However, to succeed in writing and performing comedy to a consistent degree in far from consistent conditions, the highly-motivated novice comedian must be reflexive and adaptive. While some critics of instructional literature might argue that the art of comedy is not teachable, they cannot say that it is not learnable, i.e. factors such as iterative praxis, reflection, persistence, and openness to feedback are a natural part of the adaptive improver's arsenal.

The social psychologists Crisp & Turner describe this as follows:

One characteristic that distinguishes humans from other animals is our capacity for reflexive thought, the ability to reflect on the way in which we think. Reflexive thought allows us to think about who we are and how we are perceived by others, and we are constantly defining ourselves.⁶⁵

What can be taken from Crisp & Turner is a corroborating account of the notions of CSP formation as a reflexive process. Such an account fits with Goffman's description of impression management. Regarding the self, Crisp & Turner write, 'although the self is perceived by many to reflect our uniqueness as a human being, there is considerable evidence that it is influenced by culture.'⁶⁶ Again, this supports the formative influence of factors such as audience response, social milieu, mentors, and comedy exemplars, on CSP.

One of the pillars of self is self-awareness, an ability that develops over time. We are not born with it. Similar to what McConachie says of empathy, self-awareness is a process. In fact, Crisp and Turner suggest a strong link between the two.⁶⁷ Relevant to this thesis of CSP and its formation, they describe two distinct forms of self-awareness: public and private. They say:

⁶⁵ Richard J. Crisp and Rhiannon N. Turner, *Essential Social Psychology*, 3rd edition. ed., 180.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 181.

Public self-awareness arises when a person is aware of public aspects of themselves that can be seen and evaluated by others... they realize they are being appraised by those observers. The fear of a negative evaluation can lead to nervousness and a loss of self-esteem, particularly if a person's perceived actual public image does not match their desired public image [...] Whereas, private self-awareness may intensify emotion, clarify knowledge, and intensify adherence to personal standards and values.⁶⁸

As discussed in Chapter 1, David Marc describes how 'the stand-up comedian addresses an audience as a naked self'.⁶⁹ Oliver Double, in response to Marc, suggests that comedians jump in and out of character during act-outs within routines. I challenge both Marc's assertion of naked self, and Oliver Double's partial challenge to Marc's assertion. From the moment an accomplished comedian steps on stage, they are fully-clothed in a CSP. I will concede that a novice by definition is not accomplished. But they are likely to have watched other comedians and witnessed the workings of stand-up comedy shows. On balance, therefore, they are likely to present a version of self that somewhat models what they believe an audience will respond well to. There can be little doubt that standing in front of a live audience will trigger the process of public self-awareness. And as Crisp and Turner write:

... public self-awareness leads to adherence to social standards of behaviour: people who are aware of the perceptions of others, for example their social group, are more likely to conform to group norms, even if this does not match their private point of view.⁷⁰

Norms the novice comedian is most certainly likely to adhere to are that: he or she is presenting as a comedian, and the venue booker expects to see some level of preparation and intent to entertain, and the audience expects to hear and see a presentation that worthy of laughter. This brings us back an earlier point of what seems like a paradox in the process: being oneself/being authentic, and being what will make an audience engage and laugh.

The resolution I propose is: a comedian negotiates a way of being oneself as a funny person—CSP. As evidenced in interviews, comedians don't start as the finished product. This environmentally adaptive process of becoming a comedian

⁶⁸ Ibid., 183-4.

⁶⁹ Marc, *Comic Visions : Television Comedy and American Culture*, 13.

⁷⁰ Crisp and Turner, *Essential Social Psychology*, 184-5.

is the process of adapting a CSP for professional performance, of clothing the ‘naked self’ (described by Marc) from an increasingly effective wardrobe. In this sense, presenting themselves to any audience, comedians may present different aspects of self, depending on several variables. For example, just as with the sequencing of conversations in any human interaction, topics such as sex and drugs are not likely to be opening topics in a conversational interaction with people one has just met. The general principles of breaking the ice apply. This raises the issue of what aspects of self are presented when, where, to whom, and within what context. As Crisp & Turner point out:

[T]he self-concept is thought to be made up of many self-schemas, some of which reflect individual aspects of the self, such as personality, but others which reflect our relationships with family, friends, and social groups.⁷¹

My thesis proposes that CSP is a type of self-schema. For the stand-up comedian, writing and rehearsing entails choices that pre-empt the performance situation. These choices involved what aspects of self to present, and how to present them. So, for example, Louis CK may speak about his relationship with his ex-wife, his young daughters, or white people, middle-aged men, or other such relatable topics. As the interview with Milton Jones shows (see above) there is a choice of order and placement of topics. What is worth noting about the comedian’s choice of schema is how it impacts concepts such as intimacy, identity, and impression management in terms of how it enhances or diminishes the humour transaction. As mentioned above, the experienced/skilled comedian intuitively knows what topic and self-schema, when and where.

CONCLUSION

This chapter began by setting out a pre-science approach to folk theory suggested by the philosopher of science Sir Karl Popper, and prepared the ground for mapping and bridging folk accounts of CSP to scientific/scholarly accounts and methodologies. Through the process of unpacking concepts and discussion of research by Rutter, Scarpetta & Spagnoli, Brodie, and Greenbaum, it was demonstrated how such unpacking yielded a crucial insight into comic timing as described by comedians and the folk theory. By identifying the comic timing as

⁷¹ Ibid., 197.

kairos instead of *chronos* (as in Attardo and Pickering) it opens the way to connect notions of timing with *Kairos* and the type of process of cognitive empathy required to judge such phenomena. This is core to this thesis. Mastering audience interaction is the *sine qua non* of stand-up comedy. Mastering interaction is the domain of empathic competence. Comedians must be in touch, read rooms/audiences, perceive, adjust, tack, and engage. The aim of the thesis is to show that this array of processes described initially through folk notions can be described via cognitive and psychological accounts. CSP is what emerges from these processes.

The focus then turned to examining and unpacking the folk account in the form of how-to literature and the insights of stand-up comedians. Through this process of unpacking, an apparent paradox emerged: comedy coaches and comedians emphasize notions of authenticity and originality. The only defining objective of a comedian is to be relatively funny, i.e. make audiences laugh. A question was raised as to why authenticity and originality were referred to so often in the folk theory. It was suggested that advice such as ‘be yourself’ or ‘be authentic/original’ may be a form of virtue signalling, given the process of self-awareness triggered when a performer is asked to speak about craft. There may also be connotations with a sense of stage self (CSP) that embraces risk-taking and highly disinhibited self-presentation and performance. But, it was concluded that the primary driver in stand-up is entertainment/laughter.

Franklyn Ajaye’s account provides insight into how exemplars influence CSP. Both in his description of working with Richard Pryor and his discussion of influences with Chris Rock, he shows the embodied aspects of CSP and how both rhetorical structures and physical comic expression are blended. This opens up pathways for considering how rhetorical and performative can be consciously and unconsciously adapted. It also shows the existence of learnable/adaptable structures of influence in the comedian’s professional environment.

And finally, there are both conscious and unconscious aspects to discussing any art, craft, or activity, that limit the practitioner’s objective ability to describe the process. Even the most candid stand-up comedian is bound by subjective limits in describing their process. As the psychologist Timothy Wilson so succinctly puts

it, 'we are strangers to ourselves'. This does not in any way diminish the value of folk accounts of stand-up comedy; on the contrary it, suggests the type of considerations required in processing the accounts appropriately through what Daniel Dennett describes as a heterophenomenological approach and cognitive methods. Terms such as 'authenticity' and 'originality' or advice to 'be yourself' are worth considering. But such terms must be unpacked and analysed for what they actually claim to do within the process of writing and performing. It may seem almost heretical to challenge such laudable recommendations, but in terms of what a comedian must do, and the challenges he or she must face in writing and presenting to live audiences, how should such advice be considered?

The following chapter sets out the processes of CSP via compatible strands of cognitive science, humour, and personality theories. It describes through cognitive and psychological means the comedian's need for, and formation of, CSP. Drawing on Hurley et al.'s cognitive evolutionary theory of humour, the account of stand-up comedy set out heretofore is extended and anchored in compatible frames of the cognitive approach. Through George Kelly's constructivist approach to personality formation and his analogy of man as naïve scientist, the theory of CSP finds its place within a solid matrix.

CHAPTER 4 – FROM PROCESS TO PERSONA

INTRODUCTION

As has been established, the distinction between text-based humour and stand-up comedy are the elements of interaction, engagement, and the relationship between performer and audience delimiting the humour, performance, and narrative self-presentation. Stand-up performance entails bringing prepared ideas to life with a strong emphasis on *in situ* dynamics. A key challenge for any theoretical model of stand-up comedy performance is to account for the processes involved. Terms such as ‘Comedy in the flesh’ or ‘performance fabric’ used by Eric Weitz speak to a sense of tailoring to each situation—responding to the fluid nature of situation and event—and the centrality of mental framing.¹ These issues were discussed in the previous chapter in the work of Brodie, Fabiola & Scarpetta, Greenbaum, and Rutter. Comedians must be sensitive to, and act upon, the opportune moments in performance (empathy and *Kairos*). Though felt and familiar, these concepts tend to be mercurial and slippery in the face of analysis. However, a central claim for CSP is that it is as a response to these concepts of performative engagement and interaction that CSP emerges adaptively.

This chapter sets out to break down these concepts by unpacking them, identifying the moves, and by framing them in compatible cognitive and psychological models. The first phase is to consider what comedians do, what challenges they face, and what identifiable methods and tools do they use to address their writing and performance challenges—the factors that inform CSP. The terrain in terms of tuning into one’s sociocultural and performative milieu, generating humour, and tuning into one’s self-presentation can be summed up in three steps: write, perform, reflect. The three broad phases of this process are not necessarily sequential; rather, they are dynamically linked. Feedback and experience from all three phases have the potential to impact on the other two. For example, noting how phrasing helps or hinders performance and audience response can impact the comedian’s writing process, i.e. based on multiple

¹ Weitz, *The Cambridge Introduction to Comedy*, 93-5.

audience responses material may be edited, expanded, or dropped, or a comedian may choose to improvise or script verbatim.

Reflecting may include observing how comedy exemplars engage audiences, structure material, and use act-outs to optimise engagement and humour. Reflecting on the effective methods of others may impact style of writing and presentation. By considering the comedian's creative and performative process in terms of challenges detected and resolved, and bearing in mind that necessity is the mother of invention, CSP is—in its most essential form—a product of the adaptive and intuitive process whereby human beings formulate and embed perceived rules about situations and generate ways of functioning effectively. An important point to make here is that the comedian's process, for the most part, is tacit/intuitive. Comedians do not need to read instruction manuals to learn how to do comedy. They certainly require no understanding of humour studies, cognitive science or performance studies. There is, therefore, a substantial challenge in bridging the practitioner's knowledge and scholarly, academic, and scientific knowledge. In Greek philosophy, therefore, the practitioner's knowledge (know how) is described as *technē*, while academic knowledge is *epistēmē*. In this chapter in particular, the aim is to map connections between what comedians do and cognitive concepts—in other words map the folk reports of *technē*, on to theoretical descriptions *epistēmē*. The ultimate aim is to show that if the comedians tacitly learn much of what they do, they also tacitly acquire CSP.

HUNTERS, NAÏVE SCIENTISTS, AND TACIT KNOWLEDGE

A useful starting point to capture the comedian's development process within an environment is to employ some fitting models and analogies. Applying George Kelly's 'naïve scientist' analogy to stand-up comedians provides a way to categorize their process of prospecting for laughter. Kelly's cognitive account of human beings as, 'constantly engaged in the process of understanding ourselves and the world around us,'² works to cast the comedian as a naïve scientist attempting to work through the complex task of how to engage audiences in humour. The pursuit of answers to this question inevitably gives rise to questions relating to the nature of

² John F. Kihlstrom, "Cognitive Approaches to Personality," University of California, Berkeley, <https://www.ocf.berkeley.edu/~jfkhlstrom/IntroductionWeb/resources/Ch12Cognitive.htm>.

audiences, jokes, routines, and self-presentation. Writing, performing, and reflecting can certainly be understood as experimental. Every nascent joke entails a hypothesis. Every failed joke was once believed to be worthy of mirth/laughter by its originator. Therefore, all jokes entail a propositional belief that they will trigger mirth/laughter in an audience (in its broadest sense). In the case of a failed joke, post-failure, the originator must analyse what went wrong. Possible results of such an analysis may include: the joke is not funny, not well-structured, the audience was not good, the performance was not sufficient, the setting was not suitable, etc. The list of possible reasons for the joke's failure is not exhaustive, but it gives a flavour of the comedian's post-performance reflection. For now, I am not making any claims about the extent to which such a process is conscious or intuitive. The only claim is to say, writing and performing stand-up comedy involves an adaptive learning process that includes reflexivity that builds AII (audience-interaction-intelligence).

Applying the hunter analogy the process goes as follows: if all jokes can be described as a form of trick, becoming an effective joker means becoming an effective trickster. Comedians must think into the mind(s) of their audience, engage, strategically reveal and conceal, wrong-foot, and elicit laughter. The challenge is to bait and successfully retain/engage, and generate laughter. However, as the comedian and writer Jay Sankey suggests, even when performing material that has worked well previously with many audiences, an audience can still cool, switch off to a comedian, and, as he puts it, get 'off the bus'.³ Past results are no guarantee when facing a live audience. For this, comedians must develop intuitions of how humour in the live situation works, contextualise who they are, what they believe, provide a personable frame for the presentation of their material, as a way to keep the live situation under control. The provision of this commanding, personable frame is central to CSP.

Combining the naïve scientist and hunter analogies, it becomes possible to describe a model of the hunter-comedian building and honing skills and knowledge as naïve scientist. CSP can therefore be considered as an emergent property of the comedian's problem-solving process, i.e. a style of presenting a plausible, engaging,

³ Sankey, *Zen and the Art of Stand-up Comedy*, 144. (See also: Sankey, chapter 7 - Audiences).

and comedic self that serves the primary objective: laughter. Both analogies—naïve scientist and trickster-hunter—frame a way to consider the challenges and solutions involved in the comedian’s development that leads to CSP formation as an integral part of such an invariably intentioned and intuitive process. However, there is one more vital point to be restated: such processes are broadly tacit, and therefore the knowledge of the processes are, for the most part, tacit.

Though with its roots in Greek epistemology, the concept of tacit knowledge is associated with the Hungarian-British polymath Michael Polanyi. As part of my description of CSP, I am invoking the concept of tacit knowledge to both describe the process of CSP formation, and to explain why it is challenging and problematic for comedians and other performers to describe what they do and how they do it. I make the case that the formation of CSP is an intuitive and adaptive process. In effect, it involves an intuitive form of knowledge of the rules of writing and performing stand-up comedy. Treating CSP as a function of the comedian’s tacit knowledge of craft offers a way to explain why comedians may find it difficult to either recognise or speak about their CSPs, and why there are so many muddled notions in the folk account.

Polanyi claims that, ‘we can know more than we can tell.’⁴ He gives an example of how we comfortably recognise faces (physiognomy) but have little or no reason how this process works: ‘We recognise the moods of the human face, with being able to tell, except quite vaguely, by what signs we know it.’⁵ There are a couple of germane points to be considered here. The first is the general point that much of what a comedian learns about how to do stand-up is tacitly embedded. The second point relates to the role of facial feedback in a stand-up performance. Considering that comedians perform to a sea of faces, the “reading of the room” is literally the reading of facial expressions in the audience. Add to this the auditory forms of feedback discussed in the previous chapter in the work of Spagnolli & Scarpetta, and we discover a significant form of feedback that comedians must process tacitly. Comedians learn much of what they need to know about writing

⁴ Michael Polanyi and Amartya Sen, *The Tacit Dimension* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press ; Bristol : University Presses Marketing [distributor], 2009), 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

and performing stand-up comedy based on audience feedback that is processed tacitly.

There is also the information that is gathered while watching fellow comedians onstage. Keeping in mind the hunter and naïve scientist analogies, comedians work in a community of other performers. Therefore, while the emcee is onstage warming up the room, or other acts are performing, the comedians waiting to come on are listening to and watching the audiences, observing what topics, styles of presentation are going over well or badly, all the while tacitly processing audience feedback and the work of other comedians. Via this ongoing process, comedians are learning the rudiments of set-up, rhetorical structure, handling hecklers, NVCs, noticing when audience get on or off the bus (as described by Jay Sankey), observing how attention spans of audience peak and wane as the night wears on, alcohol kicks in, bladders fill, the call for last orders near, and the last bus is about to leave.⁶ This is the stuff of CSP. It is a tacit process. By intuitively absorbing the rules, adaptive to the lines of the art form, CSP emerges.

These particulars of stand-up comedy all constitute a type of physiognomy of what is required to succeed as a stand-up comedian: live in situ dynamics, rhetorical and joke structures, audience visual and auditory feedback, the agency and club booking process, the monkey-see-monkey-do of modelling exemplars, etc. But as Polanyi writes, “[G]estalt psychology has demonstrated that we may know a physiognomy by integrating our awareness of its particulars without being able to identify these particulars...”⁷ Citing two similar but separate psychological experiments by Lazarus and McCleary, and Eriksen and Kuethe, that shocked experiment subjects on the presentation of certain words and syllables, he shows how the experiment subjects predict a shock but did not consciously make the connection with the types and words and syllables. In other words, they had predictive ability without knowing how they had it. It is reasonable to suggest that the process of becoming an accomplished stand-up comedian is based on something similar to electric shocks. After all, we admire stand-up comedians

⁶ It is worth mentioning again research by Dolf Zilmann on the relationship between alcohol and the ability to process complex humour. See: Chapter 2 above and Antony J. Chapman and Hugh C. Foot, *It's a Funny Thing, Humour* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1977), 293

⁷ Polanyi and Sen, *The Tacit Dimension*, 6.

because of the risk they take by standing up in front of rooms of strangers who may well reject them. It might be said that it is a practice full of feedback and shocks. The comedian observes other comedians, audiences, and exemplars, actively shaping those observations and experiences. Polanyi's description of Gestalt is useful here. He sees it as

... the outcome of an active shaping of experience performed in the pursuit of knowledge. This shaping or integrating I hold to be the great and indispensable tacit power by which all knowledge is discovered and, once discovered, is held to be true.⁸

What I take from what Polanyi says here is that those pursuing knowledge, in this case comedians, shape their experiences and observation to extract knowledge and insights. Therefore, a comedian watching another comedian is not watching in the same way as an audience member might. Likewise, when observing audience laughter or other forms of feedback, the comedian is doing so in a particularly interested and intentioned way.

HETEROPHENOMENOLOGY EXPLAINED

Chapters 2 and 3 point out the value of humour and performance researchers engaging with folk theory and practitioner accounts in the study of stand-up comedy, while at the same time the chapters showed that practitioner accounts and the how-to literature is replete with ill-defined concepts. This is exactly the challenge of engaging with tacit knowledge. As Polanyi puts it: all knowledge is personal. It would be fair to say that there is a gap to be bridged between humour practitioners and researchers. While the tendency to quantitative scientific approaches may be driven by notions of objectivity, the reality is: such findings may say little that is worth proving, while the other camp says much that cannot be proven or disproven.

To capture CSP I have so far examined folk theory, notions, and concepts, and suggested how these ideas might be unpacked and mapped on to cognitive and psychological accounts. In this respect I am following the heterophenomenological approach set out by Daniel Dennett as an approach to the study of consciousness. As I see it, CSP faces similar challenges as consciousness, in that there are at times

⁸ Ibid.

two sides talking past each other. One side privileges the subjective first-person experience and account of stand-up comedy's creative and performative processes, while the other dismisses too easily and too early the potential of the first-person, subjective insights to make a valuable contribution to scientific understanding.

Comedians may well say they are themselves, or a version of themselves, or a persona on stage. Some comedians may be aware of an onstage/off-stage distinction, while others may be oblivious, ambivalent or in denial. Likewise, the third-person observer may take a similar range of positions regarding CSP. Given that folk theory can generally be described as first-person reporting, and humour and performance studies research as third-person analysis, it seems that Dennett's approach is apt. Setting out the problem of bridging first and third person—subjective/Objective domains—Dennett asks how objective methods can be applied to subjective accounts. He writes:

On the face of it, the study of human consciousness involves phenomena that seem to occupy something rather like another dimension: the private, subjective, 'first-person' dimension. Everybody agrees that this is where we start. What, then, is the relation between the standard 'third-person' objective methodologies for studying meteors or magnets (or human metabolism or bone density), and the methodologies for studying human consciousness?

Dennett's proposed solution involves combining scientific method with interpretation of first person accounts. As regards CSP, this means interpreting the beliefs, ideas, and opinions of subjects/practitioners and considering reported experience in the light of cognitive and psychological accounts of humour and persona. This does not mean privileging a first-person account; rather, it means taking 'the first-person point of view as seriously as it can be taken,' and then applying the intentional stance. Therefore, treating a stand-up comedian as a rational agent one can predict how he or she is likely to believe and act in a given situation. By setting out the situation as a series of challenges and parameters associated with performing stand-up comedy, it is then possible to predict what the comedian is likely to do to overcome the problems and challenges in achieving his or her goals.

EXAMINING THE PROCESS OF CSP

Considering what has been said so far regarding the structural elements of CSP, the chapter now turns to demonstrating the type of situations and processes involved. The natural starting point is to examine the creation of a comedy routine, and in particular, how a comedian structures material and considers the audience, and plans performance. As set out in the opening chapter, human beings are intentioned toward other human beings. Our social reality entails the empathic reading of other minds. A significant part of our social and evolutionary success as a species depends upon our ability to read into situations and the intentions of others in terms of our general objectives.

In stand-up comedy such intentioned thinking—a mix of reflection and pre-emption—is evidenced in choice of topics and biographical narrative. The types of introductions used by many comedians demonstrate this point well. Pre-empting the ice-breaking phase, comedians reflect on what ideas and impressions are likely to go through the mind(s) of audiences as they appear on stage. Hence there are abundant examples of the self-deprecating trope structure ‘I know what you’re thinking, I look like a cross between [X] and [Y]’, where X and Y equal a celebrity or well-known character. Using a blend of self-deprecation and topicality, such an introduction is designed to get a quick, early laugh that builds confidence and intimacy.

The following are examples of the comedian, John Herr—stage name: Hurricane—introducing himself to audiences at various venues.⁹ These examples show clear pre-emption by Hurricane of what audiences are likely to notice about him first. He is portly and bears a resemblance to the cartoon character Peter Griffin from the Fox TV series *Family Guy*. His lines of introduction address the first likely impression and functions as a way of getting quick early laughs, and as an efficient technique for establishing his capacity to self-deprecate. But he follows this with a wrong-footing format, i.e. by making a play on where he lives.

⁹ Herr, according to his website, has previously worked as a speechwriter for two presidents and has written jokes for President GW Bush, (see: <http://www.hurricane.com/about/>).

The first sample is a transcript from Herr's show at the D.C. Improv.¹⁰ The piece gives an insight into how a comedian establishes rapport and a CSP with an audience via introductory remarks.

1. Thank you very much, thank you very much!
2. Give yourselves a hand for coming out and seein' comedy.
3. So I love this joint. It's good to see you guys.
4. My name is Herrricane.
5. I gotta say, I love playing the D.C. Improv.
6. It's a nice change from my day-job.
7. I play Peter Griffin in the Family Guy (on ice show).¹¹
8. (With Peter Griffin voice) Hey, Lois, Quagmire just bought a new power-mower.
9. No, that's bullshit. I'll get real, I'll get real.
10. I'll get real. My name is Herrricane.
11. I live in Southeast.¹²
12. Southeast Fairfax County, motherfucker.
13. The mean cul-de-sacs.
14. Every street's a dead-end, yo!¹³

In using the single stage name 'Herrricane', John Herr is already identifying himself to audiences as a force of nature, powerful, destructive, and dangerous. In comedic terms, he is declaring that he is big and powerful. The use of a stage name in and of itself speaks to the process of mind-reading and pre-emption that is core to this chapter in particular, and this thesis in general. Such conscious examples of creating an impression, I argue, builds an accumulation of circumstantial evidence for CSP. Even before arriving on stage this comedian wants to announce his brand.

¹⁰ Herr, John. "DC Impro 2011". YouTube video, (11:43). Posted Aug, 2012.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4HojsAz63_4&t=100s

¹¹ The final 2/3 words of this line are hard to figure out on all recordings. My best guess is 'on ice show'). Regardless, the audiences seem to get the reference.

¹² All of the shows I refer to here are in the Washington D.C. area. Southeast Washington D.C. is a pre-dominantly African American deprived neighbourhood within the quadrant southeast of the Anacostia river.

¹³ According to US census statistics published in 2008, Fairfax county has a median income of \$105,241, making it the second wealthiest county per capita in the US. (Source: Bishaw, Alemayehu and Jessica Semega, U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey Reports, ACS-09, Income, Earnings, and Poverty Data From the 2007 American Community Survey, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 2008).

On line 1 he acknowledges the applause of the audience as he arrives on stage and takes the mic from the stand.

On line 2 he gets the audience to enact a second round of applause by asking the audience to applaud itself. As this is the beginning of the night, this call-to-action (CTA) as described by Jason Rutter in his research on the role of the emcee, is a fairly standard way to build a form of compliance, group energy, and positive response.¹⁴

Line 3 seems like a polite acknowledgement that he likes the venue, likes the audience, likes performing there, and is comfortable on stage and is having a good time. But he is also implying that he has performed the venue enough times to be comfortable and by implication is a safe pair of hands, as it were. He is also implying that he has performed enough venues to be in a position to express a positive evaluation of this particular venue. Again, implicit in this line is the idea that he is an accomplished act. Though line 3 may at first glance seem like filler, it intends to several purposes; it is also a partial set up for lines 5 – 7—as will become clear.

On line 4 he re-establishes his name. This marks the beginning of his scripted material. Line 5 is a set up line. The name of the venue is arbitrary. As scripts from other Hurricane performances show, the line can be considered as follows: I gotta say, I love playing [insert name of venue here].

Line 6, as it turns out, hoodwinks the audience into believing he is about to risk revealing something personal. It sets up the expectation that he has a job that he finds difficult and, maybe, he's about to deliver some juicy complaints and gossip about his boss or workmates. Given that this is Washington D.C. it may even add an extra degree of intrigue and tension to the moment.

There are several elements at play in Line 7 the punchline. He stands still and allows the audience to laugh. He has addressed the elephant in the room, i.e. he is obviously quite overweight. It seems he is reading the audience's mind(s), saying what they are privately thinking. He is saying: I know I'm fat, and I know that you know I am fat but are afraid to say it. This form of self-deprecation is also

¹⁴ Rutter, "The Stand-up Introduction Sequence: Comparing Comedy Compères."

a form of pre-emptive strike. It is a way of saying to any would-be heckler: I can heckle myself about my physical appearance, you have no power over me on that front.

Line 8 is a topper where he shows he can also do the voice of the cartoon character Peter Griffin.

Line 9 is a clear example of two diametrically opposed ideas. On the one hand, he is acknowledging that he tricked the audience into believing that he was about to reveal something truthful and personal. He is apologizing and saying: sorry I tricked you, I won't do it again, that was bullshit, now I'll get real and reveal something about myself. On the other hand, this is in fact setting the audience up again for another bogus claim.

On line 10 he again restates his name—again a form of branding, but perhaps also a way of affecting a sincere tone of voice. Along with line 11 it is the set up for the next gag.

Line 12, again the punchline is a reversal or script opposition (as described by Attardo and Raskin as discussed in Chapter 2). The play is on Southeast, a poor and crime-ridden ward in Washington D.C., and southeast Fairfax County, one of the wealthiest areas per capita in the United States. The use and performance delivery of 'motherfucker' is also a SO in that it is a phrase associated with and delivered in the patois of an African-American urban youth from an area such as Southeast district, Ward 8.

Line 13 is a topper line that plays on *Mean Streets*, the 1973 crime film by Martin Scorsese, but instead uses the type of cul-de-sacs associated with the leafy suburbs of Fairfax County.

Line 14 is a second topper and a SO. Cul-de-sacs associated with the leafy suburbs, limitations on through-traffic, and quiet seclusion, can also be associated with being dead ends, as in dead-end jobs, dead-end life, and no future or way out that often describes how life is for people in poor and crime-ridden metropolitan suburbs. Again, the use of a phrase associated with criminal youth ('yo').

LAUGH OUT LOUD, TEMPLE HILL CDP, MARYLAND

What is notable in Herricane's set and performance at this venue is the addition of a line prior to his Peter Griffin line: 'My name is Herricane, (pause) based on the novel *Push* by Sapphire.'¹⁵ This line clearly goes down well with the audience at Laugh Out Loud, Temple Hill. According to the 2010 census, Temple Hill has an 86.9% African American population.¹⁶ From the video clips available, he only seems to use this *Push* reference in venues with predominantly African-American audiences.¹⁷ In another venue, Laffs on the Harbor, in the predominantly African-American area of Oxon Hill, he also uses the *Push* line.¹⁸ The 2009 film *Precious* was based on the 1996 novel *Push* by Sapphire. The main character Precious, played by the actress Gabourey Sidibe, is noticeably overweight. Herricane is therefore leveraging concepts that he believes particular audiences will relate to and pick up on quickly.

These examples from John Herr suggest the type of ice-breaking, introductory ideas and concepts that comedians typically develop. The reason why this is relevant to this thesis on the formation of CSP is they show the following: when tracked back to its genesis this kind of material reveals the pre-emption, artifice, and mentalization process of stand-up comedians as they prepare for the live event. Considerations of venue location, audience profile, likely first impression of his appearance, and how he can leverage these factors for humour, are all evident in Herr's material. But what it demonstrates the over-riding consideration is generating solutions to such questions as: how to get the audience laughing? And how to keep them laughing? Comedians reflect on audience response, test and re-test material, delivery, and presentation-style. And—over time and with application—through this process CSP is formed and modified. In the case of John Herr it is possible to see how he adjusts according to the venue.¹⁹

¹⁵ John Herr, "Herricane @ Laugh Out Loud 1", YouTube video, (9:19), posted Dec, 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lur5pcGDL_s&t=65s

¹⁶ Source: United State Census Bureau, <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF>

¹⁷ The DC Improv from Sample 1 is located in downtown DC a few blocks from DuPont Circle (1140 Connecticut Avenue).

