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Comedy and distinction: the cultural currency of a 'good' sense of humour

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COMEDY AND DISTINCTION



THE
CULTURAL
CURRENCY
OF A 'GOOD'
SENSE OF
HUMOUR

SAM FRIEDMAN



Introduction: Funny to Whom?

In January 2011, the scheduling plans of Britain's biggest TV station, BBC 1, were leaked to the press. After the recent success of BBC comedies such as *Outnumbered* and *My Family*, BBC1 Controller Danny Cohen apparently told his team of producers that BBC Comedy was becoming 'too middle class', and failing in its responsibility to appeal to working class viewers (Gammell, 2011; Revoir, 2011; Leith, 2011). Attempting to clarify Cohen's position, a BBC source told *The Daily Telegraph*: '[Danny] feels the BBC has lost its variety and become too focused on formats about comfortable, well-off middle-class families whose lives are perhaps more reflective of BBC staff than viewers in other parts of the UK. One of his priorities is getting more programming that reflects different social classes and what he describes as 'blue collar' comedies. In the past, programmes like *Porridge*, *Birds of a Feather* and *Bread* were about real working families and the workings of their lives. Danny is conscious there are not programmes like that on BBC1 at the moment and is making it a priority to change that. The key point is to make everyone feel like they are engaged with BBC1' (Pettie, 2011).

Within 24 hours this leak had caused a media storm. Columnists, sitcom writers and comedians all rushed to denounce the comments. Cohen, most argued, was being fundamentally short-sighted, even patronising. But most importantly, he was neglecting the golden rule of comedy – above all *it has to be funny*. It is not about who is being represented in comedy, Vicky Frost argued in *The Guardian*, or indeed what type of people are watching, 'it's about the jokes' (Frost, 2011). Similarly,

giving an industry perspective Alan Simpson and Ray Galton, creators of *Steptoe and Son*, told *The Daily Mail*, ‘Cohen is missing the point, good comedy is classless. The best comedies are funny regardless of whether their characters operate at the depths of society or in middle-class comfort’ (Simpson and Galton, 2011). Likewise, Jeremy Lloyd, creator of *Are You Being Served?* commented: ‘Laughter crosses boundaries of class and age – humour is universal’ (Lloyd, 2011).

Having worked as a critic and magazine publisher in the British comedy industry for the last ten years, I couldn’t help but feel a little bemused by both Cohen’s comments *and* the ensuing reaction. Certainly, I shared the frustrations of those that felt that the BBC1 Controller’s comments were misguided. While I didn’t necessarily support Simpson and Galton’s suggestion that ‘good comedy is classless’, I felt instinctively uncomfortable with Cohen’s presumption that broadcasters can discern the makeup of a comedy audience simply by looking at who is represented within the programme. To me this seemed a simplistic and somewhat reductive assumption, which was wholly unsupported by any empirical audience research.

Yet although I was baffled by Cohen’s comments, I was even more troubled by the media and industry response. Rather than challenging Cohen’s shaky association between comic representation and consumption, most instead argued that the BBC 1 controller had underestimated the one universal that underpins comedy – funniness. But to me this posed an even more fundamental question – *funny to whom?* How can we definitively discern what is and what isn’t actually funny? And why is it that everyone writing about comedy was so sure that their sense of humour was shared by everyone else?

In fact, these questions have captivated and eluded me in equal measure throughout my involvement in comedy. As a comedy critic at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, I have reviewed hundreds of comedy shows, representing every possible style and approach. And what has always fascinated me about my role as a critic is that I am somehow handed the power to decide, on behalf of my magazine’s audience, whether a piece of comedy is funny or not. However, I have never judged a comedian’s

funniness in terms of how much they made their audience laugh. Of course audience reactions have a bearing on comedy reviews, but I'm yet to meet a critic that has written a review based solely on audience reaction. The more pressing issue for me, as a comedy critic, is not what is funny to everyone, but what is funny to *me* – according to my sense of humour and my aesthetic criteria. My role may be to communicate an authoritative sense of which comedians are funny, but the truth is such judgments will never accord with everyone's sense of humour.

Indeed, if there is one thing that I have learnt from a decade of comedy criticism it is that there is no such thing as 'universally funny'. Despite what all those criticising Danny Cohen might say, a piece of comedy is never simply funny or unfunny. Indeed, as a keen observer of live comedy audiences, I have always been fascinated by the lack of uniformity in what people find funny, by the diversity of aesthetic experience enjoyed during a comedy performance. This diversity is apparent not just in the kinds of people at *different* comedy gigs (which, incidentally, is striking), but also the diversity of people, and their aesthetic reactions, within the *same* gigs. Once people are engrossed in a comedy performance, many don't laugh at the same jokes, and even when they *do* they're not necessarily laughing at the same time, or with the same levels of enthusiasm.

