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# STANDUP COMEDY AS SOCIAL AND CULTURAL MEDIATION

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STANDUP COMEDY IS ARGUABLY THE OLDEST, MOST UNIVERSAL, BASIC, AND deeply significant form of humorous expression (excluding perhaps truly spontaneous, informal social joking and teasing). It is the purest public comic communication, performing essentially the same social and cultural roles in practically every known society, past and present. Studies dealing with humor often begin with defensive, half-hearted apologies for taking so light a subject seriously or for failing to reproduce the spirit and tone of the entertainment examined; this one will argue that humor is a vitally important social and cultural phenomenon, that the student of a culture and society cannot find a more revealing index to its values, attitudes, dispositions, and concerns, and that the relatively undervalued genre of standup comedy (compared with film comedy or humorous literature, for example) is the most interesting of all the manifestations of humor in the popular culture. In this essay, at least, Rodney Dangerfield and his colleagues will finally get some respect.

A strict, limiting definition of standup comedy would describe an encounter between a single, standing performer behaving comically and/or saying funny things directly to an audience, unsupported by very much in the way of costume, prop, setting, or dramatic vehicle. Yet standup comedy's roots are, as I shall discuss below, entwined with rites, rituals, and dramatic experiences that are richer, more complex than this simple definition can embrace. We must therefore broaden our scope at least to include seated storytellers, comic characterizations that employ costume and prop, team acts (particularly the staple two-person comedy teams), manifestations of standup comedy routines and motifs within dramatic vehicles such as skits, improvisational situations, and films (for example, Bob Hope in his "Road" pictures, the Marx Brothers movies), and television sitcoms (Jack Benny's television show, Robin Williams in *Mork and Mindy*). To avoid also having to include all theatrical comedy and its media spinoffs, however, our definition should stress relative directness of artist/audience communication

and the proportional importance of comic behavior and comic dialogue versus the development of plot and situation. Such a definition is hardly pure, but it is workable.

Standup comedy has been an important feature of American popular culture since its earliest days.<sup>1</sup> Popular theater incorporated variety comedy as complement to the main plot. Circus clowns provided verbal standup comedy in the early years of these productions, as well as physical and prop comedy, in the tradition of fools, jesters, clowns, and comics, which can be traced back at least as far as the Middle Ages. The enormously popular minstrel theater featured the comic interaction of the two end-men, Tambo and Bones, and the Interlocutor, a straight-man, as well as various comedy routines within the show itself. The lecture circuit in the nineteenth century supported dozens of successful humorists, the most famous of whom were Mark Twain and Artemus Ward. Medicine shows, tent shows, and other traveling variety entertainments all boasted standup comedy as a central element.

In the twentieth century, standup comedy has been the backbone of vaudeville and burlesque and the variety theater (for example, Earl Carroll's *Vanities*, the *Ziegfeld Follies*), as well as night-club and resort entertainment. More recently, standup comedy has spawned a popular entertainment movement of its own, the comedy clubs, where a rather lengthy bill of comics have exclusive possession of the stage and audience for a long evening of laughter. Standup comedy has also contributed to all of the mass media in America, from the silent films through radio, to the record industry and, of course, to television. Clearly it is a popular art that is central to American entertainment, but in the universal tradition of public joking rituals it is more than that as well; it is an important part of the nation's cultural life.

The motives and functions of standup comedy are complex, ambiguous, and to some extent paradoxical. Anthropologists and sociologists have paid some attention to teasing relationships and the roles of social joking. Students of theater and humor have recognized comedy's more profound aspects, but there is no developed study of the social and cultural functions of standup comedy as such. In his book, *Heroes, Villains, and Fools*, Orrin Klapp does, however, briefly mention a few of the functions of standup comedy in his discussion of fools. He observes that

<sup>1</sup>There is no comprehensive, definitive history of standup comedy in America. Phil Berger calls his book, *The Last Laugh* (New York: Morrow, 1975), a history of the genre, but it is impressionistic, more "new journalism" than anything else. Joe Franklin's *Encyclopedia of Comedians* (Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press, 1972) is helpful, as are Steve Allen's *Funny Men* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956); *Funny People* (New York: Stein and Day, 1981); and *More Funny People* (New York: Stein and Day, 1982).