¹⁸ John Herr, "Herricane", YouTube video, (9:49), posted Jan, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2dYIA6XJt-M>

¹⁹ This adjustment to the venue is covered in Andrea Greenbaum's research discussed earlier.

To further demonstrate the artifice of comedic introductions, consider the comedian who happens to be from out of town, another culture, or country, who refers deprecatingly to where they are from. Here again there may be a pre-emption of what stereotypes the audience is likely to associate with their place of origin; or how audiences are likely to find them novel/interesting. But prior to coming to grips with such audience management techniques, novices enter a process of finding their way through their first gigs and adapting their initial scripts and performance to accommodate the feedback of their lived experiences with audiences.

In an interview with the *Guardian*, discussing what she learned from her first one hundred gigs, British comedian Ellie Gibson describes the challenge of scripting, performing, and dealing with stand-up comedy audiences.²⁰ She says, 'you realise that nerve is not enough – in fact it's not even enough to have really good jokes that you've worked hard on.' This speaks to a discrepancy between expectation and reality. It also supports my view that text-based analysis is not sufficient for the analysis of stand-up comedy. Before performing in front of live audiences, the novice has ideas and beliefs (hypotheses) about what will engage audiences and generate laughs—generally in the form of a script. But, the live event presents at least two significant challenges: generating the sense of natural conversation and remaining responsive and flexible to the unpredictable atmosphere in the live event. As Gibson puts it:

Don't let it get over-rehearsed. Be flexible: When you're new, you don't know how to cope if someone smashes a glass in the middle of your act or keeps talking, so you just carry on saying your jokes. Now I know, if it's going badly, I have a few lines I can throw in to break the tension, or I have other material that I can use to retune the atmosphere. The really good comedians can walk into a room and immediately read an audience – they know which parts of their act to remove and what material to pull from the databank.²¹

Here Gibson demonstrates the kind of pragmatic issues that arise from experience. Comedians over time develop ways to cope with obstacles and opportunities in the live situation. Consider, for example, how Stewart Lee's haranguing technique leverages comic failure for humour. Gibson speaks of not letting it get over-rehearsed (when you're new). This is a good point as it speaks to the importance of

²⁰ Keith Stuart, "How to Survive 100 Gigs as a Standup: Ellie Gibson's Comedy Crash Course," *The Guardian* 2014.

²¹ Ibid

spontaneity, improvisational ability, re-tuning the atmosphere, breaking tension, reading an audience, adjusting the set list of material and jokes on the fly. In this way, I argue, comedians develop their CSPs intuitively from performing through speaking out their comedy ideas in front of audiences, learning the form of live comedy events, and building their internalised hypotheses of what is effective. Again, this description is compatible with George Kelly's naïve scientist analogy.

There is an interesting point to be picked up on here in what Gibson (a novice) says about developing as a comedian, and what is evident in the work of Stewart Lee, a highly-developed act. Lee's act is tightly scripted and rehearsed. But Gibson is suggesting the opposite for the novice. That suggests to me the following: Lee, having learnt how to play the live event so comprehensively, knows how to script for it effectively. His sense of what he can be and how he can play in front of an audience is informed by decades of experimentation and an accumulation of comic insight. There is a sense of coming full circle in a bootstrapping process whereby the novice must first script "good-enough" material so that he/she can get up in front of audiences: secondly, break loose from the safety and comfort of scripted material and become more responsive to the live event: and thirdly, incorporate these experience into scripting more effectively. It suggests that in order to develop, the comedian must be open to the moments of live event in order to mature—a sense of letting of old tricks in order to find better ways of being on stage in the live event.

An important way to think about what comedians do with audiences is captured in the expression 'naming the elephant in the room'. The comedian's capacity to name and expose concealed views held by the audience is akin to the amusement created by mentalists. This is what I refer to as mental intimacy—the sense that this person seems to know what we are thinking and feeling. This is usually the capacity we associate with friends, people who empathize with us so well that they 'know' our minds. There is also admiration for the boldness and bravery associated with this kind of candour.

An example of this approach is a line from the Danish Muslim comedian Omar Marzouk: 'I don't care when my jokes die, because they go to heaven and get

seventy-two virgin jokes.’²² This gag plays on a couple of levels. The idea of a comedian not caring about dying on stage is the first thing that Marzouk identifies. Audience members know that comedians care that their jokes and their act will not die on stage. It is one of the elephants in the room, and an unspoken cause of tension at live events. Just as an actor dying on stage in the theatre presents tension, a joke that dies places both audience and performer under pressure. Marzouk’s set up makes way for an effective reversal. As described by GTVH target parameter (TA), Marzouk leverages the Muslim stereotype of being irrationally indifferent to death. However, the joke also works on the level of “comedian as fearless and brave”.

Later in the chapter—as part of grounding CSP in cognitive and psychological concepts—I discuss spreading activation: the idea that when an idea comes into consciousness a network of associations is activated below the level of consciousness. Therefore, when a comedian raises concepts in a set-up, almost simultaneously a network of association is potentially activated in the mind(s) of the audience. So, for example, Marzouk in a pre-emptive way estimates what non-Muslim audiences are likely to have in mind when he mentions that he is Muslim. Therefore, the pre-emptive work of the comedian is to intelligently approximate what those unconscious activations are likely to be and how these unconscious activations can be leveraged for jokes. As I set out in Chapter 2, these associations are highly mutable depending on the sociocultural milieu. For example, a British comedian performing in Ireland in the wake of the Brexit vote in 2016 can build jokes around this topic, whereas two years ago this association simply did not exist, hence the importance of comedians to be sensitive to the relative and mutable nature of joke topics.

So far in the chapter, I have set out the emergence of CSP as a response to the challenge of presenting and narrating the self comically and holding the attention of audiences. I have introduced the analogies of the comedian as hunter and naïve scientist. As established, for comedians/writers the prime objective is to make audiences laugh. This objective means reading audiences and performance

²² "Festival Funnies: Edinburgh's 50 Best Jokes," *Independent* (2006), <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/festival-funnies-edinburghs-50-best-jokes-413434.html>.

situations as a set of dynamic concepts such as background knowledge or socio-cultural-linguistic context. It also entails figuring out how to present oneself in an effective comedic mode (CSP). In this process of figuring out audiences and performance situations, comedians inevitably deal with feedback. For CSP, perhaps the most relevant questions centre around how is the audience likely to perceive the comedian and what are they likely to think about his/her topics? In this respect it can be said that comedians are not only naïve scientists and hunters; they are also mentalists.

The next stage of the chapter examines the cognitive account of humour presented by Hurley et al. in their 2011 monograph *Inside Jokes*. My purpose is threefold:

1. To discuss the comedian's process via the evolutionary, cognitive account of humour
2. Suggest bridging points between folk accounts and cognitive theory
3. Highlight how Dennett's concept of the intentional stance reflects narrative structure in stand-up comedy

Following Bruce McConachie's call for theatre and performance scholarship to embrace a cognitive approach, I set out to anchor the thesis in such a way that it finds compatibility with the scientific method. What follows is a mapping of aspects of the thesis onto the cognitive approach to humour set out in *Inside Jokes*. The aim is to show how the comedian's process of writing, performance and CSP formation can ultimately be described via cognitive science methods. But, as has been shown in discussion of Karl Popper, translating and unpacking folk concepts is an essential first preparatory step in the scientific approach. What follows below is a synopsis and discussion of Hurley et al.'s evolutionary account of humour with particular emphasis on the aspects salient to stand-up comedy. Taking playful, social, wrong-footing, and empathic narrative craft as the comedian's two core objectives, CSP can be considered as an emergent phenomenon that conceals the wrong-footing artifice and reveals the elements of persona that enhance the social and playful elements of humorous interaction.

INSIDE JOKES AS COGNITIVE MAP FOR CSP

Inside Jokes proposes an evolutionary account of humour that describes a process of natural selection that incentivises humans to detect and clean up the cognitive and conceptual errors that are the inevitable by-product of fast thinking. According to the authors, Mother Nature gets:

... our brains to do all the tedious debugging that they must do if they are to live dangerously with the unruly piles of discoveries and mistakes that we generate in our incessant heuristic search.²³

While fast thinking is evolutionarily advantageous, it leads to a trade-off between speed and error.²⁴ According to Hurley et al., in order to incentivise the brain to take on the task of detecting and cleaning up these cognitive errors resulting from fast thinking, ‘Mother Nature [...] has to bribe the brain with pleasure; and that is why we experience mirthful delight when we catch ourselves wrong-footed by a concealed inference error. Finding and fixing these time-pressured mis-leaps would be constantly annoying hard work, if evolution hadn't arranged for it to be fun.’²⁵ The authors further suggest that, ‘This wired-in source of pleasure has then been tickled relentlessly by the *supernormal stimuli* invented and refined by our comedians and jokesters over the centuries.’²⁶ This point in particular is central to understanding the workings of stand-up comedy and comedians. Like all humour, stand-up comedy can be considered as a form of mental tickling, tricking, wrong-footing. As the examples above from Hurricane and Marzouk show, the bait-and-switch text structure is blended with convincing performativity to spring a playful mental surprise on audiences.

In their introduction, Hurley et al. make the case that a craving for glucose and fructose explains a sweet tooth, and that likewise, our craving for humour is something, ‘We need to devote serious time and energy to doing something which, if we didn’t do it, would imperil our very lives... Nature has seen to it that we act vigorously on this need, by rewarding that action handsomely.’²⁷ Humour therefore

²³ Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, *Inside Jokes : Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*, xi.

²⁴ The subject of Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 1st ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

²⁵ Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, *Inside Jokes : Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*, xi.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 2.

is no trivial matter in terms of human evolution. And just as our sugar-cravings are, and have been exploited, the same goes for our craving for humour. Just as confectioners and food-processors exploit our taste for sugar, purveyors of comedy exploit cravings for humour. The authors put it as follows:

[B]eing funny is not just for fun; humour has been exacted as a tool in mate selection and sexual competition, allegiance probing, beliefs extraction, and the building of social capital, for instance.²⁸

Stand-up comedy could well be described within Dennett's description of the intentional stance, in that comedians are intentioned toward engaging audience attention, wrong-footing, enhancing the humour transaction, maximising efficient access to the audience's funny bone (beliefs, accessible knowledge, etc), and maximising laughter. As discussed previously in reference to Theory of Mind (ToM) in the approaches of McConachie, Zunshine, and others (see section Chapter 1, section: *Rationale for an Environmental Approach*), stand-up comedy entails thinking into the mind(s) of audience(s).

It might reasonably be suggested that it is this involuntary/automatic mind-reading process—involving the kind of belief attribution that makes observational and anthropomorphic comedy possible—that comedians adapt to locate themselves into the mind(s) of audience(s). Such locating entails a primary criterion: comic material must be relatable. In both writing and performing comedy the comedian imaginatively and empathically inhabits the mind of other people, species, and even non-sentient things. Stand-up comedy, as with other creative and imaginative pursuits, is not restricted to reading other minds; it can also extend mind into imaginative 'what-if' scenarios; attributing consciousness to, or, perhaps, projecting consciousness onto the non-sentient and inanimate. This suggests broader implications in terms of the intentional properties of mind—perhaps explaining a default preponderance to a teleological view of world as intentioned thing. Regardless of explanation, anthropomorphic attribution features in humour writing and performance. But such imaginative exploration must be relatable to contemporary audiences. The thrust of many stand-up comedy routines tease out socially-embedded propositions and beliefs, and how those propositions and beliefs can be set against socially-embedded propositions and

²⁸ Ibid., 6-7.

beliefs to reveal surprising contradictions and mis-leaps. The comedian's process of writing, performing, and reflection can be characterized as pre-emption and mind-reading.

Applying this view to writing and performing stand-up, it should be clear that jokes are not universal objects that exist out of time and place, but are, rather, packets of information specifically ordered and intended to elicit laughter from other minds within a sociocultural world at a particular time and place. As Hurley et al. suggest '[H]umor is heavily dependent on shared background assumptions, moods, and attitudes.'²⁹ There is a broader context that must be appraised by the comedian in terms of constructing a joking mechanism. Not only is there socio-cultural background knowledge criteria, but there is also the issue of how such information is specifically ordered: comedians think into the mind(s) of audience(s)—theory of mind—and exploit both socially-embedded knowledge and the order of that knowledge to wrong-foot and surprise.³⁰

Explaining the genesis of humour, Hurley et al. propose that humour is a solution to 'a computational problem faced by our brains'.³¹ As explained earlier, fast-thinking, while affording the advantages of speed within a biological structure—a human brain limited by time and glucose resources—leads to risky presumptions and errors. Spotting and cleaning up these resulting errors is a tedious but essential process. The pleasure sensations associated with mirth and humour therefore function as powerful incentivising rewards within a biological feedback system. Following Hurley et al., I propose that stand-up comedians intuitively and intentionally exploit this mechanism to elicit laughter. However, in keeping with the hunting analogy, the comedian affects a style of self-presentation (CSP) that veils the joking mechanism. So, for example, the Canadian one-liner comedian Stewart Francis has the following gag: 'Standing in the park today wondering: why does a Frisbee appear larger the closer it gets. And then it hit me...!'

In his delivery of the set-up line, Francis gives a convincing performance of being genuinely curious about the phenomenon of perspective. After the word

²⁹ Ibid., 7.

³⁰ A Theory of Mind (ToM) broadly describes the empathic potential to think into other minds.

³¹ Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, *Inside Jokes : Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*, 12.

‘wondering’, he raises his voice to ask the question. To the hearer, this triggers a scan for an answer; in other words, we are taken in by being asked to solve the riddle. In his delivery of the punchline he convincingly states, ‘and then it hit me...’ as one would expect to hear someone say: ‘then I had a realisation...’ and a follow on-point. But instead there is a pause. The audience now joins the dots set out, and the trick in the joke becomes clear. ‘It hit me’ has both a metaphorical and literal meaning. The literal gives the impression of a philosophical musing about perspective being abruptly ended.

It’s worth noting the combination of linguistic and performative elements (script and delivery) in his method. He’s not just writing a one-liner; although it is an effective text-based joke, he acts the lines with deadpan sincerity and therefore bolsters the wrong-footing through performance. His CSP is mild and prosaic; his speech is pleasant and precise. And though the audience knows he is a comedian, and the sincerity is a ruse, they still attend to each set up. The event bears all the hallmarks of a social exchange in terms of a set of rules and tacit agreements. For example, in one joke his father is dead, in another he is still alive, and yet, no one in the audience stands up and accuses Stewart Francis of lying to them or attempting to trick them. What therefore are the sociocultural elements in such jokes and their performance? And how does the comedian come to develop both their material and method for negotiating sociocultural transaction?

Before continuing this mapping of cognitive joke mechanisms to CSP, it is worth noting an apparent distinction between one-liner comedians such as Stewart Francis, Milton Jones, Tim Vine, or Steve Wright, for example, and longer-form comedians such as Sarah Silverman, Stewart Lee, and Louis CK. Comparing the two broad types in terms of CSP, the one-liner comedians could be classified as two-dimensional, more superficial, and less personable and revealing. Acts such as Bob Hope, Bob Monkhouse, and Jimmy Carr, it could be said, reveal little of themselves, but rather display their sharp wits. In this regard it seems possible to consider a spectrum of acts with gradations of personable style, self-revelation, and intimacy. Comparing the two broad styles of CSP, it seems fair to say that the burden of consistency or coherence weighs heavier on the longer-form comedians. Unlike Stewart Francis, whose father can be both dead and alive from one joke to another, the longer-form act who presents as an authentic self has less licence. This

may suggest that developing this form of CSP involves more audience engagement and exposure. Consider the following comment from the English stand-up comedian Ross Noble in a *London Independent* article:

The only way to get good at stand-up is to do it lots and lots until you are as comfortable onstage as you are off. Some people are good quicker but to be really good is about putting in the hours on stage. When most people start they don't know what their point of view is onstage. Until you figure that out you are just someone reciting a list of jokes. Often newer comics will do any joke they think of even if it contradicts previous ideas. It may get a laugh but leaves the audience confused as to who they are.³²

What Noble seems to suggest here is that over time and with substantial exposure to audiences and the commensurate reflection, it is possible to formulate a coherent sense of CSP. He describes it as discovering their “point of view”. What I take from this is a sense of coherence, identity, philosophy, and outlook—all elements one might associate with character and persona. What is also noteworthy in Noble’s description is the progression from jokes as atomistic packets that are often incompatible to a more cohesive set that presents a persona with a worldview. This description suggests a development process that begins small and disjointed. Over time, patterns and coherence emerge. There is a link in this kind of progression to Polanyi’s concept of a physiognomy composed of many atomic components. Over time, and with practice, the disjointed jokes of the novice give way to themes and the emergent CSP of the maturing comedian.

I suggest that the process is reflexive in nature and goes as follows: the comedian through reflection or random occurrence discovers linguistic, visual, and sociocultural ideas and concepts that have more than one potential meaning (in the case of puns), or contradictory elements prone to ridicule in the case of longer-form routines. The amusement of discovering double-meanings or ironic perspectives of the everyday are mini-Eureka moments that comedians then wish to share.³³ The wish to share is the crucial part of this process in the sense that this is where the process becomes social as in Theory of Mind (ToM). The task then becomes how to think into the mind(s) of interlocutors/audiences—to discover the

³² Bruce Dessau, "How Do You Write Good Comedy? Some of Britain's Finest Comedians Share Their Knowledge.," *London Independent*, 18th April 2015 2015.

³³ I use the word ‘share’ here in a very broad sense. Professional comedians and writers are financially rewarded for sharing jokes and humour.

most effective ways to adapt these diamonds-in-the-rough into viable jokes. Finally, during the road-testing in front of early audiences, comedians formulate jokes and methods of sharing and delivery.³⁴ CSP is an emergent and integral part of this process of engaging audiences and wrong-footing them in the playful performance of humour. It could be said, therefore, that CSP is what emerges in the unconscious dialectic between the comedian and audiences.

Understanding stand-up comedy as professionalised social play rooted in the impulse to share comic insights allows a way to see the objectives of comic writing and performing as structured for playful wrong-footing. Philosopher Ted Cohen describes the dynamic of joking relationships—when a person tells a joke to another—as follows:

I want you to like it [the joke] because I like you and I want you to have something you like; and I want you to be grateful to me for supplying it. But I also need you to like it, because in your liking it I receive a confirmation of my own liking.³⁵

Taking these points together it is possible to sketch an amalgam of objectives and intentions at play in both the writing and performance of stand-up comedy. From establishing friendly/playful rapport (even if the CSP is grumpy and anti-social) to drawing the audience's attention in such a way as to wrong-foot them in cognitive errors, the craft entails a comedic ToM. However, Cohen's description raises the need to highlight a key distinction between individuals sharing a joke and the professional stand-up comedian. Comedians must establish rapport and joking relations quickly with a room of strangers. As the work of Rutter on the importance of the emcee demonstrates, stand-up has a structure. That said, the challenge for the comedian is to optimise self-presentation and material for performance.

Comedians reflect on what the audience is likely to know/think/believe about joke topics. In the process of scripting and performing joke set-ups they must activate ideas, beliefs, and background knowledge in a particular way, and in a

³⁴ What I mean here by 'early audiences' are the audiences who are there at try-out or preview nights. Before taking new material on tour it is customary for comedians to road-test in small venues prior to large venues or recordings for broadcast. In this respect the analogy of the comedian as naïve scientist is particularly apt; the work process is very much about trial-and-error testing and development.

³⁵ Ted Cohen, *Jokes : Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 31--2.

particular time frame. Presenting a CSP has both the potential to act as a meta-set-up of implicit ideas, beliefs, background, and context that, taken as a whole, has an ordering effect on how the comedy material is viewed by the comedian. Attitude, as Judy Carter describes it, is essentially a way of emotionally ordering perspective. As Hurley et al. put it, ‘one can only laugh about what one can think about in a particular order and way’ and thereby lead the audience to draw particular conclusions; ‘the enthymematic expression provokes the audience to “fill in” and implication or assumption, or even a series of assumptions, without which no humour can be detected.’³⁶ But all this is not to suggest that stand-up can be reduced to word placement—performance is vital. As they put it:

Humour is dependent on (or sensitive to) both content restrictions and the dynamics of presentation. A hilarious joke lamely told, out of order or with poor timing, will have almost all mirth drained out of it, and a good comic actor can milk a laugh out of almost any line chosen at random from a book.³⁷

In terms of understanding the workings of comedy it is necessary, therefore, to consider both the text and performance together. There are the meta-factors of cognition that inform both the writing and performance. Stewart Lee’s work, discussed previously, displays a masterly use of insight into how to play the audience, timing of lines and action, and, in particular, the use of incomplete sentences that lead his audiences to resolve the humour through implication. As will be discussed in the next chapter, Stewart Lee evolved his technique partially through watching other comedians working with audiences. What Hurley et al. offer is a cognitive model of what comedians like Lee discover through trial-and-error, observing other comedians working with audiences, and study of craft. A good starting point to develop a working understanding of this amalgam of stand-up comedy moves and objectives, and how CSP emerges as an emergent phenomenon in this process, is to examine humour in the mind.

MENTAL SPACES AND THE MECHANISM OF HUMOUR

Hurley et al. set out an evolutionary theory of mind explaining the challenges and solution criteria faced by nature in human evolution. An explanation of humour,

³⁶ Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, *Inside Jokes : Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*, 32-3.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

and in turn the performance of stand-up comedy, requires a theoretical model. One of the basic demands made upon the human mind is speed. The speed at which our minds/brains decipher, process, and generate viable predictions is essential to our survival. Similarly, mental speed and predictive ability is important for our perception of humour. As Hurley et al. put it, '[A]ll brains, from the simplest nervous systems of invertebrates to our own magnificent organs, are anticipation-generators.'³⁸ Detecting patterns and anticipating events quickly offers an evolutionary advantage. One of the basic elements of the human mind is its predisposition to meaning and purpose. But, as the authors point out:

Whether or not the world we inhabit is saturated with purposes as we tend to assume, our brains are designed to impute purpose whenever and wherever possible. Purpose is like the air we breathe; we don't think about it or notice it until it is absent, and then we panic.³⁹

This predisposition to teleology—while providing advantages—also increases the risk of error. This can also be described as a risky speed/error trade-off. However, as the authors put it, 'The development of heuristic search mechanisms meant to take these "calculated" shortcuts are an unavoidable task in the process of designing mind.'⁴⁰ The resulting errors are the by-product of fast-thinking and require an incentivised solution; therefore, humour is at least partially an evolutionary adaptation to spot error. Simply put, while the human capacity for pattern detection is an immense advantage, it is imperfect and risky. The pleasant sensation of mirth, humour, and laughter is an incentive for identifying errors and potential risks in our imperfect pattern recognition. For example, detecting the difference between 'then it hit me' as a metaphor versus a literal statement in Stewart Francis's joke identifies the potential risks of confusing literal and metaphorical. But it is not just the jokes that exploit pattern detection; it can also be said that CSP is a pattern, a physiognomy—and as such it can be used to exploit pattern recognition for the purposes of humour.

The details of how jokes exploit metaphorical and literal concepts can be described via mental spaces, a theoretical concept proposed by Giles Fauconnier, as a cognitive model of information intake and processing/manipulation that

³⁸ Ibid., 93.

³⁹ Ibid., 94.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 93-4.

entails, ‘a region of working memory where activated concepts and percepts are semantically connected into a holistic situational model... They are built incrementally and revised constantly.’⁴¹ This concept—as set out by Hurley et al., following Fauconnier and Turner, and others—provides a model for understanding how the imaginative human mind functions. Mental spaces allow for *what-if* thinking, visualisation/concept manipulation, and in general, ways of dismantling and reassembling the furniture of the world in a fast and flexible manner. New mental spaces can be created to meet demand of negotiating fictional or factual worlds. Be it planning this evening’s meal, reading and digesting this sentence, or imaging what it would be like to be a bat, mental spaces provide working memory to accomplish these tasks.

Citing several experimental studies of comprehension, Hurley et al. show that sentence comprehension entails a predictive dynamic.⁴² ‘As each word of the sentence arrives, the space is augmented to model the full set of data then available.’⁴³ Joke structure leverages this process of incremental comprehension. The mind/brain gets to work as soon as data/information becomes available. I suggest, therefore, that if joke structure conforms to cognitive processes, it follows that CSPs will do something similar, albeit on a larger and more complex scale. Good tricksters and comedians intuit the best ways to exploit mental processes. Consider the following:

During the process of comprehension, the mind does not wait passively until it has “enough” information in a buffer to complete the disambiguation of what it has so far received but rather attempts to disambiguate by assumption until proven otherwise.⁴⁴

Therefore, jokers exploit the natural human pattern for pre-emptive, fast-thinking. So, for example, Stewart Francis has the following joke, ‘I do watch a lot of television... The entire screen for that matter.’ The first half creates the expectation that he is about to talk about the variety of television programmes he watches. However, the punchline reveals ‘a lot’ is not referring to the programming but the actual device. The joke is driven by a disambiguation of ‘a lot’ that reveals the

⁴¹ Ibid., 97.

⁴² See, for example, Spivey et al. (2002), Chambers et al. (2002), Kamide, Altmann, and Haywood (2003), Chambers, Tanenhaus, and Magnuson (2004), and Spivey (2007).

⁴³ Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, *Inside Jokes : Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*, 99.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

absurdity of Francis spending time watching the TV device and not the programming content. Stewart Lee, likewise, leaves gaps that forces his audiences to stop and reappraise what's been said, what's happening in the room. Lee brings the audience to realise that he (the broken comedian CSP) is floundering because they (the audience) are not doing their part. Central to stand-up is developing a keen awareness of comprehension, particularly in terms of timing.

A MODEL FOR COMIC TIMING

Hurley et al. make an important distinction between their approach to comprehension and disambiguation, and that of Marvin Minsky, Victor Raskin, Salvatore Attardo, and others, whom they say describe the same phenomena as *frame-shifting* and/or scripts.⁴⁵ They make the case that these framing theories suffer from the potential flaw of being overly specific and therefore are in need of a set of flexible and general frame-modifying tools to adjust frames lacking 'the generality for which they were originally proposed.'⁴⁶ Instead Hurley et al. choose a model of *just-in-time spreading activation* (JITSA) that they claim accommodates Minsky's and Skank's intuition without the inherent redundancies discussed.

For the purposes of my thesis, JITSA offers a way to consider two aspects of stand-up: joke structure and comic timing (delivery). In terms of the empathic process of *Kairos* set out earlier, if practice makes perfect—or at least improves ability—then it is reasonable to suggest that the more a comedian practices and experiences audiences responding to the same material in different settings, the sharper their sense of timing becomes. As regards performance, I am suggesting that an experienced comedian has a sense of whether an audience is quick on the uptake or otherwise—for whatever reason(s). No two shows are the same. Venue-based factors such as small club or arena, acoustics, sound equipment, lighting, seating arrangements (the distance of the audience from the stage), background noise, and audiences factors such as second-language audience members, age, corporate groups, couples, singles, profession, vary. The list is not exhaustive but,

⁴⁵ Ibid., 100.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

it should be sufficiently clear that audience uptake/attention spans are not uniform.

Hence, comedians need to develop a sense of timing that not only applies to the writing of material, but also supports a sense of ‘feeling’ for how the performance is going over and what *in situ* factors may be a play. Factoring in the *in situ* elements means an experienced comedian can make adjustments on the fly as described in the Guardian interview with Ellie Gibson (see above section: Examining the process of CSP). A sense of JITSA, however described, is a worthy candidate for describing how comedians develop a tacit sense of comic timing.⁴⁷ It is reasonable to expect that a deeper understanding of audience response will also inform subsequent writing. When hearing the unfolding details of a joke set up, an audience can more quickly assemble the details than they can read the overall meaning. The timing of these mental constructs is crucial. If the audience sees where the joke is going (too soon), then the surprise is lost. But with well-timed ambiguity (however defined) they experience the surprise of the reveal.

ASSUMPTIONS, ACTIVE BELIEFS, AND ACQUIRED DISPOSITIONS

These concepts of mental space, JITSA—an on-the-fly augmentation of mental spaces—work alongside a possible array of billions of beliefs resident in the mind/brain. Hurley et al. suggest that perceived contradictions between these two modes of belief is what is exploited in humour. According to their model, working-memory or *active* beliefs make up the content of mental spaces. Long-term memory beliefs, or *acquired dispositions*, are content held in long-term memory that can be activated but retains in a state of low activation. The activation model proposed makes a distinction between activated beliefs and relatively low-activated beliefs. However, these two states (active/low-active) should not be considered as a binary, but should, rather, be considered in terms of degrees of activation. Referring to the work of Swinney and others, Hurley et al. emphasise that:

⁴⁷ From the felt sense of *Kairos* set out earlier to Michael Polanyi’s description of tacit knowledge, there is the challenge of discussing the ‘feel’ of timing as a craft and how we can know it. CSP faces the same challenge

... all the meanings of an ambiguous word are activated when it is perceived, but typically only one will be so much more strongly activated as to be noticeable... When we speak of active beliefs we will typically mean more strongly activated beliefs, but as we shall soon see, many effects in humour depend crucially on there not being a sharp threshold between what we might call wide-awake beliefs and drowsy beliefs.⁴⁸

This process implies what Hurley et al. describe as ‘automatic expectation-generation.’⁴⁹ As we go through situations, we prepare/activate ourselves for what is likely to happen in situations and circumstances. Automatic expectation-generation (AEG) is perhaps the more crucial mechanism in stand-up comedy. Wrong-footing in stand-up comedy exploits AEG in particular. What is important to note is that Stewart Francis exploits AEG in both how he writes his jokes and how he performs (NVC)⁵⁰. In his Frisbee joke, the performance of the question, ‘why does a....’ vocally suggests that he may just provide suggest answers to his questions. The performance further enhances the AEG in the text, and hence boost the wrong-footing and sudden impact on the punchline, ‘then it hit me’. Extending the application of the principle of low activation in stand-up comedy, it is possible to see how they operate in call-backs of previously told stories, routines, and jokes later on in a set. As a show progresses the comedian can refer to previous bits. Again, this show how it is possible to map such cognitive concept map onto how jokes are structured, performed, and how CSP works to facilitate these processes.

IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATION TO STAND-UP COMEDY

As cognitive, socio-linguistic savants, comedians explore, compare, and contrast commonly held beliefs/assumptions and identify opportunities for logical and epistemic conflicts; hence the appropriateness of the hunter/naïve-scientist metaphor referred to at the beginning of this chapter. From initial discovery such conflicts are formulated as jokes and then presented to test audiences. The writing process now gives way to the performance and re-writing process. For example, a comedian telling a joke, speaking about a particular topic, must judiciously activate beliefs—get the audience ‘on the same hymn sheet’ so to speak. Comedy coach Judy

⁴⁸ Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, *Inside Jokes : Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*, 106.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 107.

⁵⁰ Non-verbal communications

Carter suggests, as a guide, the use of four basic attitudes when writing and performing material ('weird', 'scary', 'hard', 'stupid'). She suggests:

The hardest part of performing is engaging the audience. Posing the attitude + topic as a question is one powerful way to get the attention of an audience. It is also important to hold the attitude or the emotion throughout the entire joke.⁵¹

Given what Hurley et al. propose in terms of mental spaces and belief activation, Carter's advice seems sensible in that it encourages activation of relevant beliefs in the mind(s) of the audience, promotes general principles of efficiency by clearly introducing topics and attempting to maximise punch lines, toppers, and call-backs before moving on. Given the points made earlier about the brain's need for glucose (energy), and general rules of biological efficiency, respecting the limited resource of attention span (mental space and belief activation) is an important issue in writing and performance that will be raised further on. Another feature of what Carter suggests is how posing the introduction of a theme or topic as a question raises attention/activation. Louis CK's routine on people donating bodies after death is a good example of firstly raising the topic (Carter) or activating beliefs and mental spaces (Hurley et al.). Secondly, setting out an attitude (Carter) affirming one's commitment to a belief, declaring it as 'noble' thereby creating a mental space that goes as follows: CK plans to donate his body after death, therefore CK is noble. Finally, the punchline(s) and toppers, CK has no intention of being noble; CK's 'sincere' professions in the set-up were false. We were played, taken in by the convincing moralising of a virtue-signalling hypocrite.

SUBJECTIVE/OBJECT: DICHOTOMY AND INTEGRATION

An analogy employed throughout the Hurley et al. account is drawn from computer science. Comparing hardware/software, where the brain is considered hardware and the mind software, humour is a type of software process to deal with the problem of increasingly faster software functioning on hardware that is limited in terms of adaptive capacity. Software is therefore how we adapt to use the hardware.⁵² In human evolution there is no equivalence of Moore's law that can

⁵¹ Carter, *The Comedy Bible : From Stand-up to Sitcom : The Comedy Writer's Ultimate How-to-Guide*, 72.

⁵² Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, *Inside Jokes : Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*, 125.

double the processor speed and halve the cost (in term of glucose demand); physical brains don't evolve so fast. However, our software in the form of recursive, reflective self-consciousness and language allows for rapid improvement in software speed relative to the hardware's capacity. Reflective self-consciousness and language—the two drivers that have accelerated human socio-cultural evolution—first make it possible to 'notice not just changes in the external world but changes in one's response to those responses and so one, recursively...' and then language opens up many more options in terms of information sharing and conceptual development.

This combination of instinct, recursive-self-conscious reflection and language facilitates the generation of mental spaces that can engage in 'what-if: counterfactual and hypothetical thinking. Within the model, humour and mirth are pleasant pay-offs for detecting and cleaning up cognitive errors and risky assumptions/heuristic leaps—therefore we can consider humour as an incentivised clean-up mechanism. The task now is to connect this model to the lived experience of humour and stand-up comedy. The above description of language, recursive, reflective, socio-culture evolution describes well the mental processes of comedians described heretofore. But rather than describe these creative processes purely via traditional approaches within the humanities, this thesis aims to bridge to scientific approaches. As Hurley et al. put it, 'Here is where the arts and humanities must join forces with neuroscience or forever wallow in the mysteries and circularities of pure phenomenology.'⁵³ And though it is early days in terms of bringing together subjective/introspective and objective/empirical accounts of humour, it must also be recognised that increasing collaboration between arts, humanities, and science, in areas such as humour studies and performance studies is happening and is yielding results.

Perhaps partly because of the shadow of empirical reductionism and/or partly our protective disposition to privileging subjectivity, there is a certain reluctance to adopt scientific models of deeply human experiences. Hurley et al. make the point, 'The humour theorists in the arts and humanities suspect, with some justice, that most of the scientific details that emerge, whatever they are, will

⁵³ Ibid., 128.

seldom be in terms that can be tied in any recognisable or ‘appropriate’ way to the social and contentful aspects of humour.’⁵⁴ But, they go on to point out how Prof David Huron’s research discoveries in musicology provide a good example of what can be achieved when the arts, humanities, and branches of empirical science come together; ‘Huron’s pioneering work on music shows how explanatory correlations between ‘qualia’ and neural machinery can be devised and tested.’⁵⁵

We are not at that point yet, so what they propose is a half-way house that involves working with comedians. Using an analogy from motorsports they say that, ‘[C]omedians are in the position of people who know quite a lot about how to drive race cars, how hard they can be pushed under which conditions, but haven’t any clear idea what is under the hood.’⁵⁶ This lack of uniformity and clarity is certainly borne out in my research of the folk literature and interviews with comedians. For the competent practitioner such theory is not necessary, and any interest is academic and surplus to professional requirements. Therefore, a halfway-house approach is necessary. In general terms that requires unpacking, translation, and mapping of subjective account on to theoretical models.

In terms of CSP, I propose that pattern recognition as described above does not just apply to detecting incongruity; it also applies to spotting what works/does-not-work in the writing and presentation of humour and CSP. Comedians may well possess or develop a heightened capacity for humour pattern recognition that informs how they approach performance, read audience moods and feedback, master joke and narrative structure, and intuit how to use ridicule. It follows that such a capacity to spot humour patterns also implies the potential capacity to adapt one’s self-presentation.

Therefore, what I am suggesting is that comedians via a process of adaptation tacitly apprehend and absorb the rules of the form (stand-up comedy), through practice and experience. They intuit such elements of the craft as the art of ridicule, wrong-footing, belief-activation, rhetorical framing, presenting the comically-biographed self, framing perspectives and narratives, managing status, crowd-response, and reflexivity in the live event, through modelling exemplars, adopting

⁵⁴ Ibid., 129.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 130.

rhetorical structures, and a persistent process of writing, performing, and reflection. Describing this process requires a bridging between folk accounts of the craft with scientific and theoretical and cognitive science accounts of psychology, performance, and humour. By showing how stand-up comedians in their writing and performance map the theoretical accounts, I aim to show how tacit knowledge and theoretical knowledge can be compatibly mapped. CSP is therefore modelled just as humour skills are developed.

NEGATIVE VALENCE, HUMOUR, AND CSP

Bearing in mind pattern recognition, a significant aspect of humour that features in stand-up comedy and stage personae is what Hurley et al. describe as negative valence: ‘while mirth is a joy, contents that are funny are, much of the time, negatively valenced.’⁵⁷ Phrases such as: ‘the butt of the joke’, ‘good jokes need a target’ and the prevalence of self-deprecation as a feature in stand-up routines, speak to a strong tendency to negativity, ridiculing targets, and loss of status. This negative aspect of humour resonates with Michael Billig’s critique in *Laughter and Ridicule* of the common-sense assumption that laughter and humour are necessarily good and positive and were historically viewed as such. Billig describes how laughter and ridicule have traditionally functioned as forms of social correction and that our contemporary positive view of humour is in contrast to a substantial history that associates laughter and ridicule with negative characteristics. He makes clear that:

We belong to a society in which fun has become an imperative and humour is seen as a necessary quality for being fully human. The conditions of modern life are different from other ages with respect to humour.⁵⁸

Based on the comedians and scripts examined heretofore, a case could certainly be made that negativity is central to stand-up comedy and CSP. But, what I think is crucial to point out about negativity and CSP is that self-deprecation seems to be a powerful way for comedians to ingratiate themselves with audiences.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 139.

⁵⁸ Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule : Towards a Social Critique of Humour* (London: Sage, 2005), 13.

In his book *Comedy Writing Secrets*, Melvin Helitzer, in a section titled ‘The Masks of Comedy’, makes the case that, ‘[I]n humor, there are many distinctive character masks. [...] Each of the masks has a number of variations; there is also a great deal of overlapping.’ What is particularly relevant in his description of comic masks is the following point: ‘Paradoxically, the comedian must create a perfect characterization of an imperfect character.’⁵⁹ I suggest, however, that the elements of imperfection in CSP are strategically and playfully framed in a social agreement between performer and audience. So while the case can certainly be made that the stage personae of many comedians are based on foibles, ineptitude, and levels of incomprehension that make them the butt of jokes, the apparent paradox can be resolved by recognising the relationship rules of play between comedian and audience. There is what Bruce McConachie describes as ‘what audiences do to engage with and become engaged by a performance.’⁶⁰

There is also good reason to believe that the comedian-audience relationship and the elements of self-deprecation and negative valence must be considered as distinct from those in person-to-person relationships. I make the case that self-deprecation is a powerful way for comedians to ingratiate themselves with audiences. By putting themselves down, comedians put themselves up in the eyes of the audience. Effective comedians leverage self-deprecation to build a positive relationship that simultaneously gives them licence to ridicule comic targets. However, and curiously in terms of our understanding of CSP and the performer-audience relationship, it would appear that self-deprecating humour does not seem to have the same effect in everyday relationships, for example. In their 2014 paper *Relationship-focused humor styles and relationship satisfaction in dating couples: A repeated-measures design*, Rod Martin and Sara Caird suggest that self-deprecatory humour is negative in a relationship and a predictor of less satisfaction. What is intriguing is that these findings raise questions about the nature of the performer-audience relationship and lend further weight to the claim that comedians cannot be considered as themselves on stage.

⁵⁹ Melvin Helitzer, *Comedy Writing Secrets*, 1st ed. (Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 1987), 225.

⁶⁰ McConachie, *Engaging Audiences : A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre*, 3.

I wrote to Professor Rod Martin, who very generously responded at length to my questions on the issue. What follows is an edited quote of the key points:

I think there are important differences between stand-up comedy and everyday interpersonal humour, in terms of the psychological processes and relationship between the joke-teller and the listener. I make a distinction between "performance humour" and "conversational humour." [...] An audience hearing the sort of "self-deprecating" humour that you're describing while watching a 20-minute stand-up comedy act might very well have a positive response to the comedian, as you describe. However, if you were in a personal relationship with that person, and they were always making the same kinds of jokes, you might find it annoying pretty quickly, and might be turned off by it. Ingratiation might be fine in a performance like stand-up comedy, but it is usually not appreciated in closer relationships. [...] I think your concept of a "persona" is very important here. The audience is responding to the persona, not the real person. When they're not on stage, stand-up comics can be very different, and the same kind of humour can have different effects in the two different contexts.⁶¹

I draw the following from this: in terms of CSP, firstly, the audience are in on the act. This is in line with Rutter's concept of stand-up as socially negotiated, and McConachie's account of spectating. Secondly, the notion of comedians being "themselves" on stage becomes untenable. Thirdly, self-deprecation in stand-up, when executed effectively, empowers the comedian and provide licence to engage in negatively-valenced humour—in other words, by putting themselves down they are in fact raised up. So, for example, instead of directly calling mainstream comedy mediocre and dull, Stewart Lee's broken comedian self-deprecates and bemoans the fact that he is unable to master the art of the mediocre. Arguably, putting oneself down subversively enables a more potent form of ridicule. Louis CK, by presenting as a hypocritical, virtue-signalling slob, can then target those who have "believies" but never actually act on them. Loss of status, social capital, and self-destructive character flaws are all grist to the humour mill.

All this points to a need to square the apparent contradiction of joyful mirth being triggered by content with negative valence such as self-deprecation, ridicule, and put-downs. Hurley et al suggest that the discovery of errors in our framework of beliefs about the world is both a negative realisation that we harboured unsound beliefs (false-assumptions), and the positive realisation that we have discovered the enemy within. While one might expect that the discovery of false beliefs might

⁶¹ Rod Martin, email message to author, 1/9/2016.

lead to chronic paranoia and paralysis instead of mirth, they explain that evolutionary survival seems to favour optimism bias over paranoia and paralysis.⁶² The phenomenon requires further consideration, given how self-deprecation is a component feature of so many personae. Hurley et al. suggest:

The butt of the joke may sometimes laugh the most, and in such cases we can be quite sure that laughter is designed to minimise the social cost, to extract some kind of victory from the loss, by siding with the critics or at least disarming them with a poignant attitude that expresses confidence. Note that the laughing butt need not realise that this is why he is laughing, and the laughter may even be genuine.⁶³

What is interesting here for this thesis of CSP is that in everyday humour interactions, people can engage others in laughter by making themselves the butt of the joke. Keeping Rod Martin's comments in mind, and the distinction I make between everyday humour and stand-up comedy, I think it is useful to consider humour within a framework of power and social currency. The rules for onstage (performative stand-up) and off-stage are different in that a performance is exactly that: a performance. While it mimics many of the natural elements of everyday humour interactions, there are obvious distinctions. Much of the humour in everyday interaction is not prepared; rather it is naturally occurring in the cut and thrust of conversation. The idea of one's friend, partner, or colleague trying too hard to be funny is clearly problematic, whereas with stand-up the performance involves microphones, lighting, a venue, and a set of agreed conditions. The variations and overlap between everyday conversational humour and stand-up humour are important to the understanding of the workings of CSP. The sharing of perspective and background information, for example, means that friends in conversation can raise a laugh by saying things that outsiders might find unfunny, cruel, offensive, or would struggle to fathom as friendly. The stand-up comedian must therefore attend closely to accommodating negative valence, empathy, providing background and perspectives.

The distinction between everyday conversational humour and the humour of stand-up comedy via a CSP is a crucial one. The rules of play and engagement are clearly different. An analogy with sport would suggest that contact, conflict, and

⁶² Cf. Optimism Bias

⁶³ Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, *Inside Jokes : Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*, 139-40.

competition that is understood and accepted in game-playing is likely to create problems outside the game. Taking a ball away, or hitting a ball at speed toward someone, is certainly likely to be perceived as negative and aggressive. However, within a game/play the rules allow for a suspension of certain social rules. Likewise with humour. The possibility of mirth in such humour transactions requires a temporary suspension of empathy to some extent as mirth and empathy are of opposite valence.⁶⁴

This point is of great relevance to the live, *in situ* performance of stand-up comedy, particularly in the area of self-deprecation, ridicule, and heckle put-downs, for example. The comedian must be sensitive to keeping the audience onside—and by that I mean keeping the audience mood positive in terms of valence. If for whatever reason the sections of the audience feel sympathy for the joke's target, the comedian is likely to be appraised negatively. Particularly in the case of targeting a member of the audience, if there is a crossing of the line between mirthful into what may be perceived as hurtful, the situation is very likely to become awkward. Likewise, if the audience perceives that the comedian is feeling uncomfortable, this too diminishes the possibility of mirth. The phenomena of 'choking' or 'dying' on stage, speaks to a change of mood that denies possibility of mirth and laughter.

I propose that part of a comedian's development requires learning the often subtle rule of how to handle hecklers, self-deprecate, and interact with audience members in a way that does not lose the audience. This learning process involves the type of empathic processes described by McConachie. It can therefore be said that the process of writing and performing empathically with an audience in mind makes it possible to intuit the principles of perspective required that ultimately inform CSP. Hurley et al. offer a useful insight on how modes of perspective account for how the negative valence of humour can be accommodated as playful and entertaining.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

CSP: COMEDY, TRAGEDY, AND PERSPECTIVE

Drawing on the work of writer and film maker Jon Boorstin, Hurley et al. describe three modes of spectating that distinguish types of spectator engagement. Boorstin's modes are:

- 1) *Voyeuristic Perspective*: we observe in an emotionally detached mode, fly-on-the-wall, curious but predominantly indifferent to the outcome; emotional investment is low. Hurley et. al suggest that such emotional disconnection is the case when watching *The Three Stooges* or *Mr. Bean*; 'their mistakes do not matter to you.'⁶⁵
- 2) *Vicarious Perspective*: we observe and engage emotionally, become invested empathetically. How Boorstin describes spectatorship is worth special attention: 'The vicarious eye puts our heart in the actor's body: we feel what the actor feels, but we judge it for ourselves'.⁶⁶ That Boorstin suggests we feel what the actor feels, as opposed to: *we feel what the character feels*, is interesting. It implies that engagement is with the performer as opposed to the character portrayed. This point is in line with McConachie's account of 'cognitive blending' and spectatorship. If this view is correct, a performer or writer spectates with a more complex form of blending. A writer can engage with the character, the actor, and the writer in different modes. The nature of intentionality is such that we all bring our particular, personal and professional agendas and perspectives to spectating events; it is not a one-size-fits-all scenario. The concept of "busman's holiday" speaks to the idea of the professional experience of work from the passenger's perspective, though on a night off, a performer at a performance or a writer reading a book is still attending to the mechanics of performance and narrative, while also engaging emotionally.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 141.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

- 3) *Visceral perspective*: this is a type of first-person experience of events where distancing is absent. One is, 'bound up in the effects of the situation,'⁶⁷ and therefore the negative emotions of fear, anxiety, and so on, that one is likely to experience when negotiating a difficult situation. It is not so easy to see the 'funniness' of the situation in such moments.

Although drawn from filmmaking, Boorstin's schema offers a way to think about perspective and how it applies to stand-up comedy in terms of how the elements of CSP are framed. Self-deprecating humour, for example, involves presenting the negatively-valenced events in such a way that the audience can vicariously enjoy a fly-on-the-wall perspective of tales of the comedian's frustrations, failures, insecurity, or ineptitude completely guilt-free. In the process of writing, rehearsing, and performing stand-up comedy, comedians, I suggest, intuitively develop a sense of empathic engagement in terms of mode. Choosing topics—what to joke about, when, where, to whom—is a matter of judgement related to empathy. For example, if the butt of a joke (TA) happens to be a particular group or celebrity, according to Boorstin's schema audiences laugh from a vicarious perspective. Such a joke requires an 'us having a laugh at them' dynamic—where the 'us/we' (in-group) feels sufficiently low levels of empathy to allow humour. The celebrity in such a scenario is viewed as a legitimate⁶⁸ butt of a joke.

However, perspective can alter. If, for example, a piece of tragic news connected with the target meant the general public now felt empathy for the target from a visceral perspective, then a comedian could expect that performing the same joke in this new context runs the risk of being viewed as cruel/insensitive by some. In terms of CSP, this opens up interesting terrain. On the one hand, comedians have to speak their material and present their CSP like they mean it, and on the other they have subtly flag it as play. Here, then, is the high-wire challenge of being audacious and thrilling audiences, while playing close to the line of offense. The suspension of empathy in the vicarious mode becomes an element of CSP but, to a

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ 'Legitimate' in this context simply means the in-group don't empathise sufficiently with the butt of the joke at that moment in time. This state of affairs is utterly arbitrary, just as perspective and points of views are prone to change.

greater or lesser extent comedians must therefore be aware of the risks and be sensitive to the empathetic modes and allegiances of audiences when writing or performing. That is not to say comedians self-censor; on the contrary, many iconic comedians have built reputations on ‘saying the unsayable’ and engaging in what Fabiola Scarpetta and Anna Spagnolli describe as ‘risky laughables’⁶⁹. We can say, therefore, that stand-up engagement requires a high-degree of tuning-into the dynamic nature of public mood. Even a well-established act with an irreverent CSP can become victim of critics who fail to engage in the voyeuristic mode of suspended empathy.

CONNOLLY, BOORSTIN, BEGLEY – COMEDY AND PERSPECTIVE

During a Monday night show at the Hammersmith Apollo on October 4th, 2004, Billy Connolly spoke about British hostage Kenneth Bigley—a civil engineer who at the time was being held captive by a jihadist group having been kidnapped in Baghdad. The Bigley story was receiving a high degree of coverage. The day following Connolly’s performance, October 5th, The London Evening Standard reported that ‘during his performance Connolly told the audience: “Perhaps I shouldn’t be saying this ... aren’t you the same as me, don’t you wish they would just get on with it?”’⁷⁰ The reporting of the comments and the subsequent murder of Bigley by the jihadists further fuelled an intense media reaction to Connolly’s comments.

The Connolly-Bigley case starkly demonstrates the role of perspective, context, and empathy in the live setting of a comedy performance. It is natural to wonder how a comedian of Connolly’s experience might end up in such a situation. An analysis based on perspective shift can provide an explanation. In considering such an event we must ask: why would Connolly—or any comedian—go on stage to wish a man dead, show contempt for the concerns of his family and friends, express views so obviously at odds with the public mood, and expect to get laughs? A rational analysis would say: Connolly did not intend to cause offence or the firestorm of reaction that followed. Drawing on what has been set out above in

⁶⁹ Scarpetta and Spagnolli, "The Interactional Context of Humor in Stand-up Comedy."

⁷⁰ Tariq Tahir, "Connolly Booed over Hostage Joke," *Evening Standard*, 5/10/2004 2004.

Boorstin's schema, I suggest that Connolly had set out a context/perspective (vicarious) that separated the Begley plight from Connolly's own mental and emotional processing of that plight.

A possible view, based on what has been set out so far, is that Connolly's CSP entails a distancing space to humorously tease out a common/relatable but unvoiced response to the public discourse of the Bigley story. He was perhaps focussing on his own detachment as a reaction to helpless feelings and visceral empathy. In-group empathy is generally seen as socially desirable, while lack of it is generally kept private. Connolly, in saying he wished the jihadist would get on with it, is expressing a view that implies that a) 'If you're going to do it, get on with it, otherwise stop threatening', and b) 'I've had enough with getting emotionally drained by feelings of empathy, I've had enough with this story, and I'm taking empathic distance'. Taking a humorous utterance that was originally presented in the vicarious mode, and judging it in a visceral/empathic mode, drains it of humour, simply because humour is reliant on the specificity of frame, context, and perspective created by CSP.

Referring to the controversy in an interview with Stephanie Merritt of the Guardian⁷¹ at the end of November 2004, Connolly discusses the problem of context and comedy, describing how the prevailing perspective of many in the print media is a moralising one. He said the following:

I'm up there at the edge of things on stage, dangerous subjects like Iraq and life and death and religion, I take very strong stands on things. But I've never had a problem with the public, it was always the papers. The public always loved it, roared and howled and laughed, but the newspapers do this high-horse bullshit as if they're our moral guardians. Who said that was their function in life... I did speak about the subject and I did have a laugh about it but I'm not telling anybody exactly what I said because you'd have to be in the room with 4,000 people laughing to understand. Someone's taken that out of the building and printed it flat on a piece of paper, and they've printed it wrong. I wouldn't do stuff that would deliberately alienate half the people.

Connolly's reference to taking it out of the building and printing it flat on a piece of paper maps to concepts of context, frame, perspective, and empathy. He speaks of this as if it were a violation of the rules of the game. A comedian's performance involves getting the audience (as many members as possible) on the same hymn

⁷¹ Stephanie Merritt, "'a Little Ego Goes a Long Way in This Game'," *The Observer*, 28/11 2004.

sheet, so to speak. The concept of “hymn sheet” suggests being of unified perspective, in tune, singing the same lyrics, in harmony. Applied to stand-up comedy, the hymn-sheet-metaphor applies to thoughts and emotions. Boorstin’s schema fits well with this idea of getting an audience of four thousand to take empathic distance from a man, his family, friends, and society being terrorized. Yet, in such a serious scenario, opportunities for humour, ridicule, and comedy present themselves in a mental stepping back from the visceral context of the unfolding tragedy and focussing on elements of hysteria, dramatic rhetoric, media exploitation, and, most importantly, engaging with the comedian’s vicarious perspective—that, perhaps, a certain cynicism towards media voyeurism, and a type of ‘officially’ mandated emotional response, is merited, or perhaps a sense of compassion fatigue is common, or perhaps a recognition that one particular tragedy is being elevated above thousands of other tragedies for arbitrary reasons. Whatever the rhetorical approach taken by the comedian the hot topics must be disentangled via CSP from feelings of visceral empathy and seriousness, and reframed to present a perspective unencumbered by solemnity.

What the Connolly-Bigley case shows is how Connolly’s irreverent CSP flirted with a taboo subject and ended up the wrong side of newspapers doing ‘this high-horse bullshit’. His CSP is rebellious, scathing of the ‘moral guardians’, deeply suspicious of a media establishment. He describes the relationship between himself and his audience as a group separate from them out there. This is in line with notions of in group affiliation. But there is also the in-group spirit of the hedonistic and reckless comedian associating with mocking norms of solemnity and visceral angst outside. The stand-up comedy event is a place we go to throw off the constriction of the day-to-day. It is often at the end of the day or the weekend. There is often alcohol involved. It is no surprise, therefore, that material and CSP are profane, irreverent, abject, and negatively valenced. As Connolly puts it, he is up there at the edge of things on stage, dealing with dangerous subjects, and he takes very strong stands. Intuitively, therefore, working the audience, keeping them onside, encouraging a vicarious perspective, is all part of the performance process that brings scripted material to life in the live setting.

Connolly’s CSP is prepared to say the kinds of things that may cross the minds of the audience but are repressed as they violate the rules of taste and social

morals. When he says he is up there at the edge, this suggests a risk. The content of that risk, I suggest, goes something like as follows: Connolly has watched the media coverage of a crisis. He experiences feelings of discomfort, as a result of which he becomes aware of feelings and beliefs that are socially taboo. He also realises that he is unlikely to be alone in having these feelings and beliefs. Feeling a sense of oppression in not being free to express such beliefs and feelings, and sensing that he may not be alone, he assumes his role of comedian as the one to name the elephant in the room, the one to break oppressive silences and thereby free his audience from the angst of the everyday they have come to escape. It is quite a gambit: playing with the fire of ‘risky laughables’ and trusting the audience to engage in the vicarious mode.

THE INTENTIONAL STANCE AND STAND-UP COMEDY

Like all comedians, Connolly’s intentional process of prospecting and working up stand-up material involves what Dennett called taking the intentional stance, ‘the tactic of attributing beliefs, desires, and other mental states and actions to other mental states and actions to other minds—the minds of other people, but also animals, computers, magic lamps, talking choochoo trains and the like.’⁷² A central requirement for creative artists is to develop and improve the ability to read into the minds of target audiences. The adaptation of a classic play for a modern audience, for example, involves detailed discussion and reflection upon how to map historical details and events onto modern-day equivalents. Such conceptual translation requires deep engagement with socio-cultural and linguistic issues. Likewise, for a stand-up comedian this process often involves taking personal anecdotes and translating for a wider audience. For the sake of brevity details may be changed, elements added or exaggerated, or ‘funny bits’ that work for the comedian’s circle of friends may be replaced or dropped to make for a smoother version for an audience. In terms of CSP a comedian may struggle to work certain ideas or stories because they do not—in the view of the comedian—fit with his or her CSP (see section on Tim Vine in Chapter 3).

⁷² Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, *Inside Jokes : Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*, 143.

In Oliver Double's *Getting the Joke*, there is an interesting example of this process of translation/adaptation. British stand-up comedian Mark Lamarr explains how a real-life altercation while drunk was adapted for performance. In the stage version, Lamarr describes how six men in a jeep recognised him from TV and started shouting abuse at him. Rather than doing what most sensible, sober individuals would do, he defiantly engages with them. However, when reflecting on the origin of the routine Lamarr recalls that on the night in question he was with some members of the pop group The Housemartins. Lamarr explains the reason why he couldn't mention this detail is: 'it ends up as just: "this is a fucking bloke namedropping"'.⁷³ Metaphorically putting himself in the seat of an audience member, Lamarr thinks that mentioning he is socialising with pop stars weakens his hand and the humour of his story. In terms of understanding the tacit rules of CSP and the rules of audience engagement as set out via Hurley et al. and Boorstin's perspectives, Lamarr intuitively understands that status and self-deprecation are crucial to the humour transaction.

Arguably, Lamarr could have incorporated the detail about being with members of The Housemartins. As long as he followed the basic guidance on ending up as the butt of the joke, the result would be broadly in line. As Lamarr acknowledges, '... you've gotta lose in this story or it's not funny'. Here Lamarr shows an understanding of negative valence, and—given his cocky, arrogant CSP—he knows that the winning move in terms of delighting his audiences is to take himself down several pegs. His choice to leave out the details and alter the story demonstrates the kind of forethought and imaginative anticipation a comedian exercises, and how the intentional stance informed by accumulated experiences plays such a central role in stand-up comedy and the management of CSP in both the writing/story structure and performance.

Lamarr, like any other individual is, as Hurley et al. put it, managing his presentation of self on stage, '...by modelling what other people believe.'⁷⁴ He assumes that others think similarly to him, and writes and performs his material accordingly. Describing this process of thinking into the minds of others, they

⁷³ Oliver Double, *Getting the Joke : The Inner Workings of Stand-up Comedy* (London: Methuen, 2005), 101.

⁷⁴ Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, *Inside Jokes : Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*, 144.

explain how ‘we automatically attempt to build a model of the knowledge that they embody. Doing so in a separate mental space allows us to keep that model distinct from our own knowledge.’⁷⁵ If thinking about other minds is human, thinking how to engage and wrong-foot other minds is the preoccupation of stand-up comedians when constructing routines, performance styles, and their CSPs. As Lamarr’s story suggests, comedians figure out that a routine must be worked and reworked in ongoing attempts to maximise the humour potential. In the retelling of a story, we enter a world of minds reflecting about other minds. In the storytelling, we can think into the minds of the boozed-up louts shouting at Lamarr the cocky TV star, just as we can think of the inebriated Lamarr being torn between his self-preservation and his egotistical need to pretend he was not intimidated by the situation.