Such observations about comedy, and its vast interpretative diversity, acted as the main catalyst for undertaking this book. In 2008, after years of informally thinking about comedy consumption, I realised that I wanted to take things a step further and understand it sociologically and empirically.

Moreover, in doing so, I didn't want to make presumptions about what audiences find funny, or assume their reactions based on comic representation. Unfortunately, such approaches are not just confined to the media; they also dominate academic literature on comedy. Indeed, in disciplines as wide as English literature, cultural studies, media studies, film and television studies and sociology, there is a long tradition of

assuming audience reactions to comedy¹. In some cases these have echoed Cohen in presuming modalities of consumption from analysis of comic representation (Wagg, 1998: 2; Thomas, 1998: 59; Stott, 2005: 119; Harvey, 1987: 665-678), and in other instances audience interpretation and makeup has been presupposed solely in terms of a comedian's authorial intention (Gray, 2009: 154; Rosengard, 1989: 9; Medhurst, 2007: 194-99; Wilmut and Rosengard, 1989: 30-45; Sutton, 2000: 23-32).

However, in this book, I wanted to purposefully question such approaches. Echoing a multitude of literature highlighting the diverse ways audiences interpret cultural texts (Morley, 1978; Ang, 1985; Hill, 2007), my aim was to interrogate the full *spectrum* of British comedy taste. I wanted to understand what kind of comedy *different* people like, how they read and make sense of this comedy, and in turn what their tastes reveal about their sense of humour². As a sociologist, I also wanted to examine

¹ The problem here is less one of research deliberately rejecting the notion that audience responses to comedy are complex, and more that humour is a woefully under-researched area (particularly considering its prevalence within all societies) and therefore the frameworks that define the field are still being thrashed out. The rather amorphous field referred to as Comedy Studies often argues that theories of humour can be divided into three main kinds; Superiority Theory, Incongruity Theory, and Relief Theory. Superiority Theory suggests humour is a result of what Thomas Hobbes calls "a sudden glory" (1991 [1651], p45) whereby jokes assert the laugher's superiority to whomever or whatever is being laughed at; Incongruity Theory argues we find funny things that are not where they should be and thereby defy our expectations (Kant, 1931 [1790], p223); and Relief Theory takes a psychological approach, seeing jokes as a mechanism for expressing repressed ideas and desires (Freud, 2001 [1905]). The first two of these theories consistently make assumptions about audiences. Superiority Theory assumes the social hierarchies comedy draws upon are straightforward and understood in the same way by everyone, whereas Incongruity Theory assumes everyone will respond to incongruities in the same way. While Relief Theory is an analysis of individual psychology, it remains precisely at the level of the individual, and fails to explore how the individual's response might change from context to context. As these theories remain the starting point for much analysis of comedy, it is therefore unsurprising that the specifics of audience response remain sidelined in the study of humour.

² It is worth noting that some useful research does exist on comedy audiences. Most of this has focused on how audiences interpret representations of race, class, sexuality and nationhood in comedy (Jhally and Lewis, 1992; Bodroghkozy, 1995; Doty, 1993). For example, Gillespie (2003) has looked at the way British-Asian communities carry out 'alternative readings' of many British sitcoms. Other research has highlighted the limited power of authorial intention in understanding comic consumption (Turnbull, 2008; Weaver, 2010). Weaver (2010: 44), for example, has studied the intentionality of anti-racist comedians, cautioning that such 'resistance meaning is never automatically successful'. Using examples from British comedians Lenny Henry and Reginald D Hunter, Weaver argues that anti-racist humour is complex and multilayered but also, crucially, ambiguous, meaning the rhetoric can sometimes act to support rather than challenge racial stereotypes. In Britain, such interpretative diversity was famously observed in relation to Alf Garnett, the central character in 1960s sitcom *Till*

whether certain social demographic variables may be related to this patterning of comedy taste. Indeed, my most central concern was to understand whether some comedy is valued higher than others in British society, and subsequently whether possessing taste for more legitimate forms of comedy constitutes a tangible resource in social life – a form of ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu, 1986).