Every kind of society seems to find fool types useful in: sublimation of aggression, relief from routine and discipline, control by ridicule (less severe and disruptive than vilification), affirming standards of propriety (paradoxically by flouting followed by comic punishment), and unification through what Henri Bergson and Kenneth Burke have called the communion of laughter.<sup>2</sup>

In her vitally important work on public joking, the anthropologist Mary Douglas emphasizes properly that the contexts and processes of joke telling are at least as important as the texts of the jokes themselves to any understanding of the meaning of humor. This is obviously the case with standup comedy performance as well. As Douglas observes, “the joke form rarely lies in the utterance alone, but . . . can be identified in the total social situation.” Douglas further concerns herself with the joking activity as *rite* and *anti-rite*, or as public affirmation of shared cultural beliefs and as a reexamination of these beliefs. She notes that the structure of jokes tends to be subversive; in other words, jokes tear down, distort, misrepresent, and reorder usual patterns of expression and perception. Yet she also agrees with Victor Turner that the *experience* of public joking, shared laughter, and celebration of agreement on what deserves ridicule and affirmation fosters community and furthers a sense of mutual support for common belief and behavior (hence *rite*).<sup>3</sup>

Turner’s work is also helpful when thinking about standup comedy. His concept of “plural reflexivity,” or “the ways in which a group or community seeks to portray, understand, and then act on itself” has important implications for our understanding of art, popular culture, and humor. In addition, his discussion of *liminal* or *liminoid* activity in the rituals of performance and of artistic expression is potentially adaptable to a theory of public comedy. Turner sees rituals as an opportunity for society to explore, affirm, deny, and ultimately to change its structure and its values:

Public liminality can never be tranquilly regarded as a safety valve, mere catharsis, “letting off steam,” rather it is *comunitas* weighing structure, sometimes finding it wanting, and proposing in however extravagant a form, new paradigms and models which invert or subvert the old.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Orrin E. Klapp, *Heroes, Villains, and Fools: The Changing American Character* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 60.

<sup>3</sup>Mary Douglas, “Jokes,” *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (Boston, 1978), 93.

<sup>4</sup>Victor Turner, “Frame Flow, and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality,” in Michael Benamou and Charles Caramello, eds., *Performance in Postmodern Culture* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1977), 33. See also Turner’s books, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1966; rpt. Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977); and *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1974).

Other writers whose work contributes to this view of the social functions of comedy include Hugh Dalziel Duncan in his book *Communication and the Social Order* (1970), and William Martineau in his article outlining the various social motives of humor.<sup>5</sup>

The key to understanding the role of standup comedy in the process of cultural affirmation and subversion is a recognition of the comedian's traditional *license* for deviate behavior and expression. Probably originating in the cruel but natural practice of ridiculing physical and mental defectives, this license presents a paradox crucial to the development of the standup comedy tradition. Traditionally, the comedian is defective in some way, but his natural weaknesses generate pity, and more important, exemption from the expectation of normal behavior. He is thus presented to his audience as marginal. Because he is physically and mentally incapable of proper action, we forgive and even bless his "mistakes." This marginality, however, also allows for a fascinating ambiguity and ambivalence. In his role as a *negative exemplar*, we laugh *at* him. He represents conduct to be ridiculed and rejected, and our laughter reflects our superiority, our relief that his weaknesses are greater than our own and that he survives them with only the mild punishment of verbal scorn. Yet to the extent that we may identify with his expression or behavior, secretly recognize it as reflecting natural tendencies in human activity if not socially approved ones, or publically affirm it under the guise of "mere comedy," or "just kidding," he can become our *comic spokesman*.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, as a part of the public ritual of standup comedy, he serves as a *shaman*,<sup>7</sup> leading us in a celebration of a community of shared culture, of homogenous understanding and expectation.