By extension, the intentional stance when applied to the Lamarr case supports the central claim of this thesis that comedians adapt their CSPs as humour-enhancing strategies. Lamarr speaks of how a true life event is ‘transmogrified’ from when he first told it to his friends in the pub, into a stand-up routine that becomes ‘almost the opposite of what happened and lots of the important elements that made it really funny in the pub weren’t in there anymore.’⁷⁶ Similar to the process of road-testing jokes by Myq Kaplan (described in the *New York Times*—as mentioned above) comedians test material, presentation, and personae styles. What is important to note is that Lamarr presents himself as the loser, the worthy butt of the joke. He presents a story and identity on stage that is altered from the self and story presented to his mates round the table in the pub.

An important aspect of the intentional stance is how it facilitates what might be described as implication-driven humour. There are “reveal” moments in jokes when we realise a previously unforeseen state-of-affairs that a character or characters within the joke are not aware of. Hurley et al. explain that using ‘the intentional stance to see situations from more than one perspective allows us to have more than one mental space relevant to each situation. The more mental

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Double, *Getting the Joke : The Inner Workings of Stand-up Comedy*, 101.

spaces we create, the more places there are for humor to happen.’⁷⁷ This allows us as audience to see and understand the unfolding events and the limited perspectives of the characters from our God’s eye view. The humour response is driven by being able to infer what the characters in the joke are misapprehending a situation:

We may find things funny either if they are invalidated mental spaces in our own knowledge representations or if we recognize that they are invalidated mental spaces for another entity’s knowledge representation.⁷⁸

This fly-on-the-wall or God’s-eye-view in drama allows us to experience tension as Iago destroys Othello, or as Romeo abandons hope. However, in an extract from Sarah Silverman’s stand-up comedy show *Jesus is Magic*—discussed below—Silverman devises a piece where she plays herself as a clueless, spoilt adolescent taken in by her own concocted theory that her grandmother was raped and murdered. In this comedic setting the audience finds humour in Silverman’s delusion and earnest self-righteousness. What Hurley et al. describe, therefore, is how comedians leverage superiority by granting their audience a superior viewpoint from which to laugh at the comedian’s flawed thinking. Here again is the comedian’s strategy to put themselves down via CSP—which, as mentioned earlier, is in effect puts them up.

What can be seen in this examination of Hurley et al.’s cognitive account of humour are universal structures that in turn inform CSP. For example, calamitous events brought on by human frailty in drama are lamentable. Calamitous events in comedy awaken feelings of mirth and superiority. By lowering their status and making themselves inferior, comedians intuitively provide their audiences with a vicarious, angst-free experience of human error and frailty. Third-person humour ‘creates a new emotional dimension for mirth.’⁷⁹ While the feelings of mirth experienced in first-person humour incentivises one’s error-checking process, it can also trigger a sense of angst and concern. Therefore, the type of third-person

⁷⁷ Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, *Inside Jokes : Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*, 145.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 147.

humour perfected by many stand-up comedians via their CSPs gives us angst-free mirth with the bonus of a sense of superiority.

As Hurley et al. describe the phenomena: ‘The self-congratulatory flavour of all third-person humor is due to the addition of the positive emotional valence generated by comparing self to other and coming out ahead. And the greater the disparity, on at least two dimensions, the greater the pleasure.’⁸⁰ This would explain the pervasiveness of self-deprecation in stand-up comedy and, I suggest, why Lamarr chose not to mention that he was with members of the Housemartins, as this would be seen as ‘namedropping’ according to Lamarr. Comedians tacitly learn how the game of third-person humour works. The more Louis CK, for example, puts down his kids and rants about his struggles and frustrations as a father, the more he invites his audience to laugh at his plight and his borderline social and parental incompetence. By putting the jokes on themselves, comedians leverage the power of third-person humour.

Describing the laughter process related to TV home video shows, Hurley et al. demonstrate the applicability of the principles discussed. The laughter evoked by such shows might be easily dismissed as cruel and juvenile; however, there’s no denying its broad appeal and therefore its merit as humour phenomenon worthy of investigation. The reason people laugh at these clips is primarily ‘because they attribute mistaken assumptions to the participants portrayed’.⁸¹ As will be shown below when examining a routine performed by American comedian Sarah Silverman, it is the careful construction of script and performance by the comedian that allows the audience to take distance from first-person visceral experience into a third-person vicarious stance that leaves an audience free to laugh at her CSP’s erroneous attributions and the inferred consequences of her CSP’s world-view.

The following section analyses a section from a show by Sarah Silverman. The piece demonstrates the principles of wrong-footing, taking the audience in, and playing with emotion and storytelling to lure and engage the audience. Silverman exploits Automatic Expectation Generation (AEG), and leverages Just in Time Spreading Activation (JITSA) through the considered use of beats, pauses,

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., 153.

disfluency, and gesture. Taking the theory of mental space, and what has been previously referred to as the incremental nature of sentence comprehension AEG, it is possible to see how Silverman's script, performance, and CSP wrong-foot the audience. As with Stewart Francis, it is not just the line, it is how vocal tones and NVC send the audience the wrong way.

SARAH SILVERMAN NANA

1. I'm going to totally stop the show for a second... but I just... promised myself... ahm... that I would dedicate this performance to my Nana who, ahm ... although, this may not be her cup of tea, specifically... but she was very supportive of me. And we were very close, and she passed away a year ago... tonight. So, this is for you Nana! (Goofy-embarrassed 'huh, huh')
2. Ahm... (3 second pause)
3. I'm sorry (Raise her hand to nose and mouth as if to restrain tears—struggling to contain emotions)
(Heavy sigh. This act out of emotion has now run to 15 seconds)
4. She was 96... so... obviously...I suspect foul play. (Quietly, 'yeah, I know')
5. And so... I am spending my own money, and I'm getting her body exhumed...
6. And I am going to get a full rape exam...performed,
7. And I'm going to get to the bottom of it... I'm going to get to the bottom of this.
8. And my parents are not behind me.
9. What else is new?
10. They never are.
11. They don't believe in me.
12. So...they're wrong this time

13. That sucks for them

(Agonised 12 second pause).

14. Oh God, please let them find semen in my dead
grandmother's vagina.⁸²

Applying Hurley et al.'s theory to Silverman's routine it is possible to see how she uses wrong-footing and Boorstin's visceral mode in the set-up (lines 1-3). She then switches the audience from the visceral mode of seriousness and empathy to the vicarious mode of deprecation through a series of punchlines (lines 3-14). At line 1, Silverman switches the performance mood by talking about the death of her grandmother. She creates a sense of being off-the-cuff, sincere, and unscripted. Through the use of uhms and ahs (dysfluency), she convinces the audience that she is genuinely experiencing both grief and gratitude. Through the end of line 1 into line 2 she ratchets up the emotion, to the point where she appears as if she is about to cry. By the end of line 3 there has now been a 15 second pause in the performance, and the audience appear to be completely taken in that Silverman the comedian has become Silverman the off-stage person speaking sincerely about a bereavement. It is reasonable to assume that members of the audience would be activating ideas of genuine upset mixed with a sense of celebrating all the encouragement and love Silverman had received from her nana. What is worth noting throughout is how Silverman's delivery provokes the audience to fill in or complete sentences and thoughts. This is very much in line with Hurley et al.'s description of how joke-telling leverages enthymematic expressions mentioned earlier in this chapter. Silverman's naturalistic delivery, and its inherent timing, leaves gaps for the audience to fill in.

As described by Hurley et al.'s theory, particularly the Boorstinian model set out, the audience have been brought into the seriousness and empathy of the visceral mode. In the context of a comedy show the audience members may well wonder how Silverman is going to resolve the situation, i.e. how will she change the mood from grief and seriousness back to laughter? In this respect, lines 1 to 3 represent a substantial setup achieved through the use of dysfluency and Silverman's acting

⁸² Liam Lynch et al., "Sarah Silverman, Jesus Is Magic," (Unites States: Roadside Attractions, 2005).

skill. She has created an emotional/dramatic tension that seems out of place in a comedy show that must somehow be resolved. From line 4 onwards it becomes apparent that she has sent the audience in the wrong direction. The beat left after the word ‘obviously’ on line 4 exploits AEG. What is particularly of note is how she uses smiling and a pleasant light demeanour up until a mood switch on the word ‘obviously’ on line 4. The turning point from set up to punchlines is on ‘obviously’.

The script is supported by NVCs that also switch. On lines 1 – 3 she speaks fondly and reverently of her grandmother; her smiles suggest that she is reflecting on a long life well-lived. The more obvious completions of that sentence on line 4 might be ‘... so, obviously, it was expected...’ Instead, Silverman vaults into a series of punchlines built upon an erroneous and deranged conspiracy theory, thereby switching from sincere off-stage Silverman to goofy, inappropriate, and deluded onstage Silverman. Simultaneously, she is keying the audience back to her CSP that sees the same set of facts as the audience—the death of nana at 96 years of age—but, unlike the audience, Silverman’s CSP jumps to the most outrageous. The humour centres on the dangers of jumping to conclusions and how it can sometimes be extremely difficult to refute beliefs, even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Perhaps the title of Silverman’s show *Jesus is Magic* gives a thematic clue to how extraordinary claims can be believed on the thinnest and weakest sliver of evidence. The audience’s reward, therefore, is the opportunity to experience flawed thinking without facing the socially embarrassing consequences.

The topper line (‘Yeah, I know’) uttered quietly after the punchline ‘I suspect foul play,’ marks a shift whereby Silverman’s smile turns to suppressed anger through gritted teeth. The audience get back to laughing at Silverman’s inept and narcissistic CSP that misreads situations and facts. There can be no doubt that it is Silverman’s performative skills and CSP that drives the wrong-footing and, in turn, intensifies the humour. An audience can appreciate how well she has performed the set-up, how well she has played them emotionally by firstly creating an awkward emotional moment of grief before playing up her irreverent CSP.

On lines 5 she tells the audience that she is spending her own money on getting the body exhumed. This heightens the sense of unhinged foolishness of Silverman’s CSP, and adds the element of delusion that enhances her status as

worthy target for ridicule. Her holding of a belief with such slim possibility of truth, combined with her intense commitment of money, time, and effort to such an implausible belief, presents a character marooned in preposterous beliefs. There is more than a hint of negative valence and self-deprecation at play.

Line 6 intensifies the self-deprecatory foolishness of Silverman's CSP—an individual who misreads and commits intensely to false beliefs in a nonchalant manner to a belief that lacks any credible evidence. It is Silverman's straight-faced conviction that drives the laughter. The audience can see a character clearly in error but convinced she is right. Furthermore, she will go to extreme lengths to justify her position. Through lines 8 to 13, for example, she reveals that her parents are not behind her. A reasonable person might see this as a cause for doubt. The implication is: their mother/mother-in-law has died, and if there is a reasonable suspicion of foul-play they would have acted. Silverman, however, turns her parents' inaction into another reason to stay the course. 'What else is new?' she exclaims. The audience can imply from this that Silverman raised macabre and outlandish suspicions with her long-suffering parents. This conjures the image of her aging parents having to endure the deluded tantrums of their narcissistic child. To top it off, Silverman plays the story as if she is the victim.

Again, this is self-deprecation and ridicule combining to allow the audience to relish in a sense of superiority, as described in Hurley et al.'s theory. The performance of line 13 with its long pause is a well-acted ruse that sets up a big payoff at line 14. It speaks to an extreme desperation to be right in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

In this piece, there is an abundance of wrong-footing. In planning this routine, Silverman clearly thought through how to raise the emotional stakes, how to suck the audience in with an emotionally-loaded ruse. What is interesting is that the audience knows lines 1 to 3 were crocodile tears, and yet seems happy to fall for the 12-second emotional act out on line 13. The audience has been fooled and yet are happy to be fooled again.

The composite effect of lines 10 to 14, finishing with the emphasis on 'this time' on Line 14, suggests a long history of conflict with her parents. We get the image of the long-suffering parents putting up with a daughter with a victim

complex. 'This time' implies she's been wrong many times, but this time will be different. This aspect of Silverman's works on the level of superiority, ridicule, and the exploitation of Automatic-Expectation-Generation (AEG) in two different ways, as set out by Hurley et al. An example of the first type of AEG is when Silverman wrong-foots the audience on line 5 (foul play). The most likely candidate would be that nana died of old-age. All matter of endings to that line are activated in mental spaces. Silverman delivers 'foul play'. The second use of AEG, and this is where she is leveraging superiority theory, is when a character is making deeply erroneous assumptions about what happened and what will happen.

Referring to the role of superiority theory in their model, Hurley et al. say, 'It is here—and only here—that superiority theory finds its application.'⁸³ First-person humour rewards us for spotting the inference errors caused by AEG. This process both builds our knowledge base of errors and creates mild anxiety. This anxiety is alleviated by seeing others who are 'just as vulnerable to betrayal by covert inferences as we are, *but we are better at it than they are!* ... The self-congratulatory flavor of all third-person humor is due to the addition of the positive emotional valence generated by comparing self to other and coming out ahead.'⁸⁴ This is certainly evidenced in how Silverman shows her character to be mentally incompetent, prideful, and worthy of ridicule.

She has set up her character with dire and humiliating consequences. This technique is in keeping with what Hurley et al. suggest: 'When consequences are negligible, the humor is faint to non-existent. Here we see a huge difference between first-person humor and third-person humor: A dire immediate consequence... can enhance third-person humor.'⁸⁵ Therefore, through building of mental spaces (in good intuitive humour writing and performing), Silverman brings us into the mind of a character that harbours erroneous beliefs and is ridiculously blind because of ego. Silverman leverages 'global information that the audience knows or learns or somehow activates... In this way, something the

⁸³ Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, *Inside Jokes : Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*, 147.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

audience knows, but that a character does not know, can still invalidate something that the character believes.’⁸⁶

When we hear a joke about a foolhardy character like the one presented in Silverman’s routine, ‘we set up a mental space that mimics the reality of the character in the narrative. The space contains her beliefs and inferences, including her conclusion...’⁸⁷ In the Silverman case the narrative and string of erroneous beliefs go as follows: her nana dies, and she assumes it was foul play: an expensive and traumatic exhumation and rape exam is merited; her parents are not supporting her because they are habitually unsupportive (rather than her parents believing there are no grounds for an exhumation); she expects a great moment of vindication when she is proven right, and her parents will humiliatingly be proven wrong for not believing in her. The apogee of the persona’s foolishness comes when Silverman pauses, and an expression of angst and niggling doubt flashes across her face. Perhaps this will be the moment she realised how the implausibility of her worldview. But rather than face being wrong and ridiculous, she says the most depraved prayer.

A final point regarding the application of Hurley et al. to Silverman’s routine is their claim that stand-up comedians unconsciously/intuitively exploit the supernormal stimuli bound up in the cognitive processes of humour. Comedy is not necessarily a corrective, i.e. its goal is not to debug, correct, or prevent character flaws or human error. Rather, comedy exploits the evolved debugging cognitive mechanism(s). On one level, audience can enjoy the fly-on-the-wall pleasure (vicarious) of Silverman’s mental blunders. Self-deprecatory humour affords the audience a sense of superiority and the comfort of safe distance from the social embarrassment implied in the comedian’s routine. It is also possible to admire the comedian’s capacity to reveal, via a routine, their potential for foolishness, error, pettiness, bias, gullibility, arrogance, and misreading. However, as Hurley et al. make clear, the task of the comedian is not correction or clean up. The task of the comedian is the exploitation of evolutions reward system for detection, debugging, and clean up, i.e. laughter and mirth.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 148.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

CONCLUSION

This chapter demonstrates ways to bridge folk accounts of CSP with cognitive models of humour. It shows how elements such as interaction, performative engagement, empathic apprehension of the opportune moment and comic timing can be mapped onto Hurley et al.'s cognitive account of humour. Setting out the challenges facing novice comedians, the chapter framed those challenges faced by comedians and how the development of a professional CSP emerges as the comedian conforms to the inherent structure of comedy and the stand-up comedy environment. The next chapter further develops the principles and, via interviews with stand-up comedians, it demonstrates how they provide an explanatory model of CSP as viable concept.

CHAPTER 5 – A SENSE OF CSP

INTRODUCTION

The starting point of this thesis discussed and problematized CSP and the study of stand-up comedy. Chapter 1 showed how CSP is an ill-defined and disputed concept. Chapter 2 showed how joke and humour theories inadequately capture the performative, paralinguistic, and NVC elements of stand-up performance. Chapter 3 problematized the academic reticence to engage with folk theory, and demonstrated the valuable insights of those academics who engaged with stand-up comedy via multi-disciplinary methods. Chapter 4 showed how integration and bridging folk accounts to theoretical approaches was both possible and insightful. All four chapters showed how a coherent interdisciplinary approach supports the central claim that CSP as emergent-adaptive phenomenon is key to understanding stand-up comedy.

Throughout, importance has been given to pragmatically appraising the most essential skills of the craft. The key skill was identified as the capacity to mentalize how to engage audiences humorously—an intentioned form of imaginative mental activity that involves perceiving and interpreting human behaviour in terms of intentional mental states (e.g. needs, desires, feelings, beliefs, goals, purposes, and reasons) within the performance situation. Over time, the comedian develops a CSP through the iterative process of writing, performing, and reflecting on the results. Put simply, comedians over time build AII (audience-interaction-intelligence). Through continued practice and exposure to audience interactions, stand-up comedians build on their capacity to read rooms, performance situations, and audiences, in order to improve and excel as live performers who can engage subsequent audiences and generate regular and sustained laughter. This capacity to envision/mentalize humour transactions is the essential prerequisite to developing as performers who can generate sustained laughter. Comedians come to know intuitively how to present themselves (body and text) and engage a room. This mentalizing informs and involves the writing and delivery of material, the physical presentation and framing of self on stage, and the business of conceptualising how one's comic persona is perceived.

It was also shown how subjective accounts are ontologically problematic considering how the required skills for stand-up comedy are honed through a mixture of conscious and unconscious processes. Indeed, there are abundant examples of human skills and abilities where possession of the skills and abilities is no indication that one has a privileged understanding how these skills and abilities were required or function. In this respect, possession of a skill is not strictly connected with consciously understanding the skill, or how it was acquired. A good example of this problem is described in Malcolm Gladwell's 2005 book *Blink*. A section on research carried out by tennis coach Vic Braden reveals the gap between how Andre Agassi describes his tennis serve and what actually shows up on slow-motion camera analysis.¹ Therefore, the role of the adaptive unconscious must be accounted for. This does not, however, present a problem for integrating folk accounts; on the contrary, it makes a positive case that practitioners willing to participate in such research into skills acquisition make it possible to gain valuable insights into how we human beings are in fact, as psychologist Timothy Wilson puts it, strangers to ourselves.²

A resolution of this subjective/objective *aporia* is proposed by applying a heterophenomenological approach and intentional stance set out by philosopher of mind Daniel Dennett. Therefore, the approach taken in this thesis is to integrate the folk and academic understanding of stand-up comedy. As was shown—in Chapter 3 in particular—the humour researchers and scholars who have engaged with practitioners have developed rich insights into the process. Heterophenomenology effectively engages with folk accounts while maintaining an objective approach. Hurley et al. propose the following:

The approach this book takes towards explaining what humour is and how it operates will thus not rely on people's reports about how and why they see the humour in jokes. It will be informed by such reports but will not take such data as authoritative or decisive.³

The issues of subjectivity/personal account and folk theory are understandably recurrent when addressing an area such as the performance of stand-up comedy from the practitioner's perspective. Hurley et al. address the problem faced by

¹ Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink : The Power of Thinking without Thinking* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), 67.

² Wilson, *Strangers to Ourselves : Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious*.

³ Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, *Inside Jokes : Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*, 27.

theorists and researchers. While most of them accept that humour is an internal emotional/cognitive process, ‘most researchers have simply not been prepared to theorise realistically, and in sufficient detail, about possible cognitive and emotional brain mechanisms churning away behind the veil of conscious access.’⁴ As the authors see it, there is an unnecessary conflation between accepting subjective accounts *of* an experience, while also the subjective explanation of the experience, ‘[T]he traditional confound in research that uses this kind of data is that subjects claim to be able to know not only *that* something is funny, but also *why* it is funny.’⁵

It is possible via a heterophenomenological approach to use subjective accounts but to reserve judgement on what the subject suggests analytically; in other words, personal perspectives, while valuable, must not be privileged in terms of theory and analysis. This approach, Hurley et al. show, ‘opens the path to using other external sources of data (logical analysis and empirical theory-construction) to explain why in fact people have the phenomenal experiences they do.’⁶ As both examples from Connolly and Lamarr show, practitioners have their pet theories to describe how they do what they do. These viewpoints, accounts, and theories should not be privileged.⁷ But that is not to diminish their importance; on the contrary, as the philosopher of science Sir Karl Popper clearly shows, they are central to scientific enquiry and critical discussion. And, as I showed in Chapters 2 and 3, in discussion of comic timing, engagement with folk theory yields key insights where their hasty dismissal may lead to poorly conceived testing. Given the complexity of performative humour interaction, the case is clear for engaging thoroughly with practitioner accounts.

⁴ Ibid., 26.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 26-7. *Inside Jokes : Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*, 26-7.

⁷ By the same token, spectator accounts of performance merit the same caveat. The elements of persona—concepts such as charisma, likeability, charm and warmth—while intuitively familiar, are difficult to define objectively. However, these concepts are the basic components of our commonly held notions of CSP and are therefore appropriate research topics that should be unpacked and codified.

CSP: JOKES, PERFORMANCE, AND SPECTATORSHIP

Performance of humour and the formation of stage persona involve phenomena associated with performer/audience connection, communication, and engagement. The edutainment/salutary warning element of comedy, for example, suggests how comedians leverage humour mechanisms to generate laughter. Self-deprecation, as discussed, opens up the possibility of endearing the audience to the comedian. Developing a sense of a negatively-valenced comic identity is a maturing process whereby the comedian hones the ability to home in on audience consciousness. The professional journey of stand-up comedians entails iterative and imaginative anticipation, error-discovery, recursive self-consciousness, language, and demonstrates, as Hurley et al. suggest, how ‘human ingenuity and cultural evolution have combined to elaborate the ways of exploiting the underlying mechanism prodigiously.’⁸ By extension, CSP is what emerges from the conscious and intuitive adjustments that are intended to enhance the humour transaction as set out.⁹

Unconscious adaptive elements aside, the writing and performance of stand-up comedy entails remarkable conscious craft. As has been identified in the analysis of comedy routines, one of the most delightful features of a comedian’s work is the level of forethought in how the material is constructed and delivered. There is a type of mental intimacy when we are tricked in a benign way by a joker, conjuror, mentalist, or magician/illusionist. That a stranger could know the inner workings of our minds and how we are likely to process information triggers a form of affection associated with play. Similar to the appreciation one might have for how a good writer can evoke and describe emotions, analyse beliefs, thoughts, and actions, or an actor can use the body (NVC) to emotionally move an audience with their mimetic verisimilitude, successful comedians intuit how to maximise this process and leverage the features entailed. But it is worth keeping in mind, as the

⁸ Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, *Inside Jokes : Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*, 117.

⁹ The status of such ‘choices’ may be either conscious-deliberate or, unconscious-adaptive. It is arguable whether choices can be considered unconscious. The point here though is that the primary benefit of identity and persona is how they reduce cognitive load as automated systems of tacitly apprehended rules and habits.

research discussed in Chapter 3 shows, that a stand-up comedy performance is a negotiation between comedian and audience.

Oliver Double, in his chapter on personality, discusses context, charisma and identification as three of the essential elements associated with the comedian's stage persona: 'The fact is, a stand-up's personality is absolutely crucial to his or her act. It provides a context for the material, it gives the audience something to identify with, and it's what distinguishes one comic from the next.'¹⁰ Similar views are articulated by Sankey, Murray, Carter, and Helitzer. Double further discusses issues of likeable/dislikeable traits, charisma, appeal, exaggeration, finding one's voice, appearance, truth, and ethics.

Describing a performance by one of his comedy heroes, Double provides a subjective account of his experience watching British comedian Lenny Henry at the Philharmonic Hall in Liverpool. 'I followed Henry's career since I was a child,' he says, before listing Henry's previous work on various television shows. Double describes the experience from the perspective of fan who has followed the work and career of a comedian. He writes:

As he walks onto the stage, a huge wave of affection surges through me, strengthened by the fact that he crosses the stage like a star, aware of the applause that greets him, but making no big show of it. His stride is loose, relaxed and unhurried as he makes his way to the mike. His charisma is almost tangible.¹¹

The subjective experience Double offers here sets out problematic elements of analysis. Here is Double—a writer on the craft, and a highly experienced stand-up comedian—describing his experience of seeing his childhood comedy hero live on stage. Double projects/attributes the qualities of loveliness, star-quality, humility and grace in how Lenny Henry is aware of the applause but makes 'no big show of it'. He gets the impression of relaxed charm in how he walks to the mike. But if charisma and funniness are akin to beauty (in the proverbial eye of the beholder), there is no getting away from the subjective elements of such attributions.

However, against this it can be said that such is the nature of theatrical engagement and spectatorship. Particularly with comedy and humour

¹⁰ Double, *Getting the Joke : The Inner Workings of Stand-up Comedy*, 59.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

transactions, there is a social dimension. A comedian with a track record of generating and providing quality jokes will naturally develop a form of loyalty (practically the same as brand loyalty). The audience have paid to see Lenny Henry. In the very act of paying, they are both confirming and increasing their conviction that he is funny, charismatic, charming, and any number of positive qualities one might project/attribute. And in Double's case there is most likely to be an appreciation of Henry's performance skill and prowess. The elements of persona—concepts such as charisma, likeability, charm and warmth—while intuitively familiar, are difficult to define objectively. However, these concepts are the basic components of our commonly held notions of CSP, and are therefore appropriate research topics that should be unpacked and codified.

In this regard, Bruce McConachie's cognitive approach to performance spectatorship offers valuable tools and avenues. We can say that in terms of McConachie's structure of Attention, Memory, Empathy, and Cultural Knowledge (AMECK), the audience are attentive to the performer, have positive memories of previous experiences with the performer (however mediated), are positively empathically connected, and have a shared cultural knowledge of Lenny Henry's style of humour, characters, and the type of subjects he addresses in his performances.

We can say, in terms of Hurley et al., that the reference Double makes to Henry 'making no big show of it' is entirely consistent with what one would expect from a comedian who is aware of how to relate to audience in terms of status and power. Lenny Henry's relaxed humility could be compared with Louis CK's or Ricky Gervais's brashness. Despite varying CSP styles, all three relate well to, and are related to by, their audiences. This is in line with the discussion of Boorstin's views on perspective, Billy Connolly, and Mark Lamarr. Comedians generally need to leave room for self-deprecation and being the butt of the joke. They generally need to play the everyman. Audiences tend to prioritize humility as part of the package with certain comedians. Set against this, Ricky Gervais and Jack Dee are examples of stage personae that could play risky laughables. Gervais is brash with his success and millionaire status, while Dee affects a borderline contempt for what anyone, including his audience, think of him. Both portray a measured indifference to

audience (see later in this chapter the discussion with Stewart Lee of Billy Connolly).

However, audience tolerance of indifference is on the assumption that it is substantially put on or part of the act. Without this assumption the comedian would walk off, or the audience would walk out, or the promoter would pull the show. Consider the following: Bill Hicks, as demonstrated earlier, played on the fact that he was slapping on a smile and ploughing through a script of jokes he was bored with. Whether or not Hicks was somewhat sincere is beside the point. It got laughs. If it got boos, substantial walk-outs, or cancellation of bookings, it can be safely assumed the line would be altered or dropped. A performer's contempt and indifference for audience as a general concept harbours an inherent contradiction. While it is true that a performer might dislike a particular audience, the existence of stand-up material is with an audience in mind; it therefore makes no sense to say the comedian dislikes all audiences. This brings us back to the centrality of understanding CSP within the socially negotiated structure of comedy shows.

There is good reason to consider the emotional disposition of audiences toward comedians. According to Hurley et al. it is possible, via Dennett's heterophenomenology approach, to take a scientific approach to examples of self-report, such as the case here with Oliver Double, and earlier accounts of process from Mark Lamarr, Billy Connolly, and any other folk theorist/practitioner. The essence of the heterophenomenological approach is to take seriously what is said and then analysing it through the available scientific approaches that can be applied—the theoretical framework in this case. Double's reference to the experience of tangible charisma evidences the spectator experience. No joke process has happened, yet the audience is clearly in an elevated state joy and excitement. One explanation could be that Lenny Henry has earned the positive welcome through decades of work and building of reputation. A social scientific account of charisma as set out by Alan Bryman (see also: Albrow, 1990, Baehr, 1990) suggests that charisma is outside the person. As Bryman puts it, 'there is a

tendency in general speech to perceive charisma as an attribute that a person possesses'.¹²

It is reasonable to suggest that attributing/projecting positive qualities on to a specific figure(s) is bound up with group belonging, solidarity, leadership, and survival instinct. Considering the commercial enormity and global pervasiveness of professional sports jerseys and other products bearing insignia of club, country, and sports star, it is possible to see the exploitation of old primal instincts, in the same way as Hurley et al. describe confectioners exploiting the sweet tooth, comedians exploiting the humour clean-up mechanism, and the commercialised sport exploiting evolutionary mechanisms that entail the need to project and attribute positive qualities onto a leader figure. Regardless of the particularities of theoretical explanation, the study of performer-audience interactions cannot neglect the role of charisma in engagement. It is reasonable to suggest that just as with Hurley et al.'s account of humour; it is likely that the heterophenomenological analysis of charisma via cognitive methods will yield up insights that can be codified when investigated as evolutionary adaptation.

As mentioned above, the cognitive approach in McConachie offers an avenue to explore Double's account. It's useful to compare what Double has to say about his experience as a spectator with what McConachie discusses in a section entitled 'Blending Identities'.¹³ Referring to the work of theatre historian Julia Walker, McConachie presents a cognitive account of the double consciousness experienced while spectating. As spectators we can both engage with the play-world on stage while appreciating the skills, and perceived-ineffable qualities we may attribute to the performers, writers, and producers etc. The section discusses a journal entry by Boston socialite Anna Quincy relating her experience of a performance by the actress Fanny Kemble. Quincy is simultaneously gripped by the character Bianca (played by Kemble), while at the same time admiring Kemble's skill as an actress. McConachie concurs with the point made by Julia Walker that spectators experience a double consciousness in the theatrical event. While engaged with the character being performed by a performer on stage, a spectator may oscillate

¹² Alan Bryman, *Charisma and Leadership in Organizations* (London : Sage, 1992 (1993 printing)), 68.