In this way, the research was partly designed to replicate Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) classic work on the relationship between French social class and cultural taste. However, it also attempted to extend, update and critique Bourdieu’s work in light of the widespread social change that has taken place since he wrote *Distinction* in the 1960s. I wanted to reflect key advancements in the literature on British cultural consumption, most significantly the recent intervention of Bennett et al’s (2009) *Culture, Class, Distinction*, an extensive study that explored both the patterning of British cultural consumption while also assessing the contemporary role of cultural capital in shaping social stratification. Although this book certainly represented a landmark study in cultural sociology, I noticed a conspicuous ‘comedy-shaped’ hole in the data. Although the authors claimed to examine a ‘comprehensive’ range of cultural tastes, the ever-growing industries of live and television comedy were almost completely ignored.

Considering this omission, one of the primary contributions of this book was always going to entail plugging this ‘comedy gap’ in the literature. Yet it is worth noting - even here in the introduction - that the findings reported here do not simply act as fillers to Bennett et al’s otherwise exhaustive data set, augmenting and supporting their main findings. In fact, if anything, the two key inferences that emerge from this

Death Us Do Part. Although writer Johnny Speight intended to Alf Garnett as a parody of the bigotry that existed among sections of the British population in the 1960s, some audiences interpreted the character as celebrating racism (Husband, 1988). From a different perspective, Kuipers (2006) has worked extensively on the notion of comedy *taste*. She argues that comic preferences act as a strong marker of social class, age and education in the Netherlands. In particular, her findings examine how the well-educated draw strong symbolic boundaries between what they consider to be their more ‘‘highbrow’’ appreciation of comedy and the ‘‘lowbrow’’ appreciation of those with less education. Such findings have also recently been corroborated in a Belgian context by Claessens and Dhoest (2010).

research act to challenge and dispute the findings reported by Bennett and his colleagues.

First, I strongly problematise Bennett et al's (2009: 254) central assertion that cultural omnivorousness now constitutes the most influential expression of cultural capital in Britain. In contrast, I find only partial signs of omnivorousness in the consumption of comedy, limited largely to those from socially mobile backgrounds. Furthermore, for these mobile individuals, deploying omnivorous comedy taste invariably acts as a social hindrance rather than a form of cultural capital.

In a further rebuttal to notions of widespread omnivorousness, the book goes on to show that unusually strong distinctions exist in the patterning of comedy taste. Moreover, it argues that comedy now represents an emerging field for younger generations of the culturally privileged to activate their cultural capital resources. However, unlike previous studies on cultural capital and taste, it finds that field-specific 'comic cultural capital' is mobilised less through taste for legitimate 'objects' of comedy and more through the expression of rarefied and 'disinterested' *styles* of comic appreciation. In short, it is 'embodied' rather than 'objectified' forms of cultural capital that largely distinguish the privileged in the field of comedy.

Second, the book also strongly challenges Bennett et al's claim that the British middle classes have ceased to use culture as a means of drawing symbolic boundaries. Instead, my findings indicate that comedy taste not only plays a central role in the expression of middle class identities, but more significantly it also acts as a tool for the culturally privileged to identify and pathologise those with low cultural capital. By equating certain forms of comedy taste with disparaging notions of personal 'worth', these respondents reveal a stark form of cultural snobbery and render visible comedy's role in contemporary processes of symbolic violence.

These then, in their most stripped down form, are perhaps the two overarching contributions this research brings to current debates in cultural sociology. The layout of the work is organised as follows. Part 1 is broadly concerned with situating the

study historically and sociologically. In Chapter 2, I begin this process by sketching the history of British comic production. This is important because to understand how comedy taste is connected to social stratification it is first imperative to understand comedy's traditional position in the cultural hierarchy. Chapter 2 thus charts the changing cultural value of British comedy, from its roots in 'lowbrow' music hall, variety and early television sitcom, to the rehabilitation enacted by the Alternative Comedy Movement, and finally to its contemporary status as a diverse field arrayed with 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' artists. Chapter 3 attempts to deepen this historical analysis by locating the book within the vast sociological literature on cultural consumption. In particular, it attempts to disentangle Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital and explain its operationalisation within the book as both a *resource* accumulated via socialisation and an *asset* realisable through objectified and embodied expressions of taste. Here I also briefly set out my mixed methods research design, which included a large-scale survey of comedy taste and follow-up interviews, an ethnography of comedy talent scouts, textual analysis of comedy reviews, and a number of interviews with key comedians. I also follow Bourdieu's example by analysing survey responses using Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA), a statistical approach that provides a useful visual tool for understanding the patterning of taste and which, crucially, does not smuggle in assumptions about social-demographic variables.