<sup>5</sup>Hugh Dalziel Duncan, *Communication and Social Order* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), 373–424; William H. Martineau, "A Model of the Social Functions of Humor," in Jeffrey Goldstein and Paul McGhee, eds., *The Psychology of Humor* (New York: Academic Press, 1972), 101–24.

<sup>6</sup>Recent studies dealing with the personality of standup comedians suggest that they tend to accept this role more or less consciously, viewing their art as a protection of society. Most comedians have had troubled pasts, view themselves as outcasts to some extent, and express a need for the approval of the audience. See Susan Witty's review of this research, "The Laugh Makers," *Psychology Today*, Aug. 1983, for the views of Samuel Janus, Waleed Salameh, and others. Seymour Fisher and Rhonda Fisher, *Pretend the World is Funny and Forever: A Psychological Analysis of Comedians, Clowns, and Actors* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1981) is the essential book-length study. See also collections of interviews with performers, notably Larry Wilde's *The Greatest Comedians* (Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press, 1973); and Wilde, *How the Great Comedy Writers Create Laughter* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1976); and William Fry and Melanie Allen, *Make 'Em Laugh: Life Studies of Comedy Writers* (Palo Alto: Science and Behavior Books, 1975).

<sup>7</sup>Albert Goldman uses the term in his discussion of comedians such as Lenny Bruce in *Freakshow* (New York: Atheneum, 1971). See also E. T. Kirby, "The Shamanistic Origins of Popular Entertainments," *Drama Review*, 18 (March 1974), 5–15.

The oldest, most basic role of the comedian is precisely this role of *negative exemplar*. The grotesque, the buffoon, the fool, the simpleton, the scoundrel, the drunkard, the liar, the coward, the effete, the tightwad, the boor, the egoist, the cuckold, the shrew, the weakling, the neurotic, and other such reifications of socially unacceptable traits are enacted by the comedian to be ridiculed, laughed at, repudiated, and, finally, symbolically "punished." Modern American standup comedy reflects the universal range of this phenomenon, from Jerry Lewis's grotesques, to the many fools and simpletons of the genre: Jackie Gleason's Poor Soul, Irwin Corey's mindless professor, Dean Martin's drunkard, the legion of "transvestites," and the "little men" or weaklings portrayed by such comics as Woody Allen and Rodney Dangerfield, among others. We laugh at the egotism of Bob Hope and Jack Benny, at the frustration of Alan King, the sex-role inadequacy of Joan Rivers and Phyllis Diller, the promiscuity of Redd Foxx and Richard Pryor, the boorishness of Steve Martin and Martin Mull, and at a host of other follies and frustrations reflected by the army of self-deprecating comedians whose domestic life is a disaster, whose battles with everyday life become overwhelming routs, and whose flaws are immense exaggerations of all we fear and reject in our own self-definitions.

Though the time-honored function of the standup comedian has been to provide a butt for our humor, this function is perhaps less interesting, even less important, than his role as our comic *spokesperson*, as a mediator, an "articulator" of our culture, and as our contemporary *anthropologist*.<sup>8</sup> To be sure, the separation of the two roles is rarely absolute or even entirely clear. For instance, Joan Rivers's comic persona is established as essentially negative. We laugh at her characterization of herself as a failed or flawed woman, because she is unattractive, lacks the proper female attributes, is unpopular, rejected by parents and friends, and inept in domestic skills such as cooking and housekeeping. Yet over the years her act has begun to emphasize an expression of pride in these very "failings." Rivers in fact often seems aggressively to repudiate these traditional cultural values, and to attack more "perfect" cultural role models, such as Elizabeth Taylor and Cheryl Tiegs. She seems to engage in a conspiracy with women in the audience to reject male demands that women fulfill their romantic and domestic fantasies. Indeed she shares this perspective with Phyllis Diller, another standup comedienne, and with Erma Bombeck, the columnist and comic-lecturer. It seems likely, therefore, that these female comics are voicing changing attitudes about gender roles that have begun to take hold in American society as a result of the most recent wave of feminist agitation.