¹³ McConachie, *Engaging Audiences : A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre*, 40-7.

between being swept along in the dramatic action, awareness of the fictional character, and awareness of, and admiration for, the skill of the performer. This description of spectating seems compatible with the model of mental spaces discussed in Hurley et al. referred to earlier in this chapter. McConachie likewise invokes the work of Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner to describe mental spaces. He also makes the point that a connoisseur (such as Double watching another comedian or a professional actor watching a film or play) creates another mental space: that of the informed spectator aware of craft.

Any viewer who knows the rules of the theatregoing game can step back from an imaginative immersion in the onstage action to consider the relative skills of the players (and of the designers, the directors, etc.) or to think about the fictional world of the script (and perhaps about the art of the playwright). Arguably, connoisseurs of the theatre, like Quincy, take more of their enjoyment from such considerations than do amateur playgoers.¹⁴ Extending this idea to Oliver Double's account of watching Lenny Henry, it is reasonable to apply the concept of double consciousness. As Lenny Henry walks on stage, Oliver Double experiences '... a huge wave of affection...' associated with his previous experiences of Henry's performances. Double, as McConachie suggests above, can take more enjoyment from a comedy performance, given his professional experience. Knowing the challenge of generating and delivering humour, he can be both a fan, while also admiring Henry's consummate stage craft, audience interaction skills, joke-writing, and routine ordering.

SILVERMAN, PERSONA, AND CHARISMA

In light of McConachie's account of spectating, Double's practitioner account of spectating is therefore an important contribution to bridging the folk account. Because Double is more informed about the process of stand-up comedy, he is in a position to offer a more articulate, multi-perspectival account of a comedy performance and CSP. This suggests, therefore, that there are clearly levels in spectating. Audience cannot be considered homogenously. Leaving aside matters of taste, it is reasonable to make the case for levels of audience appreciation based on how informed they are of other comedians and genres, educated, familiar with

¹⁴ Ibid., 41-2.

background knowledge and cultural references, and, in the case of Double, the insight into craft and the onstage/offstage realities of stand-up comedy. A high level of connoisseurship can, in a certain respect, offer the possibility of extracting more enjoyment and appreciation out of any performance, including stand-up comedy.

Sarah Silverman's performance in Chapter 4 can therefore be appreciated more in how she uses her acting skills in her comedy. Just as described in Double's paper on stand-up comedy and characterization,¹⁵ Silverman generates characters and archetypes in her stand-up. Her humour in many respects is a twist on older/established archetypes including dumb blonde/valley girl and JAP (Jewish American Princess). She sets her characters up and shoots them down. In a theatre play, for example, the audience (assuming here a basic of theatrical and narrative literacy) can identify the targets the playwright has set up and identified as exemplars of virtue or deserving of contempt and or ridicule—in other words, heroes, villains, and fools. Through conceptual blending an audience may recognise the pen of the author, her use of literary and theatrical characters to make a statement about world(s). As spectators, we like/admire Shakespeare, Beckett, Carr, or Roe, etc. But as readers or spectators, who can we say we like? What can we say we like them for? Not having met and yet fondly regarded, admired, or even adored, one's admiration can only be attributed/projected for how they have communicated their worldview, and, perhaps, put the world to rights according to ethics and values one might share.

In the case of stand-up comedians, they identify people and states of the world as worthy of ridicule. Allowing for perspectival-shift as set out in the Boorstinian model, humour must frame targets worthy of ridicule. As Billig and Hurley et al. suggest, much of humour is negatively valenced; targets and butts of jokes are synonymous with comedy. With Silverman (as with most self-authoring stand-ups) the writer of the humour stands before us performing the vignettes and characters, play out the roles, seemingly becoming the butt of her own jokes but in fact, by creating characters and archetypes, she generates Silverman the humorist,

¹⁵ Double, "Characterization in Stand-up Comedy: From Ted Ray to Billy Connolly, Via Bertolt Brecht."

Silverman the performer, and archetypes. She is the writer, dramaturg, director, and performer of a series of moral tales. As such, when one admires Silverman, or any other comedian for that matter, there is potentially—as Bruce McConachie describes—the conceptual blending of the aforementioned composites at play. What then is Silverman’s CSP? One may accept her goofy characterizations on face value. One may admire her virtuoso performance of goofiness or admire a blend of her skills to capacity to pre-empt audience, write humorous social critique/ridicule, wrong-foot, and perform. Her CSP is the version of self she writes and performs in order to engage her audiences in laughter.

However, the interpretation of CSP is a matter for spectators. The range of observations when spectating Sarah Silverman, or any other performer, is determined by the particular spectator’s purpose, level of expertise, and states of AMECK (attention, empathy, and cultural knowledge). Given that much of stand-up relies on cultural knowledge, appreciating the archetypes Silverman employs is crucial to being able to mimic the form of the mental spaces and belief activation involved. Each spectator brings their bespoke way of spectating events. As McConachie puts it, ‘spectators are active agents in the process of combining actor and characters into blended actor/characters.’¹⁶ Drawing on the theory of conceptual blending set out by Fauconnier and Turner, he describes the flexibility of blending.¹⁷ Each spectator blends their own mix but from a generalisable set of ingredients.

Conceptual blending, JITSA, AMECK, Boorstin’s model of perspective and empathy, and ToM/intentional stance all make it possible to locate what ‘getting the joke’ entails. Saying why an audience laughs at Sarah Silverman’s comedy is a description of mechanisms and an approximation of how the members of the audience are engaging with her and her act. There will naturally be a range of reasons and levels of engagement. McConachie speaks of studies that suggest audiences form a sense of what they believe is the performer’s personality before they respond to the role/archetype/character they present. From Double’s report of Lenny Henry, we can see how attribution and projection of positive qualities is certainly part of the process of performer-audience interaction. McConachie refers

¹⁶ McConachie, *Engaging Audiences : A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre*, 44.

¹⁷ Ibid.

to the playfulness of performers as a measure of how audiences are willing to engage when he says: ‘spectators are looking for good partners in play’. Even if a performer is playing a nasty, introverted character, spectators want to sense that the actor is willing to share that character with them.’¹⁸ This offers a way to consider how seemingly anti-social, shocking, and irreverent CSPs can work well. Acts such as Frankie Boyle, Jimmy Carr, and Rickie Gervais represent a generation of anti-PC stand-ups that have won over audience despite performing ostensibly cruel humour.

As audiences we are not simply seeking jokes at a comedy performance; we are firstly seeking a person who is playful, emotionally available and communicative, and willing and capable of sharing via humour structures their human experience and worldview. Were it otherwise, audiences could simply read the material in a book or online virtually free of its psychosocial and performative qualities.

In a 2017 interview on *The One Show*, Ricky Gervais discussed persona and theme in his new stand-up show *Humanity*. The guest hosts of the show were the TV double-act known as “The Hairy Bikers” (Simon King and David Myers).

HB1 (Simon King): There’s always been a theme, hasn’t there, Ricky, to your tours. What can we expect from *Humanity*?

Gervais: Well, this is slightly different. There’s less persona than my first four. All comedians have a bit of a persona, even if it a slightly more confident, brasher version of themselves. But mine’s less and less now... I think I’ve got... I’ve reached that age where I’ve got old people’s rights, so I just say what’s on my mind. It’s much more anecdotal, it’s much more honest, much more about my past ... and everything.

HB1: So, it’s a more personal tour?

Gervais: Yeah... it is. I mean people will still be offended, don’t get me wrong.

HB2: So, if a young Ricky Gervais came to see you perform now would he find you’ve mellowed with age or have you got edgier?

Gervais: I think that the good thing about this is there is a bit of both ... I think because I’ve been going for so long people know what I’m doing now, they get it. They know I’m playing with the perception of myself playing... and playing with my own persona. So, I think people know when I’m being naughty and getting it wrong and when it’s heartfelt. And

¹⁸ McConachie, *Engaging Audiences : A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre*, 45.

they certainly seem to, I've done three dates in Bristol, which is amazing. And, you know, even the critics got it... so, that's nice.

HB1: But people know you so well

Gervais: I always thought they did, but... you know... you can't legislate against stupidity. You've got to do your thing and hope that like-minded people come and see you. It's usually things that are taken out of context... you know... In the arena, everyone's laughing. If someone suddenly texts a quote and puts it on Twitter and somebody says, 'Oh, he said that!' They haven't even heard what I've said.¹⁹

It is interesting that Gervais says there is "less persona" in his new show compared to previous ones, and how he defines the difference as being more honest about his past and presenting material that is more personal. This supports the view I put forward that CSP has a protective, mask-like quality. Gervais sees persona as a concept that puts distance between the onstage/offstage. He also recognises that with time and having a well-established following, it is possible to risk presenting a more vulnerable and personal show. The mask, having served well, is not as essential as when he began his career.

The elements of cognitive blending discussed above are also applicable to the interview. In saying that 'I think people know when I'm being naughty and getting it wrong and when it's heartfelt'²⁰, Gervais implies people know that it is a persona. Here is the concept of cognitive blending discussed above. "Getting it" here means and implicit understanding on the spectators' part that there is an onstage and offstage Gervais. What I read from this is that Gervais understands that his audience understand the rules of his comedy *modus operandi*; they know his politically incorrect material is offered in a playful context. What I take from this is that comedians intuitively understand some or all of the elements of CSP as set out in this thesis. In particular, comedians learn that the use of mask, while conflicted with notions of authenticity, is a necessary part of staying alive in the live comedy event. Modification of the mask (CSP) to something that is closer to one's offstage self is possible, but only after a viable (in the truest sense of "life being possible") persona has been established.

¹⁹ "The One Show," ed. Sandy Smith (London, UK: BBC One, 2017).

²⁰ Ibid.

JACK DEE CSP

In 2008, when I first began to think through the idea of stand-up comedy, the philosophy and psychology of humour, and CSP, one of the outstanding examples of evidence that came to mind was the story of the British comedian Jack Dee. While working as a restaurant manager in the centre of London he moonlighted as a stand-up. After a number of years and a moderate but invariable level of success, he decided that either he was not for stand-up, or stand-up was not for him. In the following extract from a 2012 BBC interview with Mark Lawson, British comedian Jack Dee discusses the struggles he faced in finding a CSP.

ML: And so, you came close to giving it up, comedy. (JD nods “mm”). And that was because it was going so badly.

JD: Because it was, well, I felt that I wasn’t delivering the real thing. I felt that I might as well be writing the jokes, I could phone them in and have the same effect on people. And that’s what I wanted to resolve is actually to... to be getting people laughing at me for me; for that thing that had kind of almost happened on the first night, and for those times at school, and with friends when they (acting out friends) *ah, so funny, your face*, or whatever, you know, *the way you said that was so funny*. And, you become obsessed with it of course pursuing it and you can try too hard, far too hard.

ML: And then as you said, so, what would have been your retirement gig, that’s where it suddenly came back in.

JD: When I had decided: that’s it, I’ll may be try and, you know, sell these jokes, or something, I might as well. I went along and did these gigs with a view that I was going to give up, and I had stopped trying so hard. I’d stopped, eh, working at it and trying to be conscious of everything I was doing on stage and instead just delivered this very deadpan throw-away, ‘I don’t care if you like these jokes or not, because I’m giving up anyway. You’re not going to break my heart if you don’t laugh. It doesn’t matter to me.’ And that in itself was funny. And I went home thinking, ‘well, yeah, I’d laugh at that.’ (Laugh). I’d laugh at a comedian who doesn’t really care if you laugh or not.

ML: For people who haven’t ever done it, what’s it... that moment when the laugh comes back, what’s that like?

JD: Well, for me, it was about that sense that... something’s been, you know, put back into you, if you like. It’s the one thing that eh... made sense of life to me. I mean, comedically (sic) I’ve always seen life like that. And it’s how I’ve always eh... understood life. And therefore to be able to express it to other people and have them understand me was... hugely rewarding; I mean, in a way that I wouldn’t ever fully be able to explain,

it was like... I think when stand-up is going well, it's actually like being able to fly ... it feels that good.²¹

There are a number of points to be considered here. When Dee says he felt he wasn't delivering the real thing, the following questions might be asked: does he mean he was disappointed with his delivery of the material but the audience seemed happy, or was he disappointed and the audience response was poor? Were the jokes satisfactory but the delivery unsatisfactory? It's possible that a comedian could deliver a perfectly similar performance to two different audiences and receive diametrically opposing receptions; what then would the comedian's opinion of the performance be? To what extent is the comedian's impression of a performance formed by their own internal sense of how well they performed the material, and how much is the impression formed by how well the audience responded? And then there are considerations of venue, place on line-up, what emcee, and what other acts were on. The best approximation that can be made, perhaps, is that over a sufficient quantity of performances these variables average out. Material and delivery that generates a high hit rate over time can withstand negative responses from the occasional events when a small number of audiences respond indifferently or negatively. This explanation fits the view that comedians process the feedback of audience response and form a view of how to adapt.

There is a sense of an ideal CSP, which Jack Dee refers to when he says:

... what I wanted to resolve is actually to... be getting people laughing at me for me; for that thing that had kind of almost happened on the first night, and for those times at school, and with friends when they (acting out friends) ah, so funny, your face, or whatever, you know, the way you said that was so funny.²²

Some variation of the above is common to all comedians. Comedians have both a sense of being capable of making others laugh and a desire to recreate those experiences. This seems to be self-evident but not inconsequential in terms of a theory of CSP. The belief that one is capable and has the desire to repeat, and perfect, a process/action/task forms the fundamental proposition of CSP: X believes Y, and therefore behaviour Z. Why X believes Y can be examined. In the

²¹ BBC Studios, "Jack Dee Almost Giving up Comedy - Mark Lawson Talks to - Bbc.," in *Mark Lawson Talks to* (BBC, 2009).

²² Ibid.

case of a comedian we can safely leave aside the possibility that X is mistaken about the belief or the laughter or that others find them funny.²³ Therefore, behaviour Z (in the case of a comedian) is the process of figuring out what behaviours/actions will recreate the previous responses. Figuring out the behaviour is the process of mentalization that has been described throughout: how to recreate, script, and present to audiences.

Another point in relation to Jack Dee is the sense of not trying so hard: how he discovered the effectiveness of a throwaway, deadpan, delivery style. The essence of trial and error is in keeping with the naïve scientist approach. In Dee's case, he says it was because he had decided to give up but still had gigs booked, and therefore decided to do them. It seems that losing the fear of doing well changed his delivery style, and what emerged was a new CSP that was fearless and ambivalent to the audience. There are echoes in this story of the epiphanies of comedians such as Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, and Richard Pryor, who started their careers as suited club and TV acts who subsequently transformed to become counter-culture figures.

CARLIN AND CSP AS PSYCHOSOCIAL RESPONSE

In his autobiography *Last Words*, in a chapter entitled *The Long Epiphany*, George Carlin describes his transformation from mainstream to counterculture comedian in the period circa 1968 to 1971. Against the backdrop of assassinations (Dr. Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy), the Chicago convention police riots, the Vietnam War, the Nixon-era's socio-political tensions, Carlin reflects on a sense of stagnation in his work. He writes:

²³ A belief may be false. However, all that is being asserted here is that the belief is held by the subject as true.

My brilliant act, which was doing so well, had nowhere to go. I was writing and performing material that went around in circles, media material taking off on media form, television about television. And while I was powerfully attracted to the life my rock and folkie friends led—as a comedian, how did I go about leading that? There were very few counterculture comedy centers—one terrific group in San Francisco called the Committee, who’d been on *Smothers* with me, but that was about it. I felt inadequate compared to an outfit like the Committee. I felt I somehow sustained myself with this middle-class show-business shit.²⁴

Keeping in mind the bracketing rule of heterophenomonology—take the subjective account as seriously as it can be taken—there are at least two or more apparently opposing but coherent ways to look at this description by Carlin. One is an individualistic account: he felt his act was going nowhere and decided it was time to do something about it, or two, an environmental adaptive account: a sociocultural shift was taking place, and he felt the need to move in one direction or another. Both accounts can adequately describe the same phenomenon. As has been set out from the beginning, the formation of CSP entails reflecting and tuning into what is happening in society and tacking according to one’s perceived sense of sociocultural reality and audience feedback. The question might be: is a comedian a follower or a leader in sociocultural dynamics? The word ‘opportunism’ is often considered pejorative; however, in terms of artists or performers, it is perhaps deeply naïve to judge otherwise sensible reflection and appraisal as cynical. To what extent such social adaptation is conscious, or part of our natural unconscious cognitive processes is a matter of ongoing investigation. It is therefore possible to accept the bone fides of Carlin’s subjective account of his experience without privileging his explanation of his psychology.

The case for an environmental adaptive account can also be supported from such a report. As Carlin points out, ‘[T]here were very few counterculture comedy centers’.²⁵ Without a viable network of performance spaces and audiences, discussions of choice and alternative are moot. But also, there are the oppositional elements of comedy to be considered. Part of the comedian’s worldview, or stance, is to detect rules and systems within social, cultural, and interpersonal structures. The creation of humour is contrarian, oppositional, sensitive to incongruity,

²⁴ George Carlin and Tony Hendra, *Last Words*, 1st Free Press hardcover ed. (New York: Free Press, 2009), 140.

²⁵ Ibid.

questioning of orthodoxy, and drawn to ridicule. As mainstream comedian, Carlin targeted the mainstream. As counterculture comedian it was as likely Carlin would inevitably attack that too. Belonging can be a dangerous luxury. And Carlin seemed to be aware of this. As he puts it, '[A]nd however much kinship I had with the counterculture, it brought up again the eternal dilemma: of longing to belong but not liking to belong—even though the group I wanted to belong to now were non-belongers.'²⁶ Indeed, throughout the chapter Carlin expresses a spirit of libertarian individualism, while at the same time of orientating to a sense of social duty, as in, 'I wasn't doing my job. I wasn't using my mind to produce the external evidence of my inner state [...] I felt like a traitor to my generation.'²⁷ and, in reference to performing at The Copacabana in New York, 'The Copa was the quintessential place I did not belong.'²⁸ Considering these subjective accounts makes it possible to see how Carlin, in this instance, was in touch with his social milieu and audience feedback. His change of CSP is documented in these accounts. But the change cannot be viewed as the result of solipsistic reflection, but are rather within a broader sociocultural backdrop with pragmatic elements. Carlin writes:

The other change that took place was my starting to play coffeehouses and folk clubs. There wasn't yet much new material, but what I did was simply talk about the changes and make the point that I had to stop working from the surface of my brain and get into the middle of my gut. Talk about who I was and how I felt. The coffeehouse ethos lent itself to that first-person, quasi-confessional approach. And this was a crucial difference, because talking directly to the audience rather than performing for them in character as I always had would soon evolve into a completely new kind of material.²⁹

The coffeehouse ethos, as described here, meant that Carlin changed his rhetorical style to a first-person structure: 'There was an autobiographical part to this that went along with that new first-person approach: "Have you noticed...?" "Know what I think...?" "Do you remember...?"'³⁰ This shows how CSP is informed both by rhetorical structures and by the nature of audiences and venues. As will be seen later in discussion of Stewart Lee's work, the availability of arts centres and particular comedy clubs that attract audiences that afford more narrative styles of

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 142.

²⁹ Ibid., 145.

³⁰ Ibid.

stand-up comedy—as opposed to mainstream quick-fire formats—offer environmental diversity for comedians to develop a more diverse range of CSPs. In the case of Carlin, it is interesting the reaction his “new” CSP received both critically and from audiences. After all, George Carlin was still George Carlin. However, some audiences and critics strongly protested Carlin’s transformation—as if something that was theirs had been taken away. He cites the critic Jack O’Brian berating his new CSP as Carlin transforming from being ‘the very best young contemporary clowns’ and ‘a splendid comic spirit’, to being ‘an artistic drop out’.³¹ And, during a performance at The Lake Geneva Playboy Club, Lake Geneva (Wis), Carlin reports the kind of difficult relationship a performer can have with audiences harbouring expectations of the comedian’s CSP, ‘[P]eople were yelling things like, “Where’s the old George Carlin?” Soon it became the entire audience, maybe two hundred straight, tight, asshole-looking Wisconsin-Saturday-night-out people, getting up, walking out, fingers being waved at me...’³² Reflecting back to Jason Rutter’s view that stand-up comedy is socially negotiated, it might be suggested that CSP is also, curiously, bound up in this negotiation.

And it was not as if it was just the Wisconsin audience that Carlin considered would negatively react to his switch. As he puts it, ‘I knew the progressive part of the audience would be suspicious of me: “Is he just cashing in on the times?” (“Ripping off the counterculture” was the prevailing cliché.)’³³ But what we can say remains a constant before and after the CSP transition is Carlin’s intuitive sense of comic structure: comedy as negatively valenced, requiring targets, mental framing, contrasts between vicarious and visceral perspectives, and rhetorical structures. Carlin describes how, having come through this period of transition, he once again had a structure. He writes:

I had a set of beliefs and values that gave me all the ironic contrast I needed to create art. I was rediscovering the Us-versus-Them dynamic from my old neighbourhood and the underdog attitudes I grew up with.³⁴

As has already been shown, such beliefs, values, and underdog attitudes are prototypical elements of CSP—the sense of ironic contrast, oppositions and

³¹ Ibid., 140-1.

³² Ibid., 149.

³³ Ibid., 153.

³⁴ Ibid., 152.

juxtapositions, targeting up, and conforming to the negatively-valenced form of comedy.

CASE STUDY: STEWART LEE

The final comedian to be discussed in terms of CSP is Stewart Lee. Perhaps no other comedian has been as open and articulate in terms of discussing their objective method and subjective experience of the craft. He has published both scripts and writing and performance note for his stand-up comedy shows, as well as a body of articles and interviews on his stand-up work.

In a London *Guardian* interview with the writer Will Self, Self introduces Lee as follows:

On stage, Lee is apparently an embittered, envious, self-lacerating man, caught in a ferocious double-bind: if he's unsuccessful it's because his audience are stupid shits who don't get his jokes; and if he's successful it's because he's a stupid shit churning out jokes that confirm his audience in their prejudices. So convincing is this act – if indeed it is an act – that I became intrigued: was the “real” Lee quite as prickly as his performance persona? ³⁵

In this description, Self describes the mechanisms that Lee has formulated over years whereby Lee co-opts his audiences into the rhetorical structure of his comedy. He carves his audience up into groups. At first, one group is treated as an in-group and another as an out group. The in-group may well laugh as Lee berates the out-group. However, it is only a matter of time before he turns his comedy guns on the in-group, or on himself for entertaining this in-group. In this respect, it can be said that Lee's brand of negatively-valenced comedy is: every victory is a no-win situation. His broken comedian, like Groucho Marx, does not want to be a member of an in-group that would have him as a member. Within this CSP, Lee can also establish and maintain the critical outsider role. While he may temporarily laud those in the audience whom he considers the “good” part of the audience, he eventually asserts his independence of them in the play he establishes. As will be shown later, these are strategies that, Lee suggests, came about as a response to changes and shift in comedy clubs. Lee says:

³⁵ Will Self, "Will Self Meets Stewart Lee: 'Are You Really, Ultimately Embittered, or Not?'," *The Guardian*, 26/2/ 2016.

I really noticed the scene changing in the 90s. The audience at the Bedford – a pub I used to work at in Balham – started to change. There were new people in with city jobs and they hadn't come to see you, you were like their employee, and they had expectations and demands they thought should be met by the performer. I remember someone shouting out: "We've paid for jokes, there aren't enough jokes." I think this has happened across the arts and education generally, hasn't it? It's turned into a customer/client relationship. And so when you go on stage and say, "No one is equipped to review me," you're saying, "This is going to happen on my terms."³⁶

What he says here is consistent with the core of NIGHTS and CSP. The adaptive aspect of CSP is driven by problem-solving the performance challenges. Audiences, the social milieu etc. are dynamic, mutable, variables that require the kind of situational response as set out in personality theories discussed previously. In general terms, audiences vary from club to club. The examples from John Herr (Herricane) in the previous chapter demonstrate how Herr altered his material depending on the demographic of the club location. Comedians have to be prepared for the profiles of audiences they are likely to come up against. Lee's response to the audiences in Balham, London, was, '[T]his is going to happen on my terms.' This is, as I have described throughout, a psychosocial response to the performer's perceived milieu. Will Self suggests, '[S]o, it's a sort of psycho-social response to a changing economic situation [...] You want to stop the act being commoditised at that point.'³⁷ While economics may well have a bearing on audience dynamics, it is, as I have suggested previously, much more complex than that.

NIGHTS and CSP, in keeping with the heterophenomenological grounding, maintains a sceptical position on subjective accounts. This scepticism extends to personality theories. While economics may or may not have a bearing on what was happening in Balham. More money may cause some audiences to drink more and behave differently, more money may cause people to be more dominant or aggressive, while it may cause others to be more cautious and polite. All of this is a matter for debate and investigation outside the scope of the present thesis. What can be suggested, however, is that Lee's response is not the only response to such events. Another individual might, for example, decide not to perform in that particular club, or prepare effective heckle put-downs to deal with such heckling,

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

or, stop doing stand-up comedy, or, develop a more aggressive short-form brand of stand-up, and so on. The point here is: NIGHTS does not privilege first-person accounts. Rather, it examines them, considers counterfactuals, and suggests that adaptation of CSP captures the development of stand-up comedians.

Clearly, audiences are dynamic, multi-faceted, and prone to be affected by a spectrum of factors. The comedian's challenge is to tune in, generate hypotheses about how audiences are and adapt in line with such hypotheses. If the CSP works to engage audiences in laughter, the comedian's hypothesis is somewhat confirmed and can be extended. So in the case of Lee, he has continued to keep his CSP updated to accommodate the fluidity of audiences and his perceived audience profile. His ability to play the broken comedian presents a kind of paradox. On the one hand, his CSP is curmudgeonly and bemoans his struggling situation, while on the other, the more audiences warm to his comedy, the more his audience sizes and status increase. As I have maintained consistently throughout, comedians formulate perceptions of their public and audience profile. They envision how they are likely to be perceived. Speaking about his growing popularity, Lee describes how his CSP can accommodate the potential paradox of being successful while still playing the underdog. He says, 'I keep thinking it will run out of mileage, but there always seems to be new ways to spin it. Even when the people are coming in ever greater numbers, my character feels there must be some problem with this.'³⁸ What comes through in this and other interviews, is how much Lee's process of WPR³⁹ shows the kind of reflexivity that informs CSP; and shows CSP can be considered as an emergent, conceptual tool for managing a comedian's perceptions and mindreading predictions (the hypotheses of the naïve scientist) of actual and potential audiences.

Stewart Lee agreed to be interviewed as part of this PhD.⁴⁰ I briefly set out the concept of CSP. By way of context and background, Lee was born in 1968 and began writing, performing, and directing comedy while at Oxford. His stand-up career up to the date of this interview had spanned a period of twenty-six years with

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Write-perform-reflect (WPR) fits with the naïve scientist and hunter analogy. It is also a process of that entails mentalizing the audience and performance situation. The CSP is therefore developed and adapted as a tool to negotiate the performance demands.

⁴⁰ Unabridged interview included in Appendix Lee.

intermissions. His career in the 1990s was—for the most part—as one half of the double-act Lee & Herring. Lee took a break from stand-up comedy circa 2000, during which he co-wrote and directed the satirical musical *Jerry Springer: the Opera*. Lee subsequently returned to performing stand-up comedy in 2004. The interview took place at Trinity College Dublin in October 2014 during the Irish leg of his comedy tour *Much a Stew About Nothing*. What follows is a select discussion of points relating to NIGHTS and CSP in terms of the landscape of stand-up comedy, the challenges perceived and tackled, and how a comedian—in the case Lee—mentalizes audiences and the processes of being a stand-up writer/performer.

I got really serious about doing stand-up again in 2004. And I sort of thought, ‘you know what... who’s going to like me? Why isn’t it sometimes working in the clubs on a Friday night? On a Friday night it’s because politically ambivalent lads have gone out. I thought, if I can do what they criticize me for – which is: I’ll just try and find all the *Guardian* readers in every British provincial city and make sure I can get through to them.

And then, I think that started to work. Those kind of people would come and see me, and normally get it. There’d always be fun when there were people that didn’t agree with you in the room but there’d normally enough that did to make it an interesting conflict. And then, that got to the point where a few years ago when I was sort of able to attack my own audience for being those people.

In terms of the WPR process already described, here is the type of contemplation of audience this thesis proposes. A comedian reflects on responses, in this case the challenge of playing to a Friday night audience—a night when the composition of audiences in comedy clubs is likely to be an after-work crowd, and perhaps—as Lee suggests, ‘politically ambivalent lads’. Again, just as in the views of audience in at the comedy club in Balham mentioned in the Will Self interview above, what matters for NIGHTS and the heterophenomenological approach is not whether what Lee says is in fact true, but it is what he expresses as a true belief—a perception that guides how he subsequently develops his comedy writing and performance. And such a perception can also inform how a comedian may manage a tour or a career. For example, in terms of targeting a certain audience profile there are targeting strategies a comedian can employ such as booking theatre and arts club venues (instead of more boisterous comedy venues), playing certain festivals, and

managing a media campaign that notifies readers and listener via interviews and articles.

Having established the targeted audiences, Lee then senses he was ‘able to attack’ his own audience for being “those” people. This performance strategy is in line with what was discussed in the analysis of Stewart Lee’s Comedy Vehicle in the previous chapter. His CSP bemoans that there is one table that gets it [his humour] but overall the audience is problematic, disengaged, the type who as good as murdered Robin Williams. Lee, having established a certain following, then senses he was, ‘able to attack’ his own audience for being those people. The strategy is also employed in his 2010 show *If You Prefer a Milder Comedian* and his 2012 show *Carpet Remnant World*.