Part 2 relates the major findings of both the quantitative and qualitative components of the book. Chapter 4 begins by analysing responses to the survey, reporting that the most significant comedy taste division separates the 'highbrow' comedy taste of those with privileged cultural capital resources from the largely 'lowbrow' tastes of those with less cultural capital. It thus argues that liking legitimate forms of comedy does appear to act as a partial status marker in British society and that certain comedians can be identified as *objects of cultural capital*. However, it goes on to warn against overstating the significance of these quantitative findings. In particular, it notes that while taste for some items of British comedy may be associated with cultural capital resources, preferences for the majority of British comedy is free from such symbolic baggage and evenly distributed among social groups. Yet, while many British

comedians do not hold any intrinsic ‘rarity’, Chapter 5 goes on to explain that the culturally privileged maintain their sense of distinction by employing distinct *styles* of comedy appreciation. These aesthetic orientations are rooted in the mode of cultural socialisation experienced by these respondents and, as they are unavailable to those with fewer resources, come to represent a powerful expression of their *embodied cultural capital*.

Chapter 6 then changes tack slightly to examine a section of the sample somewhat ignored thus far – those with mixed cultural capital resources. It notes that it is only among these respondents, particularly those who are upwardly mobile, that it is possible to see true signs of comedy omnivorousness. However, unlike other portrayals of omnivorousness as a progressive and elective choice, Chapter 6 indicates that comedy omnivorousness is usually the result of lifecourse trajectories. Significantly, it also indicates that such trajectories often leave these respondents stuck between two dominant taste cultures – more culturally homeless than culturally omnivorous.

Part 3 is concerned with broadening the analysis and examining the wider sociological implications of the patterning of British comedy taste. Chapter 7 therefore aims to explicitly examine the symbolic boundaries separating the comedy tastes of different social groups. It shows that the culturally privileged, in particular, draw remarkably strong aesthetic, moral and personal boundaries on the basis of comedy taste, with some such aggressive judgments arguably constituting a form of symbolic violence. In Chapter 8 and 9, the wider implications of comedy as cultural capital moves from symbolic boundaries to issues of *legitimacy*. Chapter 8, in particular, uses textual analysis to explore the role played by comedy critics as mediators of cultural value in the comedy field. It concludes that although critics have not been able to fully legitimise comedy in the cultural field, the similarities between their aesthetic judgments and those of the culturally privileged demonstrates how intermediaries act to legitimise certain styles of comic appreciation as cultural capital. Chapter 9 moves from comedy critics to comedy scouts, and in so doing focuses on the more veiled form of tastemaking enacted by these intermediaries. In particular, it

illustrates how scouts act to intensify comedy taste boundaries, making scouting judgments based on assumptions about imagined audiences and inadvertently directing more legitimate comedy to privileged audiences and vice versa.

Finally, the conclusion draws together the findings from the previous chapters, reflecting on their implications for those working on cultural consumption and Bourdieusian theory. Centrally, it concludes that proclamations of a new era of cultural eclecticism and tolerance may be dangerously premature. While snobbery may be receding in some cultural fields, these findings illustrate that the contemporary field of British comedy is marked by remarkably strong symbolic boundaries. In particular, certain legitimate comedy tastes and styles of comic appreciation now represent an important means for new generations of the culturally privileged to demonstrate their cultural distinction.

Part 1: Positioning the Research

Chapter 2: From Music Hall to the Alternative Boom: The Changing Field of British Comedy

When Alternative Comedy started in 1979, no university educated person went to stand up. But I suppose we attracted a new audience that's grown and grown. Audiences seem better behaved now. They will sit and let complex ideas be related, they don't mind a bit of a lecture (Alexei Sayle in Friedman, 2013)

Introduction

British Comedy is booming. Following the recent resurgence of TV stand-up and the continuing growth of the live circuit, comedy has emerged as a thriving billion pound industry (Logan, 2010; McDonald, 2010; Dessau, 2010)³. It also represents one of the few culture arenas to experience significant growth in the continuing economic downturn (Salter, 2009; Thompson, 2009).

Yet despite this, sociology – and indeed academia in general – has largely ignored comedy. Indeed, the art form has been absent from all recent large-scale studies of British cultural participation and consumption (see Goldthorpe and Chan, 2005; Skelton, 2007; Savage et al, 2013; Bennett et al's; 2009: 132-151).