<sup>8</sup>See Stephanie Koziski, "The Standup Comedian as Anthropologist," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 18 (Fall 1984), 57-76. Her dissertation on standup comedy is in process. The term "articulator" is used by Chauncy Ridley in an unpublished ms., "Insight and Regeneration in Richard Pryor's Stand Up Comedy."

Similarly, Alan King serves as a comic spokesman for contemporary Americans by outlining his frustrations with the bureaucracy, with doctors, with all of the pitfalls of modern American life. His persona, however, is also clearly negative; he is a bully, a boor, a malcontent, a loudmouth, and a loser.

The ambiguity, then, is an essential feature of an audience's reaction to standup comedy.

Redd Foxx's Las Vegas routine, like so many other comic acts, is based on a persona that is sexually libertine. He is a constant violator of both verbal and behavioral taboos. I witnessed one of his sets, for instance, in which virtually all of his jokes dealt with the topic of oral sex. Foxx presented himself as a successful practitioner of these taboo arts and repeatedly claimed that all successful lovers indulge in the techniques whether or not they admit it. The audience laughed loudly and enthusiastically, but a close look at the physical responses in the room revealed two different types of laughing behavior. The older people in the audience gasped, flinched, physically backed away while laughing at the punch-lines, and frequently looked at each other nervously, perhaps for confirmation that the license of comedy was still in effect. They seemed to be saying to themselves and each other, "Can you believe that he is as daring to say these things in public? Isn't this exciting, dangerous stuff?" The younger people in the audience were laughing in a manner that I term "anthemic." They leaned *toward* Foxx, often applauded, raised their hands or fists as though cheering a political speaker with whom they were in agreement, while occasionally yelling, "yeah," or "right on," or "all right," or just yelping with delight. For them Foxx was the counter-culture spokesman with the courage (and the comically protected situation) to state publicly and openly that the sexual taboo against oral sex was, in their view at least, no longer valid or operative. Foxx led them in an expression of their cultural truths.

This role of the comedian as social commentator is surely not a new one. Shakespeare made extensive use of the fool's traditional license to have the innocent but sharp, shrewd observer speak the "truth" which was universally recognized but politically taboo. If nineteenth-century Americans laughed *at* the racist images of Tambo and Bones for their licentiousness, they probably also laughed *with* their Dionysian freedom to enjoy life and their common-sense victories over the stuffy, pompous, dull Interlocutor. No doubt, they identified also with their topical commentaries expressing the democratic, popular, if often cynical, opposition to "official" social attitudes and public positions.<sup>9</sup> Twain, Ward, and the other platform lecturers similarly offered a down-to-earth, comi-

<sup>9</sup>See Robert Toll, *Blacking Up: the Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), which emphasizes the racism of the characterizations; and William Stowe and David Grimsted's review which corrects Toll by calling attention to the more positive functions of the portrayal, "Review Essay: White-Black Humor," *Journal of Ethnic History*, 3 (1975).

cally acceptable, but “opposition line” to the views of polite society. Ethnic and blue-collar comics of vaudeville and the variety theater were vulnerable fools, frequently, but they also won ironic victories and expressed many of the social proclivities of their audiences, as well as a more realistic if not more admirable view of their worlds.

It might be said, then, that the trickster, con-man, and likeable rogue all turn dishonesty, selfishness, disruptive and aggressive behavior, and licentiousness into virtues, or at least into activity that the audience can applaud, laugh with, and celebrate. The pleasure the audience derives from this sanctioned deviance may be related to the ritual violation of taboos, inversion of ritual, and public iconoclasm frequently encountered in cultural traditions. If, as Freud posited, there is a battle going on between our instincts and our socially developed rules of behavior, comedy provides an opportunity for a staged antagonism.<sup>10</sup> Another way of expressing the same process would be as a dialectic in which a thesis—basis human traits and characteristics—is confronted with an antithesis—polite manners and social restraints—with a synthesis perhaps being tolerance or at least a relaxation of hostility and anxiety.<sup>11</sup>