CARPET REMNANT WORLD, LYCEUM THEATRE

The following extract has been taken from a recording. Laughter is graded as follows: **LL**: Low-Level Laughter, **ML**: Medium Laughter, **SL**: Strong Laughter

1. Now, this show is called *Carpet Remnant World*.
2. Now... since I’ve been on the telly I’ve been picking up a lot of stragglers. [LL]
3. People who don’t normally come and see me... eh ...
4. There’s twice as many people as I’ve played to in Sheffield before here tonight and em...
5. The kind of people... that... come and see people off the telly...
6. The kind of shows you go and see, by comics,
7. They’re normally called things like “Laugh Time” aren’t they? [SL]
8. Or “Jokerama Six” [ML] or something like that.⁴¹

⁴¹ Tim Kirby, "Carpet Remnant World," (UK2012).

Lee creates the kind of awkwardness and embarrassment that occurs when we are present while an individual puts down another individual or group who too are present. The bit dismisses a section of the audience that Lee says have only come to see him because of his television profile. He describes them as stragglers' on line 2, suggesting that they are behind, slow, and need to catch up. Comedy for them has to be packaged in simplistic formats, he suggests. Expressing the kind of views normally thought privately or spoken out of earshot of those one is speaking about, Lee's monologue creates a strange delight and tension by assuming a contemptuous body language and gestures. Delight and tension in that: no one in the audience can know whether or not Lee sees them as the 'stragglers'; the ones there for the impure reason of seeing a comedian off the telly.

In the model described by Hurley et al. Lee is playing close to the line of vicarious and visceral perspective. He addresses these 'stragglers' directly: "... The kind of shows you go and see, by comics, they're normally called things like "Laugh Time"... aren't they?..." The barely audible phrase 'aren't they?' is said with such subtle disdain and condescension it generates laughter despite the insulting audacity he portrays. He speaks of them as if about an alien breed he knows little about, but will show off that little knowledge to full effect. He is, on the face of it, breaking the convention of interacting with the audience in a way that ingratiates himself and instead risks alienating parts or inevitably all of the audience by contemptuously describing them as 'stragglers'. He knows, and the audience knows, he is breaking social rules of politeness and good manners. The laughter is therefore generated by the aforementioned delight and tension. Delight from the vicarious perspective, tension from the visceral perspective. He has framed a 'legitimate' target (the stragglers), and he is freeing himself from the social constraints that restricts the expression of disdain for the mob that insists that only comedians on the telly are worth going to see.

There is also another aspect available for humour: Lee, by implication, is knowingly playing the sneering snob who would prefer a smaller audience rather than having to perform to middle ground audiences. In this respect he plays with some cultural knowledge in that we all know that television exposure would bring bigger numbers and sustain a career better than being an unknown. And therefore

it seems somewhat ludicrous for a comedian to complain about getting extra numbers at his shows.

1. Now, if you've seen me before, and I hope you have –
2. I don't like new people coming... [SL]
3. My shows tend to be a relationship between the title and the content
4. That's the bare minimum of what you should offer... [ML] I think.
5. Not so much this year though, it's not really come together very well this show.
6. It was supposed to be about idealised notions of society and how we behave as collective groups...
7. but I've been a bit busy with one thing or another... it's not really eh... worked. [LL]
8. But what I will do is about five minutes from the end - it's about ten o'clock -
9. I will repeat the phrase "Carpet Remnant World" [ML]
10. over some music...[ML]
11. and that will give the illusion of structure. [SL]

Line 1 as a set-up works by having two possible interpretations on the phrase 'and I hope you have, as in a) It good people are coming back to see me again; it suggests that they must have enjoyed themselves, or, b) I hope you've seen me before because I don't like new people coming to my shows. The second line reveals at least two absurdities: a) He is being dismissive towards returning fans—he is only happy that they are not new visitors, and b) the suggestion that a comedian would not like new people coming to see him implies he would prefer that from his very first gig no new people would come to see him, therefore he would prefer dwindling audience numbers.

On lines 3 and 4 Lee provides opinion and access that deconstructs the process of stand-up comedy. He is speaking in front of house the type of things that are usually considered appropriate conversation for backstage. So much of show, theatre, and spectacle is about creating an illusion, concealing the illusion-makers craft, but he seems to blithely ignore these conventions and openly discusses the

kind of considerations that go into developing a stand-up show. And he speaks about it in terms of the bare minimum of what you should offer, as if his show is some kind of product or a chore-like contract that needs to be adhered to. His CSP gives the impression of an act who really could not be bothered with the artifice of disguising his show's structure. Rather he speaks about his work as if a chore with obligations, as in 'that's the bare minimum of what you should offer...'

Lines 5, 6, and 7, delivered nonchalantly, is the type of thing no performer ever seems to say: 'It was supposed to be... But I've been a bit busy with one thing or another.' We are generally expected in performance to put our best foot forward, and if we haven't been in a position to do so it is generally frowned upon if we don't make it seem like we have made an effort. The humour is a deconstruction of the conventions of stand-up. Comedians put on a front. At the same time they attempt the type of intimacy and natural free-flow of interpersonal conversation, while in reality the show is structured, the jokes prepared, and the presentation/performance of the natural is a conceit. In Lee's case, the reveal of the construct is, on the face of it, a reveal, but in reality, another construct.

Lines 6, 7, and 8 can also be viewed on the following level: Lee effectively self-deprecates the type of pretentiousness some audiences attribute to Lee as a comedian. Saying his comedy show was, '...supposed to be about idealised notions of society and how we behave as collective groups...' is, in and of itself, a gag. It plays on the idea of a stand-up comedy show being "about" something other than jokes/routines. But his being a 'bit busy with one thing or another' juxtaposes a grandiose plan with a pathetic excuse for not following through. Line 7 works as script opposition (SO) to line 6. Line 8 to 11 elaborate the SO and deconstruction.

Lee is not so much deprecating himself as deprecating the perception he believes certain critics and members of the public have of him. In the book of *Milder Comedian*, he writes:

... since my return in 2004 I had enjoyed a convenient outsider/failure status: the acclaimed live show I contributed to *Jerry Springer: the Opera*, had ended in financial ruin and a right wing Christian witch hunt, and my proposed TV series had been abandoned thanks to the fluctuating whims of the BBC. But such status-lowering failures allowed me to snipe at people from without the citadel of success, like a comedian should. Now, however, I was back on television. To the casual observer I was suddenly a powerful figure of sorts, to all intents and purposes a denizen of the sequinned world as many of the glitzy celebrities I sneer at for money. My wife had alerted me to the danger of this, and the hundreds of viewers who posted online that they thought that, the TV me was smug confirmed that, to quote the long-lost nineties stand-up Jason Freeman, context is not a myth. Could I engineer a deliberate lowering of status in a new live show that would enable me to persevere with the social and celebrity satire elements of what I did, without looking like a conceited arrogant bully?⁴²

Note the phrases ‘outsider/failure status’, ‘status-lowering’, ‘engineer a deliberate lowering of status’, all point to the kind of processing of perceptions and reflection attributable to the formation of CSP. Lee is engineering based on what he feels best works for his purposes.

AWARENESS AND ORIENTATION

It is difficult to say precisely to what extent or how comedians mentalise/weigh up their social milieu, and to what extent their perceptions of audience reactions, and their intentions impact the work. But that comedians mentalise their process, hypothesise how audiences are likely to respond, and how they are going over, cannot be doubted. The application of George Kelly’s “Naïve Scientist” analogy is therefore apt. Evidence of these reflections and hypotheses can be noted in how comedians consider their place in society and how sectors of society view them and their work. During our discussion Lee spoke of a sense of shock when he realised he was in danger of becoming a type of insider/commodity for a particular branch of arts festivals. He described the situation as follows:

⁴² Lee, *Stewart Lee! : The 'If You Prefer a Milder Comedian, Please Ask for One' Ep*, 3-4.

... I accidentally saw a bit of an e-mail with one of these festivals that these little towns have to try and make themselves look important. And I realised [...] they wanted me rather than someone better, and better known, because they thought: I brought a certain cachet, a particular audience to this place. And I thought, "oh God, time to change this then." Because you don't want to be a commodity that brings a kind of cultural cachet to these things; I thought it's getting stilted.⁴³

This suggests the type of awareness that informs how comedians present and locate themselves and their CSPs. A counterfactual question could be posed: had Lee never seen such an email, would he eventually have formed the view that he was becoming a commodity? Would he inevitably have perceived that his CSP was 'getting stilted' and this posed a threat to an overall objective to maintain his critical stance? To what extent we know these situations, or how we decide, is not always so clear. Such views of a situation could be challenged as post-hoc rationalisations. Could it be that becoming a commodity or an act that 'brought a certain cachet', runs counter to the comedian's inclination to maintain a critical distance? What can be said definitively, however, is that comedians reflect on matters of public and audience perception. From the discussion of the folk accounts of stand-up comedy discussed in Chapter 3, a sufficient number of stand-up comedians, how-to writers, and coaches reflect a great deal on issues related to authenticity and CSP.

I put the point to Lee that Bill Hicks did a routine that attacked the marketing and commodification of stand-up comedy. Hicks rails against marketing people who endlessly attempt to commoditise everything, even comedians who "authentically" attempt to berate the marketing people. My particular interest in this line of discussion is the concept of "authenticity" referred to in Chapter 3. Lee's response is interesting and raises germane points:

⁴³ See: appendix.

I think that is such a great piece and it's relevant to so many things not just comedy. I used to think that the persona of me was authentic. And between 2004 and 2008, it was. And one of the things the persona of me was - I was low status, and I was pissed off. I was able to do a lot of things from that angle because—at the risk of sounding self-aggrandising—there was a disparity between the critical acclaim that I had had and my actual day to day life and income. I had an Olivier award, and I didn't really have anywhere to live, and there was this kind of assumption after *Jerry Springer the Opera* that I was a millionaire, whereas in fact, I was in debt [...] there were all sorts of funny things like that going on. And all sorts of people going: he's this, he's that, but I wouldn't get booked on anything for mainstream telly or mainstream gigs. Then, the weird thing I noticed a few years after that is the character kind of stopped making sense in a way, because I was doing well enough for it not to be true. A particularly disconnected thing was the first series of *Comedy Vehicle* on BBC Two. The head of comedy insisted that I get a smart suit, and I didn't want to, and the way I looked at it, it was completely wrong, because you're on television and in a £500 suit, who is supposed to be, why are you annoyed about these things? What right have you got to complain about anything, you're one of life's winners. [...] And then luckily, what happened there was doubt about re-commissioning the second series. There were various other problems that helped to chip away at it. In the second series they let me do myself a bit more. And also, I was able to do stuff about the reports that Russell Howard was earning four million a year. In that period the top end of comedy went so massive that I was still able to go: look at them earning four million pounds a year.

The first point is how a comedian's CSP can be overtaken or run contrary to their offstage life. As Lee puts it, 'I use to think the persona of me was authentic. And between 2004 and 2008, it was.' As described in the previous chapter, comedians can paradoxically strengthen their position in front of an audience via self-deprecatory and low-status CSP. This seems to be part of the negative-valence of stand-up comedy's narrative/rhetorical structures.

The second point, as outlined previously, is how a comedian can be aware of how he is potentially perceived. For Lee it seemed, 'the character stopped making sense,' as he became more associated with the trappings of career success. The head of comedy at the BBC suggesting that he perform in a suit and Lee's response all point to CSP as a response to set of perceived rules about what the audience thinks, perceives, believes, and extends to what an audience is likely to think if the comedian changes elements of appearance and presentation. Here is Theory of Mind (ToM) as described in cognitive accounts of human interaction. In terms of stand-up comedy it demonstrates the hypothetical understanding of audience that informs a myriad of choices that inform CSP.

The paradox of comedic power—whereby comedians play up low-status—highlights the gap between the onstage/offstage. Be it comedians with high financial status off-stage playing the everyman on stage, or being in a relatively functioning relationship off-stage while talking up crisis onstage, or being hardworking and focussed off-stage while and playing up the hedonic on stage, comedians intuit their most effective comedic line of approach. Lee, realising he is a critically-acclaimed five-star act, compensates in his writing and performing CSP by playing up the problematic. He says:

What I've started doing now is, this series has problems with, because I can't find the weak spot that demonises the character and I've had to sort of fabricate this slightly worse domestic life than I've got – much worse. I've had to massively exaggerate the problems I feel I have with children to kind of undercut myself a bit.⁴⁴

As with Jack Dee, Louis CK, and a host of wealthy and accomplished performers, the dominant CSP choice is to demonise or find the weak spot. In the case of comedians like Ricky Gervais, Jimmy Carr, or Frankie Boyle, the high-status approach can also be made to work by presenting it as a form of weak spot.

I raised the issue of Billy Connolly as an example of a multi-millionaire, with high social status who still manages to hold onto his 'man from the shipyards of Glasgow' persona. Lee makes some interesting points about how Connolly manages to create the illusion by taking on the role of a self that is reporting back from the front lines of his privileged experiences. This reporting version of self on stage manage to create the sense of "I'm just like you". Lee describes it as follows:

⁴⁴ See: appendix

When I saw him twenty years ago, that's the only time I've seen him live, and he did a very clever negotiation with the fact that he's wealthy and successful. He sort of, reported back to us, on our behalf, as if he were a kind of spy, or a mole, of what it was like to be at a Royal Garden Party at Balmoral. I think he had gone to something like that and he was sort of telling you what it was like. Then about a similar time I saw Frank Skinner who by that point in the mid 90s was very successful and he wasn't like the working-class, Birmingham alcoholic that he'd been. But he sort of reported back to us in the persona of Frank Skinner-normal-bloke, what it was like to be at a film premier. And so they both (Connolly and Skinner) in their own way managed to negotiate that compromise by sort of saying: (voicing the performance bits) 'And then this happened... and then I met the Queen... and then I went in the toilet cubicle at the film premiere'. And so they managed to hold on to it. But twenty years later I imagine that umbilical cord is getting rather stretched. It's difficult...

I mean with me I...I still. Take Daniel Kitson, for example, is massive. No one has heard of him apart from comedy fans. He's headlining a benefit for me on Wednesday in London at the Hackney Empire, and it sold out in about three hours. Daniel Kitson has no overheads, no management; he does exactly what he wants. I think he bought a house in Crystal Palace like ten years ago – he must be alright (financially). But luckily he's got a stutter and a funny face so he's always going to be allowed to be the low status character. There's a weird difference, and it isn't Frankie Boyle's fault but partly why what he says lands so badly sometimes is because he's in an expensive suit in a 5000-seater room saying those things while Sadowitz is saying them to a half-full theatre with a bleeding scab on his face looking like someone who lives in a ditch. And he is that person as well, he's not pretending (laugh)

The sense of a spy, mole, ordinary bloke suggests notions of a successful double-agent operating between two separate realms: a world of real people and authentic social relations with its particular set of rules, and the scripted/performance world of stand-up comedy that runs according to rules of ridicule, self-deprecation, targets, hypothetical constructs of audience attitudes, cultural knowledge, beliefs, perspectival shifts, and negative valence. Here again we see the paradox of engaging audiences, affiliation, while simultaneously maintaining a distance. The type of ambivalence Helen Freshwater describes as 'a complex mix of hope, frustration, and disgust'⁴⁵ (see Chapter 1 section: The Centrality of Audience and Ambivalence). This suggests a paradoxical relationship between comedian and audience. When performative engagement works, both achieve a happy state: however, comedians are keenly aware that when that connection goes awry, the comedian is alone and outnumbered in front of a room of dissatisfied strangers.

⁴⁵ Freshwater, *Theatre & Audience*, 2.

And perhaps it is this asymmetrical relationship in terms of consequences that creates the primary need for a CSP that optimises the chances of commanding such performance situations.

CSP AND AUDIENCE-INTERACTION-INTELLIGENCE

Confronted with a situation like this, the boldest course of action is to make things worse. – Stewart Lee⁴⁶

In the footnotes of the book version of his 2010 show, *If You Prefer a Milder Comedian, Please Ask for One*, Stewart Lee provides a valuable insight into the elements of community-based learning and interactive craft in stand-up comedy—whereby comedians build audience-interaction-intelligence (AII) by watching other comedians interacting with audiences. One of the routines in the show centres around Lee being refused a free coffee at a Caffè Nero in Oxford Street, London, because the *barista* refused to accept the legitimacy of the stamp on Lee's loyalty card (six were blue, three were red). In retelling this story of frustration and annoyance to his audience, Lee produces the said loyalty card for a member of the audience to examine. Lee effectively turns the simple act of verification into a section of one-on-one interaction with a member of the audience. Lee structures the interaction so that his CSP moves from a one-to-many to a one-to-one in front of the many. What should take just a few seconds extends into a semi-improvised piece with Lee and the audience member.⁴⁷

In his footnotes he describes the background to the routine via several examples of audience interactions involving himself as performer, and others examples where he witnessed other comedians handling audience interactions (including heckling and unwelcome interruptions). All of the examples are in the context of describing his approach to the interactive part of the Caffè Nero routine. One particular example involves the British comedian Ian Cognito mentioned in Chapter 3 (see section: Material/Persona Spectrum). At a 1992 gig in Chiswick, London, Cognito was being persistently interrupted by a member of the audience. Cognito, who Lee describes as a 'fiery circuit legend'⁴⁸ came down hard on his

⁴⁶ Lee, *Stewart Lee! : The 'If You Prefer a Milder Comedian, Please Ask for One' Ep*, 32.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 31-37.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

supposed heckler. Unbeknownst to Cognito his “heckler” was in fact a wheelchair-bound man with Tourette’s Syndrome. As Lee describes it, Cognito—blinded by the stage lights—was not to know why the audience had become uncomfortable with his put-downs of his heckler. However, on realising what was happening in the situation, Cognito had to choose a response. According to Lee, Cognito’s CSP is that of a ‘disaffected and jaded psychopath,’ and therefore:

...it wouldn’t make dramatic sense for Ian Cognito to back down. Thinking on his feet, Cognito made the shouting, shaking man the focus of his act for the rest of the set, blaming him for interrupting, defusing the situation, creating a bizarrely heart-warming vibe and quite honestly making the man’s day.⁴⁹

What is particularly useful for this thesis is that this account confirms the claims regarding how craft and CSP are influenced by watching others in what is essentially a monkey-see-monkey-do modelling of exemplars. Observing performer/audience interactions from such a third-person standpoint is a valuable source of AII and insight for the comedian. The observing comedian can therefore be analogously described in the naïve scientist and hunter framework described in Chapter 3. The above example from Stewart Lee demonstrates the community learning process whereby comedian watch others and emulate their effective techniques.

A second point is how a comedian may take the unexpected occurrences and improvised responses created in the live event and structures his scripts so that these moments can be recreated. Much of Lee’s material astutely pre-empts the vicissitudes of live audience responses. Such pre-emption requires an accumulation of interaction and audience nous. Over time, scripted material is more informed by these experiences and therefore more advanced and conformed to the reality of live comedy.

CONCLUSION

Through the discussion of spectatorship, performance, and interviews with stand-up comedians, this chapter shows that the aspects of CSP and its processes are abundantly evident in interviews and biographical accounts of the craft. The first

⁴⁹ Ibid.

half of the chapter highlighted the centrality of self-deprecation, negative valence, engagement, and the negotiated nature of live stand-up comedy as described by several key theorists. The concept of “mental intimacy” was employed to describe the bonding effect generated when a performer astutely reads/pre-emptively an audience thought process. In this sense the element of tricking, wrong-footing, and conjuring was shown as a key part of stand-up comedy. From the perspective of spectatorship such pre-emptive skill and mental intimacy was linked to concepts of performer charisma and leadership. By viewing stand-up via spectatorship, it is possible to see the role spectating plays in his/her development. Through accounts of spectatorship (Oliver Double, Bruce McConachie, Hurley et al., and the Boorstinian model), salient aspects of performer/audience connection were identified via the cognitive approach.

The examination of a routine by Sarah Silverman showed how the concept of conceptual blending confirms how it is possible for audience members to have a blend of appreciation for a writer/director/actor/comedian/thinker when watching a comedian. This shows the intriguing idea of how self-deprecation can simultaneously show the comedian to be at once foolish, honest, open, and clever. Perhaps, more than any other element, it is the capacity to articulate one's humanity effectively via the structures of humour that is central to stand-up comedy. The audience can therefore enjoy the company of a performative creative, articulate, inventive, and open individual with the power of a compelling worldview.

The second half of the chapter focussed on practitioner insights as related to the key concepts of this thesis. Present in all the interviews is the kind of reflexivity that informs CSP; and shows that CSP can be considered as an emergent, conceptual tool for managing a comedian's perceptions and mindreading predictions (the hypotheses of the naïve scientist) of actual and potential audiences. The model of stand-up comedy as a set of challenges and how comedians tackle those challenges perceived, support CSP as an emergent phenomenon, a mask created by mentalizing audiences, the accumulation of AII⁵⁰,

⁵⁰ Audience-Interaction-Intelligence

and the conscious and unconscious adaptation to the structures of stand-up comedy as an interactive and performative form.

The examination of Stewart Lee's body of work, in particular his candid and informed insights on the craft, strongly supports the main concepts set out in the thesis. Stand-up comedy is not simply jokes and routines performed to a passive spectatorship. It is primarily a dynamic and interactive performance genre. Mastering such a genre requires a psychosocial cultural intelligence. The accumulation of such intelligence informs the formation of CSP as an adaptive humour performance phenomenon.

THESIS CONCLUSION

The opening line in Chapter 1 sums up the central claim of this thesis: comedians learn how and who to be onstage. Bound up in this claim is the principle that stand-up comedy is a learnable performative craft that requires the practitioner to engage with, and adapt to, a world of audiences and humour structures. The element of becoming a 'who' and 'being onstage', denotes the sense of a somewhat fluid identity amenable to change. The claim was problematized firstly via a discussion of Oliver Double's paper, *Characterization in Stand-up Comedy: from Ted Ray to Billy Connolly, via Bertolt Brecht*. This showed that CSP is a disputed concept. Neither theorists or practitioners seemed to agree on even general principles or the existence/non-existence of CSP.

This opened the way for setting out an interdisciplinary exploration of solutions to the perceived problem of distinguishing the self and the CSP. Initially via a discussion of Timothy Wilson's, *'Strangers to Ourselves'* and Erving Goffman's *'The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life'*, it was shown that first-person accounts are problematic, and that social life requires a level of adaptation that for various reason the individual may not be fully aware of. This in turn introduced the need to consider CSP in both conscious and unconscious terms.

Considering the pervasiveness of NVC (non-verbal communication) in stand-up performance, attention also focussed on the limitations of text-based analysis of stand-up humour. This opened the way to discussion of CSP in the context of a cognitive approach to humour studies and performance as set out in the respective work of Bruce McConachie, and Hurley et al. The theoretical framework that emerged therefore mapped the psychosocial and sociocultural domains related to stand-up comedy and CSP.

The framework was then discussed in terms of the dominant theory in humour studies (GTVH), where it illuminated the problems of a purely text based approach to what is an intersubjective and dynamically interactive process. NIGHTS (a Notional Integrated General Humour Theory of Stand-up) was set out as a way to combine text-analysis within a heterophenomenological approach as proposed by philosopher and cognitive scientist Daniel Dennett. This yielded a

novel and more effective solution to the understanding of comic timing. Designating *Kairos* as opposed to *Chronos* as the way to consider the practitioner's report of comic timing and, even more importantly, links comic timing to the empathic process of Empathy as described by Bruce McConachie's cognitive account of performance. Comic timing therefore is framed as the cognitive ability of the performer to read the performance situation and thereby apprehend the opportune moments for action. The proposal then is that the same cognitive ability also informs the formation of CSP as a way to optimise the presentation of a comically-*biographied*-self. The interdisciplinary approach of the thesis makes such linkage possible.

The next phase focussed on CSP as an environmentally-adaptive phenomenon. Starting with a pre-science approach the chapter examined the folk account/folk theory of stand-up comedy as set out in the 'how-to' literature and the insights from comedians. This identified the influence of exemplars, rhetorical structures, and the primacy of engaging audiences with 'authentic' material.

One of the recurring issues with CSP in the folk account is that some stand-up comedians may be unaware of their CSP or are unwilling to acknowledge that they are performing an act. So, while a comedian such as Stewart Lee might quite openly consider and discuss his onstage persona as a third-person construct, others may insist on the idea that they are themselves on stage. One possible explanation may be that there are good reasons for comedians to consciously and/or unconsciously play down the sense of dread they may experience in preparing for and executing a stand-up performance. After all, a fundamental part of stand-up is to create the illusion of having fun; a stand-up show should ideally look effortless. While below the surface the comedy swan may be paddling fretfully through the murky deep, on the surface the norm is composure, humour, and ease.

Another explanation could be that being natural, authentic, truthful, and honest, are often signalled as desirable qualities within the folk literature. As has been shown, the notion of authenticity as a noble aspiration is prevalent in the folk literature, particularly in the American accounts. The issue of authenticity in stand-up comedy is perhaps worthy of its own thesis. Like CSP, it too bears all the hallmarks of a disputed concept—often used, ill-defined, and rarely denoting the exact same concept. For some, authenticity may be a sense of taking the enormous

risk of talking about one's inner experience of life and basing one's comic material on that. For others the focus seems to be originality, or standing apart from the herd.

The question might be asked: does the awareness or ignorance of CSP matter to the performer or the audience? A superficial response to this question is: most probably not, for the most part awareness of CSP does not matter. However, awareness should certainly matter to humour researchers and performance studies. While it is easy to take for granted the tacitly understood suspension that is part of all performance, it is essential to consider how humour and performances work. Performances are playful. Play involves agreement.

In *Engaging Audiences*, Bruce McConachie describes a tacit understanding between spectator and performer. He writes, '[T]heatrical engagement always works in two directions. That is, theatre audiences must engage with actors (and indirectly with others behind the scenes), and the artists of the theatre must engage with spectators before performative communication can occur with effectiveness.'⁵¹ The same principle applies even more so to stand-up comedy where the role of audience assent is crucial to the smooth running of the performance. Stand-up comedy performance can, and do, fail. As anyone with even the most basic understanding of stand-up comedy knows, comedians can die on stage performing the same set list of material that has entertained on dozens of previous shows.

While it might not be possible to say with certainty that audiences and comedians are aware of the mask effect of CSP, it is possible to say that some are aware that they are witnessing an act. It may be the subtle sense that the comedian is saying things that they are unlikely to say in an offstage setting. The comedian is embellishing and exaggerating views, personal opinions, and details of personal anecdotes for entertainment purposes. Spectators might consider the raw content of a routine and notice how effectively the comedian has fashioned it into humorous material. The more experienced comedy spectator might compare the quality of the scripting and performance to that of other comedians. In this way it is possible to speak of comedy connoisseurship, following similar principles of any other informed sense of taste. The more one experiences, the more one can

⁵¹ McConachie, *Engaging Audiences : A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre*, 1.

compare, contrast, and appreciate and discern. In this way a comedy spectator might apprehend CSP as a part of a well-crafted act.

A key point that supports the viability of CSP as a tacitly understood concept is: audience don't generally take what comedians say and do on stage at face value. If Sara Silverman's audience sincerely believed that Silverman sincerely believed that her grandmother was raped and murdered they would not laugh, rather, they would be concerned that Silverman was suffering from some form of delusional psychosis and in need of clinical treatment. Audience are part of the act of suspending serious mode and entering into the mode of play. An extreme and macabre example is the death of the British comedian Tommy Cooper who suffered a heart attack and died while performing on stage at Her Majesty's Theatre, Westminster, London. Believing his collapse was all part of the act the audience continued to laugh as Cooper was going through his death throws.

For routines to work the audience have to be in the mode of spectating that accepts the comedian is playing up a slightly deranged and comical version of self. Of particular note here is the style of meta-comedy performed by Stewart Lee.⁵² It is essential to note here that some members of an audience may not get CSP. In the same way it can be said some jokes go over the heads of some audience members. It follows that getting the humour of a comedian entails a basic understanding of playing up and CSP. In the same vein, comedians may not be completely aware of how, or even that, they have developed a CSP. Just like accents, speech patterns, phrasing, body language, and all manner of expressions, unless we happen to consciously study such personal attributes we generally are not aware that we use them or how exactly we acquire them. In a way this links to the themes in Wilson's *Strangers to Ourselves* discussed above (see: p.24-5).

It is sensible to say therefore that what is said and done by comedians on stage is a joke, an act, and for laughs. Knowing that an acerbic comedian such as Joan Rivers, Jackie Mason, Sara Silverman or Louis CK are playing up a curmudgeonly obnoxious CSP requires suspension of serious mode. Prior to November 2017, for example, Louis CK's material on masturbation was a constant source of laughter. It is reasonable to contend that audiences perceived this material in a benign

⁵² See: chp.3, sect. "You as good as murdered Robin Williams!"

frame, and that what CK presented on stage was a self-deprecatory but harmless everyman. However, accusations made in the New York Times⁵³, and subsequently admitted to by Louis CK, effectively shattered the essential element of non-threat in CK's CSP. All of the above examples point to an unspoken set of agreements between comedian and spectator.

For whatever reason(s), some comedians will say what they do on-stage is an act, while others will insist that there is no real difference between who they are on stage and off-stage. Regardless of the reasons, however, for the researcher the case seems clear, the performance of stand-up comedy is an act; the simple fact remains: the mask is not just for the professional setting, it often remains in place when speaking of the professional setting. For stand-up comedians in the interview setting the issue of authenticity could be seen as part of a front. Hence the need for Dennett's heterophenomenological approach that takes as seriously as possible what the research subject has to say without privileging the subjects explanation of the account.

Attention then turned to the humour theorists who have theorized and researched stand-up comedy via the methods of sociology, psychology, folklore, and ethnography. What was common to the approaches was that these theorists closely attended to observing live stand-up performances *in situ*, and interviewed comedians about their process. The value of this *in situ* approach cannot be overstated. This yielded crucial corroborating support for the elements of CSP as a response to audience interactions.

The micro-steps of keeping a stand-up comedy audience engaged and onside were connected to the macro-steps of forming CSP. Chapter 4 described CSP via psychological and cognitive models. George Kelly's personality construct theory with its naïve scientist analogy offered a way to describe the WPR process (write-perform-reflect) of the comedian as he/she develops a model of how to interact with the world of stand-up comedy. The development of AII⁵⁴ fits with the idea of a scientist testing and modifying based upon ongoing feedback.