In order to understand this conspicuous omission, and before addressing it empirically - as I set out to do in this book - it is first imperative to consider the changing field of comic *production*. For to properly connect comedy *taste* to social stratification it is first important to understand the cultural value traditionally assigned to British comedy, and more specifically, how its legitimacy has changed over time.

One useful theoretical tool for mapping cultural production is Bourdieu's notion of 'the field'. Bourdieu used the field as a conceptual metaphor to describe the dynamic social space inhabited by cultural producers (and indeed all cultural actors). Each actor has a relational position in this space and uses their access to specific forms of capital - economic, cultural and social - to compete for power in the field (Bourdieu, 1993: 55-70). In *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993: 53), Bourdieu noted that the field of culture is split between two poles or sub-fields that 'co-exist' but never overlap (128). At one end, the 'restricted sub-field' houses autonomous 'high' cultural production where financial profit is rejected and 'art for art's sake'

³ There are currently over 200 comedy venues in London alone (Londonisfunny.com, 2011) and Jongleurs, Britain's largest chain of comedy clubs, recently announced a multimillion expansion of their venues throughout the UK (Hurley, 2010).

constitutes the dominant ideology. The logic of production here is ‘creator-orientated’ (Gans, 1974), meaning audiences are expected to adjust to the artist’s creative intentions. These intentions, according to Bourdieu, are focused around the idea of the disinterested aesthetic. This derives from Kant’s (1987) notion of ‘pure aesthetics’, where true artistic beauty can only be found if an artist (or consumer) separates themselves from any physical, emotional or functional investment in an art work. Aesthetic objectivity can then be achieved through the operationalisation of a ‘disinterested gaze’, in which the virtue of artistic form, not function, is allowed to shine through (Kant, 1987: 234).

In contrast, the ‘mass sub-field’ of cultural production constitutes the ‘discredited’ (p39) arm of the cultural field, where ‘business is business’ and ‘profane’ cultural goods such as pop music, television *and comedy* are produced to reach the largest possible audience for maximum economic profit. Here the dominant logic is ‘audience-orientated’ (Gans, 1974), meaning artists must attend to the audience’s requirements and make the meaning of their work clear. This involves catering to the ‘popular aesthetic’ or the ‘taste for necessity’, whereby goods provide immediate sensual gratification, relate directly to everyday life and ‘imply the subordination of form to function’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 32)

Operationalising Bourdieu’s ‘field of cultural production’, this introductory chapter aims to chart the changing field of British comedy. The history of comedy is of course a vast area of study - perhaps worthy of a book in its own right - and this brief overview certainly does not claim to provide an exhaustive account. Instead, its more modest aim is to outline the major developments that have occurred in recent British comic history and relate these to the art form’s evolving position in the cultural hierarchy.

The chapter begins by briefly explaining how, even before a distinct field of production had been established, deficiencies of form and the transgressive role of the body had relegated comedy to the lower reaches of the British cultural hierarchy. When comedy split from theatre in 1843 - and the field was more officially

established - this denigration only continued. However, the chapter then turns its focus to a particular 'moment' in British comedy that occurred between 1979 and 1988. During this period, 23 young comedians initiated a significant re-evaluation of British comedy now popularly known as the 'Alternative Comedy Movement'. This movement greatly altered the field of British comedy, introducing new forms of critical, experimental, surreal and political comedy. Finally, the chapter examines the contemporary field of comedy production. It explains that despite Bourdieu's inertly 'lowbrow' characterisation of popular culture, today's comedy field is characterised by huge variety, with forms of 'mass' stand-up and sitcom jostling for position with more 'restricted' strands of comedy.

The Pre-Field of British Comedy

Deficiencies of Form

Academic deliberations concerning the place of comedy date back to Ancient Greece and most significantly Aristotle's *Poetics* (335BC), where comedy was first discussed as a form of drama. Notably, comedy was defined in relation to its opposition with tragedy, a binary distinction that has proved remarkably persistent in British literary culture (Stott, 2005). Whereas Aristotle saw tragedy as an 'imitation of all action that is admirable, complete and possesses magnitude' (Aristotle, 1996:10), he viewed comedy as a representation of the ridiculous and unworthy elements of human behaviour. Comic characters were thus presented in Greek Drama as 'disgraceful' figures that failed to uphold moral values and were characterised by vulgarity and inferiority (Critchley, 2002: 88). Indeed, for Aristotle, the opposition between comedy and tragedy symbolised the wider conflict between the two aesthetic capabilities of the human character; tragedy representing the transcendental goals of 'high-art' and comedy the 'low' counterpoint of vulgar entertainment (Stott, 2005).