Given this analysis, it is possible to see that our modern American standup comedians provide us with some of our most valuable social commentary. While some critics of popular entertainment try to distinguish between a traditional standup comedy characterized by an irrelevant quest for laughs, and a so-called “new wave” comedy which is more socially and politically satiric or insightful, such categorization belies the consistent role of standup comedy as social and cultural analysis. Traditional comics like Bob Hope, Johnny Carson, and Alan King are less openly “counter-culture,” certainly, but their complaints contain a critique of the gap between what is and what we believe should be. Moreover, the “new wave” comics were not always exclusively, openly political or even satiric. Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce, Dick Gregory, and others were controversial because many of the issues they addressed were causing social divisions. Yet other “new wave” comedians—Jonathan Winters, Shelley Berman, Mike Nichols and Elaine May, Bill Cosby, and Joan Rivers chose less openly divisive material. Even the informal “new wave” style, casual dress, the use of longer “bits,” fewer “punch-lines,” and more spontaneous improvisation—recalls the nineteenth-century platform lecturers as much as it heralds a break with tradition.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, ed. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1960).

<sup>11</sup>An important essay by Louis D. Rubin, Jr., “The Great American Joke,” reprinted in Enid Veron, ed., *Humor in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 255–65, maintains that the consistent feature of American humor is its examination of our ideals in the light of the reality of our lives.

<sup>12</sup>The March 1961 issue of *Playboy* magazine features an interesting symposium on the “new wave” standup comedy, involving Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl, Jonathan Winters, and Jules Feiffer among others.

The young comedians currently performing on the club circuit<sup>13</sup> reflect the entire range of standup comedy performance, from one-liners, verbal games involving puns, malapropisms, double-entendres, and the violation of socially acceptable language taboos to physical and prop comedy, insult comedy, parodies and put-downs of current popular culture, and of course social and political criticism.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps the best, if not the only, place to witness standup comedy as true social and cultural mediation is in live performance, preferably at one of the small comedy clubs or intimate night-club rooms where the interaction between the comedian and the audience is more prominent. The comedian begins by performing two important functions. He or she establishes the nature of the audience by asking questions of a few people close by or by making statements about the audience followed by a call for agreement or acknowledgement (if the audience is too large for the question-and-answer session). This function is often performed by an MC or a warm-up comic, but it is not merely a matter of gathering information. The comedian must establish *for the audience* that the group is homogeneous, a community, if the laughter is to come easily.<sup>15</sup> "Working the room," as comedians term it, loosens the audience and allows for laughter as an expression of shared values rather than as a personal predilection (since people are justifiably nervous about laughing alone and what that might reveal). This interaction with the audience often, but not always, includes ritual insults directed at audience

<sup>13</sup>Several articles in the popular press and entertainment industry newspapers have chronicled the growth of comedy clubs throughout America in recent years. Night clubs such as San Francisco's *The Hungry I* and New York's *The Bitter End* promoted the genre in the 1960s and Budd Friedman's *The Improvisation* led to the establishment of several clubs in New York and Los Angeles. Today almost every American city has a small comedy club or two, offering young comedians a chance to learn their craft through frequent appearances. These comedy clubs generally feature one or two "name performers" who travel the circuit and whose reputations are fostered by television exposure (Jay Leno, Byron Allen, and David Brenner, among others), local professionals, and amateur, would-be standup comedians. The success of the urban comedy clubs alone would suggest that standup comedy in contemporary America is experiencing its finest hours, certainly since the days of vaudeville.

<sup>14</sup>James Walcott argues that today's club comics are not worthy successors of the "new wave" tradition. Rather, he sees them as heirs of the traditional professional standup comedy with its emphasis on commercial success, mass-media exposure, shorter routines, more concern with laughter and entertainment than message, and slick, polished style. Moreover, Walcott laments that the young professionals today are less interesting, less socially relevant: "most comedians are ignoring the shifts in American Society, mostly ignoring politics . . . ignoring quirks in the quest for status and power in a society that demands success, overlooking even the anomalous state of affairs between men and women, a great subject in these confusing, post-liberation days." "The Young Comedians: But Seriously Folks," *Village Voice*, 30 Dec. 1974, 8. While it is easy for comedy aficionados to share Walcott's nostalgia for the more pointed satire of some of the "new wave" comedians, his charges simply do not stand up after even an introductory tour of the clubs today. The standup comedians of the past decade compare favorably in style and substance with those of any previous era.