⁵³ Melena Ryzik, Cara Buckley, and Jodi Kantor, "Louis C.K. Is Accused by 5 Women of Sexual Misconduct," *New York Times*, November 10th 2017.

⁵⁴ Audience-interaction-intelligence

The concept of Tacit Knowledge offers a way to think about craft learning that has its origins in Greek philosophy and finds a modern expression in the work of the polymath Michael Polanyi. The inclusion of the concept recognised the embodied nature of unconscious learning involved in performance craft. This makes it possible to understand the osmotic nature of learning performance techniques, the rules of comic storytelling, joke structure, self-deprecation, and audience management. The ability to write and tell jokes is not the same as being able to explain joke structure and how humour works in the brain. What the comedian must possess, intuitively/tacitly or otherwise, is a CSP with the capacity to engage and wrong-foot an audience. Hence CSP was shown to be compatible with cognitive accounts of humour as set out by Hurley et al. This achieved an integral anchoring of NIGHTS and CSP as interdisciplinary, coherent with folk accounts and, compatible with psychosocial and cognitive accounts of humour interaction.

The final chapter brought together Hurley et al. and Bruce McConachie's respective cognitive accounts of humour and spectatorship to show how CSP is both compatible with cognitive accounts and with how professional comedians describe CSP. The thesis therefore provides a good model for an interdisciplinary approach to performance studies in how it theorizes via compatible lenses.

LOCATION OF THESIS AND POTENTIAL APPLICATION

The idea for this thesis began in my third year of undergraduate studies in Mental and Moral Science (philosophy). I was invited by the chair of Trinity's Metaphysics Society to present a paper on the Philosophy of Humour. At that point in time I had performed over one thousand comedy gigs and observed perhaps three to four times as many performances by fellow stand-up comedians; not to mention the years of watching and listening to stand-up comedy greats. After weeks of reviewing books and articles at the college library it became clear to me that much of the literature did not scan well with my practitioner's experience. There are various reasons for this.

Stand-up comedy is not one-on-one, it is a one-to-many experience that involves a rather unique set of expectations within a substantial lob-sided relationship. Few researchers acknowledge let alone examine the consequence that

flow from this starting point. The high-wire quality of the situation is generally masked—be that in relaxed bonhomie or brash confident swagger. Perhaps it is this masking of the terror of stand-up that has meant many researchers tend not to fully appreciate the full extent of a stand-up performance and the process of affecting/recreating good humoured rapport.

This thesis is in part an attempt to draw together the strands of academic research that most effectively fit with my experience of writing and performing stand-up comedy, and witnessing hundreds of other comedians as they progressed over time from novice nervous wrecks to accomplished, crowd-pleasing nervous wrecks. I believe that the academic study of stand-up comedy offers some unique insights into psychosocial processes that have wider implications for performance studies, humor studies, psychology and personality studies, cognitive science, and cognate fields.

What I hope comes through clearly in this thesis is the value of taking an interdisciplinary, intersubjective, and heterophenomenological approach to an intriguing and complex phenomenon. The particular appeal of such an approach, especially for performance studies, is that it provides a model that can integrate the performer/practitioners account in a truly interdisciplinary way. Dennett's heterophenomenological approach offers a viable way to explore the links between objective and subjective accounts of phenomena such as performer-audience interactions, negotiating live audience feedback, comic timing, and CSP formation.

Though critical of text-based approaches in humour studies—namely linguistic approaches that fail to capture the performative elements of humour—the thesis can, and should, locate and engage with humour studies. Indeed, there is a recognition within humour studies that much of humour is not in the form of the canned jokes that are the primary object of linguistic theories of humour such as GTVH. As Martin suggests:

Further research on cognitive aspects of humor may not only provide a better understanding of the ubiquitous phenomena of humor, but may also shed light on other more basic questions of interest to psychologists, such as the interface between cognition and emotion, comprehension of ambiguous meaning, and cognitive aspects of nonverbal as well as verbal interpersonal communication.⁵⁵

There are a couple of points of particular relevance to the thesis: the interface between emotion and cognition, and the cognitive aspects of nonverbal and verbal interpersonal communications. One of the practical functions of CSP is that it provides vital context for jokes. Knowing a comedian's CSP—in a similar way to how we know those in our life that make us laugh—makes it possible for the engaged spectator to detect irony, sarcasm, pathos, and what is being inferred by particular NVCs, for example. Knowing a person entails a world of knowledge that makes it possible to imagine how they may think, feel, and respond in particular situations. As has been shown in the analysis of stand-up script examples discussed, the laughter at the end of many lines is not detectable by text analysis alone. My suggestion is that the apprehension of CSP provides valuable context for texts and NVCs that may not otherwise scan as humorous.

The thesis can profitably engage with existing research in humour studies relating to the social and interpersonal context of humour, person perception and impression formation, pragmatics, and even AI. Apart from AI, all of these areas of research within humour studies examine metatextual elements of humour and are therefore relevant to the performance of humour. While AI primarily focusses on the linguistic elements of humour there may eventually need to be a more concerted attempt to develop more human-like, truly intelligent systems that can process both verbal and non-verbal forms of humour. While for now, such an approach is premature, the discussion of such an approach as a thought experiment offers a potential research tool for conducting interviews with comedian regarding their process of writing and CSP. One research question that could be put to comedians is: If you have to train a robot to perform your material to an audience, what would the designers of the robot have to do? This kind of research approach has the potential to overcome two obstacles in research:

⁵⁵ Rod A. Martin, *The Psychology of Humor : An Integrative Approach* (Amsterdam ; Boston: Elsevier Academic Press, 2007), p.111.

1) By getting comedians to focus away from themselves and onto the AI/Robot comedians may reveal more about their method than if the focus is put on talking about themselves.

2) It will help us to understand more about metatextual humour-making as practiced by comedy performers.

In this way, the thesis of CSP can be developed along scientific lines by linking with existing empirical research studies, and generating research questions and hypotheses that can be falsified. The position put is: CSP is a behavioural mode, a front, a way of being on stage, that is informed and learned through repeated exposure to live performances. Research that could prove the claim false would have to show that this account is untenable.

Ultimately, a collaboration between comedians, researchers, and AI developers could make it possible for an AI to learn the principles of comic timing. The Turing Test for comedy would include the impression that the AI knew when to leave a bit, when to deliver a topper line to a joke, and the capacity to just the level of audience laughter peaking and ebbing. At the very least, discussion of such a project may help comedians to drop their mask and yield up insights into the mysteries of performing stand-up comedy.

APPENDIX

INTERVIEW: STEWART LEE

21st of October 2013, Trinity College Dublin

Lee:

I got really serious about doing stand-up again in... about four years on (2004). And I sort of thought, 'you know what... who's going to like me? Why isn't it sometimes working in the clubs on a Friday night? On a Friday night it's because politically ambivalent lads have gone out. I thought if I can, sort of... I'll do what they criticize me for – which is: I'll just try and find all the Guardian readers in every British provincial city and make sure I can get through to them.

And then, I think that started to work, sort of, you know, those kind of people would come and see me, and normally get it. There'd always be fun when there were people that didn't agree with you in the room but there normally enough that did to make it an interesting conflict. And then, that got to the point where a few years ago when I was sort of able to attack my own audience for being those people.

Tony Law said a nice thing when he was opening for me once. He did a joke that he let me have: well, it is not a joke, it's a thing, he'd say: "All the Guardian readers in this town are in this room tonight; so, if there's an incident outside, there'll be nobody to mediate."

In the last few years the audience is more diffuse. There are a lot of lads coming up afterwards for photos, and I'm really glad about that and I hope, I think the comedy has got to the point where it is funny enough that even if you don't agree with it.

And I had a bit of a shock a couple of weeks ago, where I accidentally saw a bit of an e-mail with one of these festivals that these little towns have to try and make themselves look important. And I realised that I was being ... they wanted me rather than someone better, and better known, because they thought; I brought a certain cachet, a particular audience to this place. And I thought, "oh God, time to change this then." Because you don't want to be a commodity that brings a kind of cultural cachet to these things; I thought it's getting stilted.

The audiences are getting more interesting, here last night there were lots of big fat guys who I didn't think would be my crowd, but seem to... even if they didn't agree with the politics of it, they responded to the anger of it, or the annoyance or the constructs of it. So I sort of realised I didn't use to think I'd feel like that. And I had arguments with people about that. Saying: How do you feel about playing to an audience that don't agree with you, while actually getting the jokes? Well, actually there's something about it I quite like. There's more at stake in the room as well.

Naessens:

There's the piece by Hicks, you'd be familiar with as regards: marketing people, go kill yourself. And it's this idea of authenticity of a performer, and when he's railing against the marketing people he's playing out the role of the marketing person saying. "Oh look, Bill is appealing to that anti-marketing dollar."

Lee:

I think that is such a great piece and it's relevant to so many things not just comedy. I used to think that the persona of me was authentic. And between 2004 and 2008, it was. And one of the things the persona of me was - I was low status, and I was pissed off. I was able to do a lot of things from that angle because, at the risk of sounding self-aggrandising, there was a disparity between the critical acclaim that I had had and my actual day to day life and income. I had an Olivier award, and I didn't really have anywhere to live, and there was this kind of assumption after Jerry Springer the Opera that I was a millionaire, whereas in fact, I was in debt...there were all sorts of funny things like that going on. And all sorts of people going: he's this, he's that, but I wouldn't get booked on anything for mainstream telly or mainstream gigs. Then, the weird thing I noticed a few years after that is the character kind of stopped making sense in a way, because I was doing well enough for it not to be true. A particularly disconnected thing was the first series of ***Comedy Vehicle*** on BBC Two. The head of comedy insisted that I get a smart suit, and I didn't want to, and the way I looked at it, it was completely wrong, because you're on television and in a £500 suit, who is supposed to be, why are you

annoyed about these things? What right have you got to complain about anything, you're one of life's winners.

And then luckily, what happened there was doubt about re-commissioning the second series. There were various other problems that helped to chip away at it. In the second series they let me do myself a bit more. And also, I was able to do stuff about the reports that Russell Howard was earning four million a year. In that period the top end of comedy went so massive that I was still able to go: look at them earning four million pounds a year.

Naessens:

So again, you had the target?

Lee:

Well, not so much a target, as I had a place in the pecking order that meant I was allowed relatively to be a low status figure or that my resentments would be perceived as genuine, because it was understandable that the bloke getting five stars in the Guardian would be annoyed that someone was earning £4 million a year.

What I've started doing now is, this series has problems with, because I can't find the weak spot that demonises the character and I've had to sort of fabricate this slightly worse domestic life than I've got – much worse. I've had to massively exaggerate the problems I feel I have with children to kind of undercut myself a bit. I've also got two good half hours, one on the Tories and one on UKIP but they're not attached to anything; I haven't got a personal stake in it, you know what I mean, because I'm not in the world in the way as... when I was doing stuff on religious censorship, it was actually affecting my day-to-day life and my livelihood. And so, it wasn't just an abstract satire like a funny, newspaper article, it was connected to the character. The character was allowed to say those things, but now, I don't know what I'm allowed to say, because I don't know what the perception of me is

In fact, last week, in September, we were outside our house that we live in, in Hackney, which wasn't a wealthy place when we moved there, and I was sluicing

dog excrement off the front of the step with a bucket of bleach, and the parent association bloke from the school came by and said, “Oh, your Bridget [Stewart Lee’s wife] won the Perrier award in Edinburgh [2013]... you must be millionaires now!’ I thought, you get like ten grand, most of which goes on your debts from Edinburgh, not to be sniffed at but, even when people know you, they can see you hosing dog shit off the front of your normal house in a rather run down area, the projection on to you is that you’re a huge success and therefore you’re not entitled to write the kind of stuff I write, I think. So there is a problem there. Does that make sense?

Naessens:

Yes, yes it does. It’s getting into that whole idea of persona; and I think it’s a great angle in terms of wealth and status and critical acclaim. Because one of the points I have made in my pre-notes is about Billy Connolly, how does Billy Connolly... well he does successfully go on stage as a multi-millionaire with world acclaim but he still manages to hold onto the man from the shipyard, and all of that in order to be able to use it as....

Lee:

When I saw him twenty years ago, that’s the only time I’ve seen him live, and he did a very clever negotiation with the fact that he’s wealthy and successful. He sort of, reported back to us, on our behalf, as if he were a kind of spy, or a mole, of what it was like to be at a Royal Garden Party at Balmoral. I think he had gone to something like that and he was sort of telling you what it was like. Then about a similar time I saw Frank Skinner who by that point in the mid 90s was very successful and he wasn’t like the working-class, Birmingham alcoholic that he’d been. But he sort of reported back to us in the persona of Frank Skinner-normal-bloke, what it was like to be at a film premier. And so, they both (Connolly and Skinner) in their own way managed to negotiate that compromise by sort of saying: (voicing the performance bits) ‘And then this happened... and then I met the Queen... and then I went in the toilet cubicle at the film premiere’. And so they

managed to hold on to it. But twenty years later I imagine that umbilical cord is getting rather stretched. It's difficult...

I mean with me I...I still. Take Daniel Kitson, for example, is massive. No one has heard of him apart from comedy fans. He's headlining a benefit for me on Wednesday in London at the Hackney Empire, and it sold out in about three hours. Daniel Kitson has no overheads, no management; he does exactly what he wants. I think he bought a house in Crystal Palace like ten years ago – he must be alright (financially). But luckily he's got a stutter and a funny face so he's always going to be allowed to be the low status character. There's a weird difference, and it isn't Frankie Boyle's fault but partly why what he says lands so badly sometimes is because he's in an expensive suit in a 5000-seater room saying those things while Sadowitz is saying them to a half-full theatre with a bleeding scab on his face looking like someone who lives in a ditch. And he is that person as well, he's not pretending (laugh)

Naessens:

What I'm trying to get at is... how smart, well... we know comedians are smart but how smart are they as regards, or how aware – because there is this problem: you have to be somewhat aware of your stage persona and there is this need for the authenticity, that this is just who I am. And I kind of get sick of reading these interviews that go: 'aw well, I just go out there and I am who I am'

Lee:

Maybe. You know, I was sort of aware in August (2013) there seemed to be a slight backlash – I think it was partly against me – people writing saying there was too much thought going into writing all this; Brendon Burns¹ wrote a very funny piece [[Link to Scotsman article](#)]² – that I like to think was meant slightly satirically about how he and guys like Andrew Maxwell, those sort of blokes, are now thinking: 'Right, do we try and write the funniest hour we can, full of laughs and hilarity'

² <http://www.wow247.co.uk/2013/08/10/brendon-burns-on-the-job-of-comedians/>

where the audience have a brilliant time, or do we try and win good reviews and awards by putting something structured with a beginning, a middle, and an end, and a narrative to it, and a quiet bit that is thoughtful and slightly reflective, and then some call-backs that tie things up at the end?’ I think he was saying: ‘Come on, any of us could do that. We could all write a structured show that was about something. But can people be really, really funny?’ And I think: the feeling amongst those guys, who straddle the comedy circuit and the arts centre circuit, is sort of like: people like me (Lee) are getting too much credit for being self-aware of the constructs, the idea of persona, or whatever, but were we actually funny? No.

But I do think you have to think about who you are on stage and where the power lies. There’s a cliché thing that been imported from America: “Check your privilege”. I think as an English person, for example, if I go up to Scotland, Wales, or outside the UK, to here, to Ireland, because I’m historically the oppressor, I have to think that things will land differently if I say them in these places, just because of the cultural resonance.

I mean, last night I sort of overplayed my hand disparaging Ireland, but I felt I was allowed to because I’d also talked about England, people having swastikas and St George flags drawn on their... (laughing)... I thought it was even-handed. To do that, without having done that would have been ill-judged, unless it was so extreme that it was hilarious to even risk making yourself that unpopular. But it does, sort of... the status thing plays differently depending on where you are.

Naessens:

I did a paper in 2011. The title was: “The Death and Resurrection of Louis CK – Report on a Bombing in Dublin.” He came over to do a gig....

Lee:

... Oh, yeah, I heard about that...

Naessens:

... Yeah, so, he’d already (previously) done some gigs in Kilkenny (Cat Laughs) in previous years, and of course, Kilkenny is essentially a boutique festival, a very

civilised audience for a performer to play to. But this time he was put on, on the Friday night playing support to Des Bishop, and it didn't go down well. And, my job then, in that paper, was to look at some ideas and do an analysis of what happened, and what went wrong. My general view was that he came in with the expectation that he was going to be dealing with this Irish audience (Kilkenny) – 'this is what the Irish audience is', and what I'm say is the Irish audience he met were paying to see Des Bishop, they were not there to see Louis CK.³ And on subsequent nights he was there were specific Louis CK audiences. Last night you had a specific Stewart Lee audience...

Lee:

... Eleanor (Tiernan, who did support) says, they're not comedy fans my audience, they don't really like stand-up...

Naessens:

...Really?... so the

Lee:

... That's what she says....

Naessens:

... so they're Stewart Lee fans?

Lee:

I don't really know, but it's funny. Anyway, yeah.

Naessens:

³ My view that most of the audience were not there to see Louis CK is based on the following: a) CK had a headline show on Saturday and a solo show on Sunday. These Saturday and Sunday shows provided the best chance for a CK follower to see him. According to CK's blog both the Saturday and Sunday audience were much more receptive than the one he played to on that Friday.

I'd be surprised that a Stewart Lee fan is not a comedy fan.

Lee:

Yeah, well, that's what I think... I think, um, I don't know.... anyway...

That Louis CK experience, it's interesting: I think you do it as well in Ireland, but in England it's really weird like, I don't even think the Scots are like this, but we sort of, "oh an American has come here, thank you for coming here. And actually, you know what; the stand-up scene here and in the UK is bloody brilliant. It's absolutely fantastic. I think Louis CK is about as good as Dara (O'Briain) and I think Dara's really good. I'm saying they're the same kind of bloke. They're both kind of doing funny stuff from a liberal position that they occasionally undercut with a faux reactionary position. Dara's arguably slightly better in that he would take the time and trouble to tie things up in the closing five minutes to give the hour the impression of some sort of structure. Louis CK doesn't even do that; he just does a load of seven-minute bits stuck together. I mean, he's good, right, but he not sort of, he not like.... we've got loads of those guys here.

Naessens:

I think it's more, the thing that went wrong for him is that you've got a Des (Bishop) audience in which was very strongly populated with young women who were there to see the good-looking guy off the telly, and they probably did not want to see the guy who was getting up there giving out about his kids... you know like when you're exaggerating your relationship with your kids. And him not realising it... it's a no fault situation, it's more an analysis of how you can get things like that wrong. And what I'm talking about is: it demonstrates that there is a reading that has to go on, a scanning that comedians get adept at.

Lee:

Also, I noticed – I don't normally have support acts now because - I normally end up writing these 2-hour shows, I wouldn't have asked Eleanor to open if I had this other stuff (stuff that would work in the UK) – partly because it was getting to the

point about three years ago where just as I started to write 2-hour shows anyway, a certain kind of person is coming along to the show... I don't want to see the opening act. The opening act could be Eleanor, or Simon Munnery, or Henning Wehn; someone bloody great, probably better than me, better acts than me but it just so happened that my star was in the ascendant at that point. It would irritate me, those people, and I would kind of slag them off if they hadn't listened, because I felt, I've chosen this person, and you like me. But that was just the kind of person who was coming in who didn't know what the order of service was, who weren't curious.

Naessens:

Are you finding as you go through, as you were coming through the bigger numbers – particularly with the TV show – that you started finding... you covered this well in 'Carpet Remnant World' so I'm really just asking you for the record... the idea that certain audiences come along that are not really core audiences, they only come along because you have the imprimatur of TV

Lee:

Yeah, I sort of, in that show, attack them. I want them to understand that if they're coming I'm going to do it on my terms and I'm not going to do what they think comedy is. I'd like to do it again to be honest in this but... I don't know if I will... I think I need to let those people know that 'this is my show' and not the same as all the others... but, I've done it now, that's the problem. And also, do you know what... you can't be a snob about these things; you underestimate people at your peril. Most people go to the theatre three times in their life. It's nice that they found out about me, cos, I'm getting people coming up to me... a guy came up to me in a children's playground in Worcester, and he went: 'you know what, about ten years ago my works took me to Jongleurs, and I didn't like it, and I thought that's what stand-up is. Then I saw you on the telly; and I didn't know it was like that. And then I read about some people you said were good. There are loads of good people?' And I went, 'yeah'.

It this sort of thing where (there are good comedians) and people don't know about it. And people come up to me after gigs now and they go: my favourite three comedians are you, Lee Evans, and Michael McIntyre. Whereas it used to be they'd say: my favourite comedians are you, Dylan Moran, and Daniel Kitson.

Naessens:

Is it true that Michael McIntyre started off as a Stewart Lee Tribute act?

Lee:

I don't think so. (laugh)

So that means you're (Lee) now in the zone of where they know about those people. Whereas now you're just part of the bigger thing, which is nice really. And they do respond well to it. But what I have found is that people who have been coming to see me for years say.

Naessens:

There was an article or blog you wrote when you were in the Stand and a comedian – I have a picture of him in my head (can't bring his name to mind) who was in a cider commercial....

Lee:

... Oh, Mark Watson

Naessens:

... Yes, and you spoke to a comedian who was outside about playing a prank on him, basically slagging him off for being in a cider commercial... The article was essentially about you having this realisation that it was no longer in fashion or in mode to slag off somebody because they were on TV (promoting products)... we spoke earlier about the (Bill) Hicks' thing about being a corporate shill, and that has switched and changed, the idea of the generational shift, that these values are no longer applicable....

It's this idea of being aware of the zeitgeist, Dylan (Moran) is talking in this Metro article about what the fashion of the moment, and the fashion of there not being very much of a target or because they're playing bigger venues, there are less syllables in the material.

Lee:

Then again, in terms of creating a persona, what I realise I've been doing, I didn't do it self-consciously initially, was to be the things they hate you for being. In between the first and second series of "Comedy Vehicle" I looked online, and all these people saying: he's a stereotype 1980's student leftie, he goes on too long about things, he's boring and conceited and a snob. And, I thought, well, yeah, alright, let's do that more, right. And I thought yeah, I am kind of trapped in a 1980s liberal persona, I still think I'm eighteen in that way. So just do it more, I actually just roll with all that. And, eh, my wife, Bridget, she was sort of getting slagged off for being a woman comic – as all women comedians do – she'd do stuff and it (the reaction) would be like: "more women going on about this..." And then I think she just thought: you know what; I'm going to be like your nightmare of a 1980s feminist comedian, cos you think I am anyway.

Lee:

I didn't do Twitter because I don't want to get harassed by people and argue with them. But actually not being on Twitter seems quite like what he (his stage character) would do, he wouldn't go on Twitter Stewart Lee the comedian, he wouldn't even know... he have some issue with it.

There was another bad review that said: "...he's like a middle-aged man trying to make his teenage nieces think he's cool."

I thought, yeah, that's a really good way of thinking about it. He does believe what he says but his slightly about making the impression, that people will think he's very liberal. You read the criticism and you think, that's helped me to understand what it is.

Naessens:

If you go back to your formative years in terms of... for example, when I started off doing acting, back when I was 14/15, I was talking psychology and Stanislavski, and working with the whole idea of empathizing and getting into the mind... if you really want to play a character don't judge them, get into their mind... and then when you start doing stand-up you have similar outlooks. Like you seem to have a strong philosophy in terms of performance as regards challenging the audience, you don't necessarily go with them, you get far more out of them by challenging them... or ...

Lee:

...Blocking them...

Naessens:

...blocking them... so, where does that come from? Your type of warfare.

Lee:

Well, again, do things form us, or does the culture that we like, or do we seek it out because we like it? It's really naff to do psychology on yourself, but I think, my life as a child doesn't make sense socially. First of all, I'm adopted, which gives you a bit of a chip on the shoulder. You can't do much about it even if... I've no issues, I really love the people, my family, and I've no complaints about my childhood. But I was adopted, so it's at the back of your mind.

Then my parents divorced when I was about four. My mum was from a working-class background, my father was more middle-class background; they were both aspirational. I got a part scholarship to a private school and the fees were partly made up by my mum working, but also by this weird thing, this strange... charity knocking about for orphans, waifs, and strays – which gives you an idea how old this bursary must have been.

So I was in this school where everyone was better off than me. It was not massive, it was not Eaton but, it was the type of school you get in a provincial town

where the middle-class decide are they going to go on holiday or put you in a private school. We (Lee's Family) were the only people who didn't have a drive at the front of our house. We lived in a little terraced house. So, anyway, you do feel a bit like up against it. And I remember one of my ex-girlfriends saying to me when I was at the National Theatre getting an Olivier Award; she said: "it's so funny; you still act like you're some disenfranchised outsider. You've been to university and you're at the National Theatre, and you've got an Olivier Award." (laugh) But, that's in your brain.

The other thing is: lots of the music that I liked, I liked to the point where it seem intolerable and then you kind of get it and rewarding, like a pressure release; I like that in films as well. I remember as a teenager seeing "Once Upon a Time in the West". Those scenes are so long and don't seem to be going anywhere and suddenly about half way in you realise what an amazingly constructed piece it is where every scene mirrors another, and the characters are geographically and socially coming together. So you know, I do like those kinds of things where you get the sense this isn't going anywhere and all of a sudden it is.

Personally I felt like a square peg in a round hole though I probably didn't have a right to feel like that. Also, I sought out culture to confirm that feeling or else I was attracted to it because I felt like that.

Also, the thing about pushing an audience to its limits – this is a business thing, commonsense, writers are now expect to write blogs for free with a view that they might get a newspaper column. Then they're expected to write newspaper columns for free with the view that they might get a book deal. You're supposed to upload your comedy content for free

Then they're supposed to write newspaper columns for free with the hope of getting a book deal. You supposed to upload you funny comedy content to YouTube in the hope that you might get telly. Then Channel 4 wants you to do these 5-minute try-outs for nothing with the view that you might get a series. Then they make this series on E4 for a quarter of what it ought to cost with the view that if that does well you might get paid. All people in the arts now seem to be at a point where payment

is endlessly deferred. We're supposed to provide free content for structure where the software provider profits from it, if anyone does.

But a live experience can't replicate that, that can't be sold or traded; you can't say oh we'll let you perform live and maybe you'll get another gig.

Live comedians are creating memorable situations that only really happened that night. I'm forty-five now, I've got another series to write for BBC. Let's suppose I start to wind down at sixty-five, if I write a new show every two years, I've got seven more shows to write. And if I can make stuff happen in them that can only happen live then people will go: oh that was not the same as an MP3 or getting it from Netflix, I think I'll be alright, until I can't work anymore.

So part of blocking the audience is creating situations, a bit of tension in the room, you know, people arguing with each other, make a special event.

Naessens:

So that sense of structure is there in the background whenever you work something, and it becomes an intuition.

Lee:

Yeah. Well, in some of the shows I had improvisation built in but it was reliant on the improvisation end with me failing, or being humiliated; I had to get it to that point to lower the character to where it would allow me to do certain things like in "If You Prefer a Milder Comedian" I had to be rubbish at the beginning, so I was allowed to be jealous of Frankie Boyle and annoyed with Mark Watson. And I had to fumble the beginning. I remember one night that show went particularly wrong in Salford, Manchester. There was a Turkish guy in the audience and he'd never been to anything, ever. He's friend had brought him along

And he thought it was like a conversation and he kept just talking to me. I had to keep putting him down, but he didn't know when it had finished. In the end, after about 45 minutes, I went, "you know what, right, the whole first half of this show -which I can't do now - I had to lower the status of myself as a character in order to justify the second hour of it, but I can't do that now, because I've had to deal with you for 45 minutes as a high status person. So I'm really sorry everyone,

but I cannot do the show that is advertised. So I'll come back after the interval and do an hour of stand-up, but I can't do this show, because the moment where I could do the groundwork for it has passed.

And I filled out the time, but loads of people came back to the theatre looking for their money back. And the theatre tries to get me to pay it, and I asked, "What could I have done?" I did what I could; no one took the guy out. I did what I had to do, but I dealt with him like the club compere would, but it meant I couldn't establish that character who is jealous of Frankie Boyle doing corporate gigs, (asking/complaining) "why isn't it me?" But I've had to be on top of the situation with this guy for 45 minutes

Naessens:

It's really interesting that when comedy audiences show up they come pre-loaded with so much information (Framing).... (**Lee:** yeah) ... and we just assume... This guys shows up and he's not preloaded with that information. And this is why I think it is interesting to take a look at situations when the wheels come off, because you understand them much better (the mechanism), as uncomfortable and as horrible as it is, you understand what's normally there taken for granted.

Lee:

Well, yeah, and the other thing I've got is that because most of the audience arrive with a tailwind now, with a tailwind of expectation about who I am, like I can appear to be heading to a racist cul-de-sac, but the assumption is that because it's me it'll end up having a liberal point of view. So they will tolerate you doing things like that.... that's the fun of it, it looks like it's going to be awful. "You've said the N-word, what are you going to do about that?" And then you can get out of it further on down the line.

I've got a bit in the new show – I've got a bit written where I've just used the N-word and I say: I suppose people are going to write in now... how come Stewart Lee is allowed use the N-word but Roy Chubby Brown is not allowed go on television and use the N-word?" Well, it's because I'm middle-class and trusted! (laughs). If you said that it would be really funny.

Naessens:

I think you made a really good reference to that in last night's show when you were talking about context and the English Football Association not understanding context and language. Was it Bernstein (of the FA) said he didn't want the N-word to be used?

Lee:

Yeah... well it's because what they don't want is 5000 football fans chanting it at a black bloke at Arsenal on Saturday afternoon... but that's different to... Although now there is a very strange thing going on in London which is that traditionally Tottenham...

Naessens:

Tottenham, yes, they're calling themselves the yids...

Lee:

... yes, and Jewish blokes in the audience are now shouting out "come on you yids!", and so no one can decide is that racial abuse or if it's Jewish people shouting "Yids!".

Naessens:

is that not similar to black rappers calling their friends nigga?

Lee:

Yeah, it's interesting.