<sup>15</sup>See studies by Howard Pollio and various associates: Pollio and John Edgerly, "Comedians and Comic Style," in Antony Chapman and Hugh Foot, eds., *Humour and Laughter: Theory, Research, and Applications* (London: Wiley, 1976); Pollio, John Edgerly, and Robert Gordan, "The Comedians World: Some Tentative Mappings," *Psychological Reports*, 30 (1972), 387-91; and "Predictability and the Appreciation of Comedy," *Bulletin of the Psychonomic Society*, 4 (1974), 229-32.

members, and sometimes heckling and the putting down of the heckler (also relaxing the audience, making them feel less vulnerable (it doesn't *really* hurt . . . much . . . even if you are the target). So-called "kamikaze" comedians such as Don Rickles make the insult banter a feature of their act, but that is a special brand of standup comedy not necessarily connected with the process of establishing a community.

The comedian then establishes his or her comic persona, discussing personal background, life-style, and some attitudes and beliefs. This allows the audience to accept the comedian's marginal status and to establish that the mood of comic license is operative. This mood is accentuated by encouraging applause and laughter, thereby establishing a tone of gaiety and fun. Then the comedy routine itself can begin.

The styles of standup comedy differ almost as much as the content of jokes and joke routines themselves, but the essence of the art is creative distortion. Such distortion is achieved through exaggeration, stylization, incongruous context, and burlesque. (Treating that which is usually respected disrespectfully and vice versa). These and other techniques all disrupt expectation and reorder it plausibly but differently from its original state. There are dozens of theories explaining why this is humorous, ranging from formal analyses that stress incongruity reconciled or the simultaneous consideration of opposites to theories that stress socially functional factors such as superiority, hostility, aggression, taboo violation, and so forth.<sup>16</sup> Comedians themselves, like most popular artists, tend to eschew theory in favor of trial-and-error practice ("I don't know why it works and I don't care," "I learn from others and try things out, keeping what works for me," "I express what *I* think is funny and let the audience decide," are the frequently voiced opinions).

The observer has to agree that it does work, most of the time. Audiences laugh and enjoy themselves, but they also express themselves, nodding concurrence, applauding, and offering verbal encouragement. When members of the audience are asked to discuss what they liked about comedy performance and why they liked it, they are usually not much more helpful than the performers. "It was funny," "He was cool, great," "I could really identify with that," "that's just like my life," "he's crazy, really nuts," "he was wild, far out." When pressed they will often assert agreement with the content of the comedy or sympathy with the comedian's persona, but perhaps here they are pushed into such overt self-perception by their knowledge of what the questioner wants to hear.

There is much more work to be done if we are to appreciate properly the role of

<sup>16</sup>Humor theory is an indispensable if unpleasant part of any study of the social and cultural meaning of comedy. Recent books such as Antony Chapman and Hugh Foot, *It's a Funny Thing, Humour* (London: Wiley, 1977); and the two-volume *Handbook of Humor Research*, ed. Paul McGhee and Jeffrey Goldstein (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1984) survey the entire field of contemporary humor research and introduce the appropriate, more specific studies.

standup comedy in America. An authoritative, comprehensive history of the genre is necessary so that we can appreciate what has changed as well as what has remained constant. Thorough studies of joke texts and comedy routines are needed as well as more careful analyses of forms and techniques. We need ethnographic and demographic research to clarify, to substantiate, and no doubt to correct the theoretical assumptions about the performer-audience relationship and the motives and functions of the ritual. Until standup comedy is studied as a social phenomenon, we can only speculate concerning its real meaning. It is safe to say, however, that standup comedy in America operates within a universal tradition, both historically and across cultures, that it confronts just about all of the profoundly important aspects of our culture and our society, and that it seems to have an important role allowing for expression of shared beliefs and behavior, changing social roles and expectations.