Lee:

Last night, for example, I said something like... I did a bit about black stereotyping... and then something like: "go get your tin whistles to the Irish audience. I think, if I've shown that I know something about where I am, a bit about Dublin, a bit about Cork, when the date of the famine was and stuff like that, and I've already said: 'look, if I say English, I've not forgotten where I am'. As long as I've laid down my credentials and said: I do understand what Ireland is... a bit... then I'm allowed say something like that... like you've bought yourself a bit of time.

Naessens:

The way you deconstruct the whole process. (At the start of the show) You start off by saying: imagine I've been on stage fifteen minutes, even getting it down to - most comedians on stage who say this is incredible the way you know it's the 15-minute point where things switch over, and then you get into a new gear once you hit 22-minutes, it feels different...

Lee:

...yeah, yeah...

Naessens:

... it's almost like flying a plane and the atmosphere changes

Lee:

The thing is they buy into it, suddenly it does feel like fifteen minutes. I mean, I'm starting to think about neurolinguistic programming... as Derren Brown would tell you: he doesn't do magic he does neurolinguistic programming. And Tom Bins who's been doing a parody of mind readers and spiritualists, well I've got an improv bit at the moment which will work really well if I can get the audience to introduce the Koran or the Bible into the bit. And I've done it twice and it has worked so well that I've had to leave it fallow because I don't want it to get out on the internet what I'm doing. (Acting out bit to Audience) "So suppose you've got a copy of.... "they always say the Koran.... the Bible (suggestions offered from the audience)..." So you can get what you want out of them, it's really weird. Just tell them it's fifteen minutes; you ask them to play a game...

Naessens:

...That is a great trick... was it Clive Barker, the theatre practitioner, he had this process of if you get an actor to improvise a scene in the first person present tense it becomes.... they're very uncomfortable and self-conscious, but where they play it

third person past tense - first of all it's not them, second of all it's already happened - they are far more loose and comfortable physically performing whatever scene it might be. So it's almost that idea that you get them linguistically to... they've (the audience) offered - what you more or less solicited out of them - and now it's fine, the pressure is off you.

When you started doing solo stand-up were you doing the double act first?

Lee:

No, I started doing solo stand-up, well... I kind of sort of did things at school. And we didn't do the double act live until about '94/'93 when we were doing radio, and even then we did maybe 30 dates. Whereas from 1989 onwards I was doing 150 to 200 gigs by night, a year on the circuit. And I kept that going all through the nineties. So, I probably did more stand-up gigs in a year as me than I did of the double act in the whole of the 90s. But again, I didn't write, I didn't really... I wrote an hour-long show in 1994, an hour-long show in '95, one in '97, and one in '99, 2000, and I wish I'd... I've only got a recording of one of them, and it's all just gone. I did do a lot of stuff then, yeah.

Naessens:

Do you look back on any of the material of that time, any of the things you said, any of the positions you had of that time and said they've now changed...

Lee:

... O God, yeah, absolutely...

Naessens:

... and, how do you reconcile that?

Lee:

Well, cos you just change as a person; I think, partly what's changed is this, though: when I was twenty-one, I was, you know, I was thin, reasonably good-looking young man, you know. And for you to say arrogant things then, or nasty things

about people, or confident things about sex or sexuality is very different to saying the same things as an over-weight, grey-haired man. And I think the best thing that happened to me was that in the four years I had off during “Jerry Springer the Opera” I sort of got a bit broken, I got really knackered out, I went grey, I put on weight, and when I came back to doing stand-up I think I was entitled to inhabit a lot of the positions I’d taken, as an affectation, when I was in my 20s. And also, looking a bit fucked makes taking certain arrogant positions heroic, whereas before it just seemed arrogant. And I think it took me a decade and a half to look right for the stuff that I was doing. In my head I wasn’t thinking it was arrogant when I was twenty-something, I was thinking ‘wouldn’t it be funny if someone thought this?’ I know it’s myself doing it, but you look at young guys and women trying to be (cynical and jade) ‘...oh this is all shit...’ and I’m thinking: what’s your problem? You’re healthy, you’re young, you’re in this exciting city, what’s there to be down about? (laughing) I think people must have looked at me and thought: you know. So, I think I was lucky that I kept going with it long enough for it to fit. And what a weird thing, it’s like the opposite of pop music.

Naessens:

It’s that whole idea when we take a look at younger acts, and we’re looking from our middle-ages back, to guys in their 20s or early 30s and talking about they’re being cynical or tired about life... and we’re going: it’s too early in your life to be tired about stuff...

Lee:

... yeah you’ve got a lot of people who do these shows: (AO) “I mean, I’m 30 and what am I going...” even 40 and they’re doing these ‘fuck! I’m 40’ type shows’ to me seems really funny now.

Naessens:

I had to stop doing relationship material when I played an abuser on TV who was stalking his girlfriend. I just couldn’t do it. It was fine material to do and I had to stop doing it. I could do it in London but I couldn’t do it here. So it’s this idea of...

your persona is going to change, it's not a kind of fixed thing, so these argument of authenticity or some kind of integrity of persona it's...

Lee:

... it's also about who is seeing it and where it is...

Naessens:

... and it's the plastic nature of it. It's like in Dylan's piece (Dylan Moran's interview in Metro) when he goes to America, and of course he's not going to be doing the same material on America that he does when he's in the UK, for example, or Ireland.

Lee:

Well, when I get asked to go to America, to Canada, to New Zealand, to Australia, to Holland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, they've all got English-speaking, all those Scandinavian countries have got English-speaking; and I say: I can't do it, because now, if you come and see me, seventy percent of the audience have seen another show, it's like another episode in a story, and I can't do the 'hello, this is me...'

Naessens:

... Stewart Lee 101...

Lee:

... I can't do that set anymore. To be honest, I find coming here a bit difficult sometimes because I think... the stuff's not relevant... it's very parochial what I write. Even going to Scotland which is normally part of the UK, their politics is so different now; the Tory party is not significant in Scotland - it's between Scottish Nationalists and Labour now - and yet in England, the Tory party, they're not really in charge in Scotland, they're only in charge by default of London, whereas if they go independent they'll be irrelevant, so. I could never go to America now and work because I can't... do that opening set again... it wouldn't make sense to do it.

Naessens:

There's a paper by Jason Rutter - "Comparing Comperes" - it's talking about that whole business of.... I think it's Roger Monkhouse (**Lee:** O, Yeah!) in Salford, no... is there a club in Salford... no, it's Frog and Bucket... and it's Johnny Vegas I think is doing... either Johnny is the MC... so Michael (Pennington aka Johnny Vegas) and Roger is coming on as an act. And it's that whole idea of priming the audience, positioning the audience, or... I have this analogy in my head... you know horse jumping, show jumping or whatever they call it... where they're coming up to the fence, and it's that sense of you're listening out and saying 'are they onside? And if there's a clank (of glass) or an interruption or if you feel... you're literally feeling out the attention span... and if they're not there... automatically... you're returning to what you were dealing with in that gig up North (Salford and the Turkish audience member).... and then you have to come back to set it (the gag/bit) up again.

So, I'm really trying to nail in that idea of the intuitions of the comedian.

Lee:

Well, I've a number of thoughts about that. First of all, if you arrive at the mic and it's not switched on, and the first thing you say isn't heard, the gig will be fifty percent and you'll never recover. Because they form an impression of you in that second, and you might get it up to okay, but it's never going to be brilliant, that gig, ever now, because the initial thing is down. They don't think: oh the bloke forgot to turn on the mic or whatever; they think there is some deficiency with you, they can't help themselves. When that happens to me, and you'd be surprised how often it happens, thousand-seater theatres, you get to the mic and it's not on, and I go - ah shit - this gig is never going to be great now cos the mic is not on at the beginning, it'll be alright but it's never going to be as good as the other one, sorry about that. I say that: it's quite funny. Anyway, that's one thing.

The second thing, and tangentially since you mentioned Roger Monkhouse, I remember doing gigs in Edinburgh with Roger Monkhouse in the late 80s and early

90s when he was on the circuit in London. And about ten years ago he had a very spiky conversation with me, he pulled me up on something and I felt very.... I felt told off and I understood his position. He'd read an interview I did about 2006/07 where I'd used Jongleurs comic... I'd use it as a kind of... pejorative term, and he went: you know what right, I do Jongleurs... and he said: look, there are loads of people who do that circuit, who do their absolute best to do interesting stuff in those environments. And in lots of towns in the country the only place you can go to see comedy is that.

And, of course, Roger does political things and he had kids young, and at some point he obviously thought: I'm not going to keep going back to Edinburgh doing one-man show. And he became a proper working comic, and he still is. And those guys rarely cross the tracks back to em... arts centres and bits of telly. Mickey Flanagan famously, you know... he says in his autobiography I think... he went to Edinburgh having been on the circuit properly for ten years, and not really aware of Edinburgh. So he went back and he's telling all the guys... on the Jongleurs circuit ... 'you know, there's twenty-three year-olds doing their own hour, and then they'll be doing arts centres, this is where you need to be!' and these guys are going: it was like someone coming back from some foreign country (laugh).

Of course they're going round and round on circuits maybe making forty grand a year, but they're doing the same twenty their whole life. Anyway.

And the other thing I say about comperes, I can't compere. My persona is: I'm not supposed to be there, anyway. I can compere a gig at the Bloomsbury Theatre in London where it's for a charity and I've booked it and everyone knows who I am and the acts are people that I like. I can do that because I don't have to do 'where are you from?' and get everyone going. It's like, I can introduce my friends but I could never compere anything. It's funny, because at my kid's school, no one really knows who I am but they go: 'he's a comedian, so let's ask him to host the raffle.' And I said to the PA woman, I can't do it. Because my thing is like a negative energy, I've not got the skills. You'd be better asking anyone. If I host a raffle, it's more likely to go wrong, and be awful, because I don't actually know how to... I've never really done that, thing. I think she thought I was... a lazy, unhelpful man.

Naessens:

You couldn't do a raffle?

Lee:

I could do a raffle as part of a charity gig. But I can't go into the school playground after some event, stand on a chair and gee everyone up. I couldn't do it. I'd be so embarrassed. And something I might say, that would work in my act, would create totally the wrong vibe.

The thing about compering that is really difficult is: a good compere on some level has to be ego-less. We've all seen people go through a phase where they want to be the star of the night, and they do it at the expense of the acts, or they become such a localised phenomena - like Skinner in the early 90s in Birmingham. It got to the point that there wasn't much point doing the Bear where it was his night because the people just wanted to see him [This backs up my Louis CK/Des Bishop claim]. It wasn't his fault, he was really good. And everyone else was... it was the Frank Skinner show with interruptions from visiting people.

In Belfast, in the early 90s, at the Empire when Paddy Kielty use to comper it... now Paddy Kielty's got understandable issues with local politics and British people... but either by accident or design, he made it very difficult for...

Naessens:

... Wilty...

Lee:

.... well, Wilty specifically... but anyone really. The Wilty thing is very funny but very irresponsible. And not good for the night, as a whole. What would happen before you'd go on, he would do some amazing thing about some incident that happened that day; like a bombing... the day I did it there was a bombing in a shopping centre. The bomb had gone off in the afternoon, and he'd got all the people, protestants booing Catholics and whatever, and then you're brought on, into that atmosphere as a visitor. You've got nothing to say - it's unplayable; you're irrelevant. And not only are you irrelevant, the only relevance you have is that

historically you're part of the problem. (laugh) And that's terrible. And so it was very difficult.

Sometimes I think he was creating a situation whereby he would be guaranteed to be star of the night because the visitors were disenfranchised. Then, the forgiving part of me thinks: he knew exactly what was going on in that town, he had a personal window into it all, and he did what he should have done, which was, make it an exceptionally, exciting situation.

But anyway, we've all been with comperes where the night becomes about them... they don't ... I hate it when they... I think it's really dishonourable when they stay onside with the audience if someone's gone badly they come on and say: 'what the fuck was that?!' You know what it was. That's someone you know, and you've probably seen going well, and if you haven't, you know enough to know that one day they will, and they might be better than you.

What Malcolm Hardee used to do... like people say he was horrible to open spots, they always use quotes, "well that was shit, wasn't it", but he didn't do that. What he did to me when I did an open spot at Up the Creek, was, he went ... I died by the end... he goes: that was Stewart Lee, started off well, got worse, and by the end it was shit (laughs).

Naessens:

So, he'd give you a public analysis.

Lee:

Yeah, but he'd give you a little bit of dignity, that's all you want. He left the window open to repair that relationship. Whereas Mark Watson I saw was being horrible to someone who had died, and I thought it was really cowardly and.... why does he want them to like him more than other comedians? He's supposed to be on our side - it's us against them.

Naessens:

That whole power relationship... I think power... there are so many elements in the room when people come to talk about comedy. The assumption is: Isn't comedy nice, isn't humour nice? It's neither nice or not nice; it's like talking about nature. More about that idea of Up The Creek. I played there once, and I luckily had an average to good gig but I was sweating...

Lee:

I never got used to it, I was sick, I was on the toilet, I never got used to it.

Naessens:

But in terms of training ground, preparation, building up your comedy chops and muscles, skills, all that kind of stuff, what are the kind of venues or gigs that would have allowed you the scope to develop your on stage persona that's worked for you?

Lee:

Well... (Pause) Well, it difficult. (Pause) I was told... I did a lot of opening spots at the Store in the early 90s late 80s, and I was told by Kim that I was not a Comedy Store act and that I reminded him too much of his least favourite act which was Simon Munnery. So pretty early on I thought: right, this is not the place for me then. There were some circuit gigs where I would have a really good time, others where I got by by the skin of my teeth. When I was sent around the country, to Belfast, and places here in Ireland there was some places I could play and some where I couldn't. I was never a bullet-proof circuit act. But when I came back in 2004, what had changed was: first of all, because I had done Jerry Springer the Opera there was this perception on some level that I must know what I was doing. And also, what had happened in that intervening time - I don't know if this is analogous to here, I don't know enough about it, and I'm sorry about that but - because there'd been some kind of comedy boom in the four or five years I'd had off, every town had a Jongleurs, a Comedy Store, a Headliners, they all had one of these chicken-in-a-basket nights.

And all the people who ran the clubs pre-dating those in the town like the equivalent of The International, they all thought: oh, well, we're fucked now. But what actually happened was: everyone that didn't like that went there, and suddenly everywhere, between about 2005 and 2010 before the recession kicked in, everywhere that had a Jongleurs, a Headliners, or a Comedy Store, had some fucking great other gig run by the local weirdo where all the freaks could play, and all the bohemian drop-out types and people who liked indie rock and things went there to see people like Kitson, Mark Watson, and Josie Long. So it was great, and I actually, after four years off, parachuted down back into a circuit which in England at least had become what I was hoping to find. And it did it while I was away and came back. Suddenly I could do a tour with Josie around thirty places in England, Scotland, and Wales that were... that would stand you doing an hour of us.

Naessens:

So that's a three-year gap...

Lee:

... yeah about four years...

Naessens:

... I know you say you don't make much of the time you stopped in 2000/2001, but you just stopped, was it?

Lee:

Well, there was a particular thing... it's partly because I was with Avalon. And this is a whole other paper that no one has written about... you know... basically, you in subprime zone with comedy in the UK now. Where the outlay those sorts of agencies are taking, there not enough money ever to be made out of comedy to pay back what they're asking the kids to invest, in terms of the debts they would accrue. It's like subprime mortgages, or education in the UK at the moment; it's costing much more than someone studying arts can possibly hope to make back out of it.

Anyway, I was with Avalon. And it was complicated by that in as much as they were always very short-termist about things, they had the wrong kind of gigs, that's partly why I gave up, and there was one particularly badly organised tour they sent me out on - I was supposed to be doing my own hour with Andy Zaltzman opening for me. And I just kept turning up at all these sorts of Jongleurs-type clubs where they thought I was just doing a set and I didn't know anything about Andy.... It was really fucked up. And I ended up in Liverpool doing this bit I got about immigration to a guy that was really pissed and was shouting out really racist things about immigrants. And then I thought - I mean I suspect I must have been reading about Andy Kaufmann at the time, I'm probably quoting my own description of this now thinking about it.

I thought, if you want to talk you can do it then mate. And I got him up on stage, and I went to sit in his seat, and he was really drunk. I thought this was going to be really great, he was already dying, it was going badly. What I thought was I'm going to let this play out to the point where everyone hates him, then I'll go back on and I'll do something hilarious. What happened was: after about three minutes the bouncers came and got him off and I was kind of directed back to the stage - which was undermining me. I can't do anything with this now. It was a high stake gamble that might have paid off. But this isn't the place to do that, And I kinda thought: what can I do? I can't really do anything.

I'd also done an Edinburgh show where... it was the same sort of thing as I'm doing now, I was just getting in the groove of that... and it got reviewed. And things that were positive choices were being reviewed as if they were mistakes. At one point, the Independent said: he loses the crowd for twenty minutes, appeals to them to try and help him, he doesn't seem to know how to do stand-up at all, I mean, it's funny but we're laughing at him, and in the end he just manages to claw it back.

Of course it was very carefully stage managed that I was thinking about how I could destroy the room and win it back. Yet it was written as if I was just useless and by the skin of my teeth I'd managed to...

I can't really do this. I can be bothered with ... I'm doing things that are going somewhere and there doesn't seem to be a place for it, they're does seem to be

anyone equipped to write about that. And the more I get better at these things the more they're going to look like mistakes anyway.

But then, when I came back after four years off, and I got an Olivier award it was sort of assumed that I must have been... these things that looked like mistakes I must have been doing on purpose, which they were... then I was given the benefit of the doubt I think. The perception changed. The stupid quote someone reminded me this morning from Bob Monkhouse saying: if people are laughing it's comedy and if there not it isn't. Well, you know, sometimes they laugh at something one night and the next night they don't. And partly why they laugh is because what they're were told about you. So, it does make any sense what he said.

The good thing about the Stewart Lee character is he thinks he's trying to do stand-up. He doesn't care if it goes badly, he doesn't care what they think - he thinks it's good (laughs)

Naessens:

That's the key thing. There's an appeal to that character because he's doing what he believes to ...

Lee:

Yeah. He comes out and he tries to do stand-up. In 'Carpet Remnant World' and to a lesser extent "...A Milder Comedian" and to a lesser extent "41st Best", he comes out and he tries to do a show. And he opens like he's trying to do a stand-up show but he gets distracted by memory, bitterness, and other things. He keeps trying to gather his thought and get it back onside, but this other stuff keeps leaking into it. That's the conceit of it.

Naessens:

Throughout there is this implicit self-deprecation and low-status.

Lee:

Yeah. He trying to do stand-up, he's trying to do an actual show. Same as like Vegas' (Johnny Vegas) thing is 'I'm an entertainer.'" Sometimes when I see people doing

character acts, I think, okay, why is this shop keeper on stage addressing us? Whereas when my wife Bridget... my wife Bridget did a lot of characters like King Charles II or Samuel Pepys, and I'd end up thinking: well, why is he here? Then she did this character of an ant who was trying to do stand-up comedy. And the reason the ant was on stage was because it was trying to be a comedian, it was doing an act. So, you could talk about ants and stuff but there wasn't some fourth wall barrier where your thinking: why's an ant on stage? it's because the ant wants to do stand-up; it said that, I'm an ant, I want to be a stand-up comedian, here are my ant jokes. So, you're into it.

The great thing about stand-up is that as long as the person on stage is supposed to be doing stand-up there's no need to explain why they're there. They don't need any other motivation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ajaye, Franklyn. *Comic Insights : The Art of Stand-up Comedy*. 1st ed. Los Angeles: Silman-James Press, 2002.
- Allen, Woody, Larry Wilde, and Larry Wilde Collection (Library of Congress). *Woody Allen Interview*. 1966. sound recording, 1 sound tape reel (54 min.) : analog, 3 3/4 ips, 1/4 track, stereo. ; 7 in.
- Attardo, Salvatore, and Lucy Pickering. "Timing in the Performance of Jokes." *Humor - International Journal of Humor Research*. 24, no. 2 (2011): 233–50.
- Attardo, Salvatore, and Victor Raskin. "Script Theory Revisit(Ed)." *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 4, no. 3-4 (1991): 293-347.
- Billig, Michael. *Laughter and Ridicule : Towards a Social Critique of Humour*. London: Sage, 2005.
- Bishop, Des. "Des Bishop Unplugged." 2009.
- Brodie, Ian. "Stand-up Comedy as a Genre of Intimacy." *Ethnologies* 30, no. 2 (2008): 153-80.
- Bryman, Alan. *Charisma and Leadership in Organizations*. London : Sage, 1992 (1993 printing).
- C.K., Louis. "Louis C.K.: Live at the Beacon Theater." 1h3mins. USA, 2011.
- Carlin, George, and Tony Hendra. *Last Words*. 1st Free Press hardcover ed. New York: Free Press, 2009.
- Carr, Jimmy, and Lucy Greeves. *The Naked Jape : Uncovering the Hidden World of Jokes*. London: Michael Joseph, 2006.
- Carter, Judy. *The Comedy Bible : From Stand-up to Sitcom : The Comedy Writer's Ultimate How-to-Guide*. New York: Fireside, 2001.
- Chapman, Antony J., and Hugh C. Foot. *It's a Funny Thing, Humour*. Oxford: Pergamon, 1977.
- Cohen, Ted. *Jokes : Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Crisp, Richard J., and Rhiannon N. Turner. *Essential Social Psychology*. 3rd edition. ed.
- Davies, Christie. "Victor Raskin on Jokes." *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 17, no. 4 (2004).
- Dean, Greg. *Step by Step to Stand-up Comedy*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000.
- Dennett, D. C. *Consciousness Explained*. 1st ed. ed. Boston: Little, Brown and Co, 1991.
- Dennett, Daniel. "Who's on First? Heterophenomenology Explained." *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 10, no. 9/10 (2003): 19.

- Dessau, Bruce. "How Do You Write Good Comedy? Some of Britain's Finest Comedians Share Their Knowledge." *London Independent*, 18th April 2015 2015.
- Double, Oliver. "Characterization in Stand-up Comedy: From Ted Ray to Billy Connolly, Via Bertolt Brecht." *New Theatre Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (2000): 315-23.
- . *Getting the Joke : The Inner Workings of Stand-up Comedy*. London: Methuen, 2005.
- "Festival Funnies: Edinburgh's 50 Best Jokes." *Independent* (2006). Published electronically 26/08/2006. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/festival-funnies-edinburghs-50-best-jokes-413434.html>.
- Fowler, H. W., F. G. Fowler, and J. B. Sykes. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*. 6th Edition. / Ed. by J. B. Sykes. ed. [S.l.]: Clarendon Press, 1976.
- Freshwater, Helen. *Theatre & Audience*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Gardner, Martin. *Best Remembered Poems*. New York: Dover ; London : Constable, 1992.
- Gladwell, Malcolm. *Blink : The Power of Thinking without Thinking*. London: Allen Lane, 2005.
- Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. A Pelican Book. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971.
- Greenbaum, Andrea. "stand-up Comedy as Rhetorical Argument: An Investigation of Comic Culture." *Humor* 12, no. 1 (1999): 33-46.
- Greengross, Gil, and Geoffrey F. Miller. "The Big Five Personality Traits of Professional Comedians Compared to Amateur Comedians, Comedy Writers, and College Students." *Personality and Individual Differences* 47, no. 2 (2009): 79-83.
- Harrop, John. *Acting*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Helitzer, Melvin. *Comedy Writing Secrets*. 1st ed. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 1987.
- Hicks, Bill. "Dark Poet." 1992.
- . *Love, Laughter and Truth, Voices series*. London, England: Rykodisc,, 2002. sound recording Bill Hicks, 1 sound disc : digital ; 4 3/4 in., RCD 10631 Rykodisc.
- Hurley, Matthew M., Daniel Clement Dennett, and Reginald B. Adams. *Inside Jokes : Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011.
- Jones, Alice. "Tim Vine, Winner of the Funniest Joke of the Fringe Award: 'Making a Quip as Funny as Possible Is an Art'." *The Independent*, 19/8/ 2014.
- Kahneman, Daniel. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. 1st ed. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011.

- Kihlstrom, John F. "Cognitive Approaches to Personality." University of California, Berkeley,
<https://www.ocf.berkeley.edu/~jfkihlstrom/IntroductionWeb/resources/Ch12Cognitive.htm>.
- Kirby, Tim. "Carpet Remnant World." 123 mins. UK, 2012.
- . "Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle." In *Season 4*, ep.6, 30 mins: BBC, 2016.
- Krikmann, Arvo. "Contemporary Linguistic Theories of Humour." *Folklore* 33 (2006): 27-58.
- Lee, Stewart. By Edward Naessens (2013).
- . *Stewart Lee! : The 'If You Prefer a Milder Comedian, Please Ask for One' Ep*. London: Faber, 2012.
- Liddell, Henry George Dean of Christ Church and Scott Dean of Rochester, Roderick of Trinity College Oxford Mackenzie, Henry Stuart Jones, and Robert Dean of Rochester Scott. *A Greek-English Lexicon ... A New Edition, Revised and Augmented Throughout by Henry Stuart Jones ... With the Assistance of Roderick Mckenzie ... And with the Co-Operation of Many Scholars*. 9th edition ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925.
- Limon, John. *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000.
- Logan, Brian. "Masters of the Mini-Joke." *The Guardian*, 17/1/2011 2011
- Lynch, Liam, Sarah Silverman, Brian Posehn, Bob Odenkirk, Laura Silverman, and Copyright Collection (Library of Congress). "Sarah Silverman, Jesus Is Magic." 8 film reels of 8 on 4 (ca. 72 min., ca. 6,480 ft.). Unites States: Roadside Attractions, 2005.
- Marc, David. *Comic Visions : Television Comedy and American Culture*. Media and Popular Culture. Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989.
- Martin, Rod A. *The Psychology of Humor : An Integrative Approach*. Amsterdam ; Boston: Elsevier Academic Press, 2007.
- McConachie, Bruce A. *Engaging Audiences : A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre*. Cognitive Studies in Literature and Performance. 1st ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
- Merritt, Stephanie. "'a Little Ego Goes a Long Way in This Game'." *The Observer*, 28/11 2004.
- Mischel, Walter. *Personality and Assessment*. New York, etc.: John Wiley & Sons, 1968.
- Murray, Logan. *Be a Great Stand-Up*. [New] ed. ed. London: Teach Yourself, 2010.
- Norrick, Neal. "On the Conversational Performance of Narrative Jokes: Toward an Account of Timing." *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 14, no. 3 (2001): 255-74.
- Oring, Elliott author. *Joking Asides : The Theory, Analysis, and Aesthetics of Humor*. Utah State University Press, 2016.
- Palmer, Jerry. *Taking Humour Seriously*. London ; New York: Routledge, 1994.

- Pappas, Anastasia. "Circle." 1h22min. UK, 2002.
- Park, Robert Ezra. *Race and Culture*. His Collected Papers, V 1. Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1950.
- Pickering, Lucy, Corduas, Marcella, Eisterhold, Jodi Seifried, Brenna Eggleston, Alyson and Salvatore, Attardo. "Prosodic Markers of Saliency in Humorous Narratives." *Discourse processes* 46, no. 6 (2009): 517-40.
- Polanyi, Michael, and Amartya Sen. *The Tacit Dimension*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press ; Bristol : University Presses Marketing [distributor], 2009.
- Popper, Karl R. author. *Conjectures and Refutations : The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*. 2nd edition. ed.
- Provenza, Paul. "The Aristocrats." 1h29min. USA, 2005.
- Provine, Robert R. *Laughter : A Scientific Investigation*. London: Faber, 2000.
- Raskin, Victor. *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*. Dordrecht ; Lancaster: Reidel, 1985.
- Renner, Karl-Heinz, and Timo Heydasch. "Performing Humor: On the Relations between Self-Presentation Styles, Gelotophobia, Gelotophilia, and Katagelasticism." *Psychological Test Assessment Modelling* 52, no. 2 (2010): 171-90.
- Ritchie, Chris. *Performing Live Comedy*.
- Rose, Dave. "Profile: Tim Vine." *Premier Christianity* (2014). Published electronically June 2014.
- Rutter, Jason. "Stand-up as Interaction : Performance and Audience in Comedy Venues. [Electronic Resource]." University of Salford.
- . "The Stand-up Introduction Sequence: Comparing Comedy Compères." *Journal of Pragmatics* 4, no. 32 (2000): 463-83.
- Ryzik, Melena, Cara Buckley, and Jodi Kantor. "Louis C.K. Is Accused by 5 Women of Sexual Misconduct." *New York Times*, November 10th 2017, A1.
- Sankey, Jay. *Zen and the Art of Stand-up Comedy*. New York ; London: Routledge, 1998.
- Scarpetta, Fabiola, and Anna Spagnoli. "The Interactional Context of Humor in Stand-up Comedy." *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 3, no. 42 (2009): 210-30.
- Seinfeld, Jerry. "Jerry Seinfeld: How to Write a Joke." *New York Times Magazine*, 2012.
- Self, Will. "Will Self Meets Stewart Lee: 'Are You Really, Ultimately Embittered, or Not?'" *The Guardian*, 26/2/ 2016.
- Smith, John Edwin. "Time, Times, and 'the Right Time'; 'Chronos' And 'Kairos'." *The Monist* 53, no. 1 (1969): 1-13.
- Stuart, Keith. "How to Survive 100 Gigs as a Standup: Ellie Gibson's Comedy Crash Course." *The Guardian*, 2014.

- Studios, BBC. "Jack Dee Almost Giving up Comedy - Mark Lawson Talks to - Bbc." In *Mark Lawson Talks to: BBC*, 2009.
- Sutherland, James editor. *The Oxford Book of English Talk*. Oxford: At The Clarendon press, 1953.
- Tahir, Tariq. "Connolly Booed over Hostage Joke." *Evening Standard*, 5/10/2004 2004.
- "The One Show." edited by Sandy Smith, 29 mins. London, UK: BBC One, 2017.
- Weitz, Eric. *The Cambridge Introduction to Comedy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Wilson, Timothy D. *Strangers to Ourselves : Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002.
- Zinoman, Jason. "A Stand-up Joke Is Born." *New York Times*, 2012, March 5th.
- Zunshine, Lisa. *Getting inside Your Head : What Cognitive Science Can Tell Us About Popular Culture*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012.