Yet comedy's early artistic deficiencies were not just attributed to vulgarity. It was also discredited for the limited nature of its form. Roman New Comedy, for instance, which incorporated a body of 26 plays by Plautus and Terence, were built upon stereotypical characters that were indistinguishable from one play to another (Konstan, 1995). Such one-dimensional characterisation was also matched by

formulaic plots. Plays rejected realistic human portrayals in favour of repetitive themes, such as the forbidden love of a Roman man for a prostitute or a slave girl (Konstan, 1995). According to Stott (2002), the basic structure of Roman New Comedy went on to have an enduring effect on British comedy and greatly influenced the development of British ‘Citizen Comedy’ in the 1580s and 1590s. Here the plays of William Haughton and particularly Ben Jonson dealt in similarly repetitive themes, but reflected the onset of modernity and the capitalist economy⁴.

Comedy and The Body

Although comedy’s early denigration had much to do with its restricted form, its lowly place in the cultural hierarchy was also the result of its inextricable relationship with the body. Again, a key theme in Greek thought was the divided nature of the human form, capable of both stunning beauty and foul excretions. Physical beauty was therefore considered a reflection of ‘absolute beauty’, symbolising good, virtue and truth (Plato, 1951: 94-96). Developing alongside this idealisation of beauty was an emphasis, particularly among social elites, on mastering the body and making it conform to appropriate codes of ‘civility’. In the *Civilising Process*, Elias (1993) demonstrated that the governing of bodily manners and suppression of ‘bestial functions’ had been key in the development of modern Bourgeois civilisation:

The greater or lesser discomfort we feel towards people who discuss their bodily functions more openly, who conceal and restrain these functions less than we do, is one of the dominant feelings expressed in the judgment of ‘barbaric’ or ‘uncivilised’ (Elias, 1993: 58-59).

Notably, however, much medieval and early modern British comedy was situated directly against these notions of civility. Overtly physical, sexual, grotesque and obscene, comedy functioned by returning the individual to the uncivilised body. This direct inversion of social etiquette was most obvious in the holiday festivities of the Elizabethan era (1558–1603). Barber (1963) argues that the loosening of social controls and deliberate merrymaking experienced during holidays such as May Day

⁴ For instance, in Jonson’s *Volpone* (1605) and *The Alchemist* (1610), it is the pursuit of money that replaces the slave girl in becoming the narrative focus.

and Shrove Tuesday both informed and was reflected in the comedy of the period. The best dramatic example of this was arguably the ‘Saturnalian Comedy’ of Shakespeare. In plays such as *Twelfth Night* (1601), the plot centres around the ‘release’ from social norms experienced by characters during the festive period, where ‘the energy normally occupied in maintaining inhibitions is freed for celebration’ (Barber, 1963: 7).

However, arguably the most explicit reference to the body in comedy studies derives from Bakhtin (1984) in his analysis of the early modern comic novelist Francois Rabelais (c.1494-1553). Bakhtin characterises the early modern period in terms of two opposing cultures, the sombre, Church-driven ‘Official’ culture, and the popular, boisterous culture of the common people. Bakhtin argues that this popular culture could be characterised as a spontaneous expression of ‘natural’ feeling, where people were unmediated by expectations of bodily formality. In particular, the main vehicle for this popular voice was ‘Carnival’, a special period of sensual indulgence before the Lenten fast, which involved a temporary suspension of all social rules and etiquette. For Bakhtin, the carnival operated according to a ‘comic logic’, where graphic and humorous descriptions of bodily functions and sexual activity represented a deliberate mocking of the dominant order (1984; 68-74). He celebrates these comic expressions as a form of ‘grotesque realism’, which reached beyond societal limits and interacted with the world in a distinctly sensual way:

Wherever men laugh and curse, their speech is filled with bodily images. The body copulates, defecates, overeats and men’s speech is flooded with genitals, bellies, urine, disease, noses and dismembered parts (Bakhtin, 1984: 319).

While Bakhtin sought to romanticise the grotesque, the fact remains that the enduring connection between comedy and the barbaric body only added to the art form’s early deprecation within British culture. This connection was also augmented by the traditional figure of the clown or fool. Traceable in the Church festivals of the Middle Ages, such as the *festum stultorum* (the ‘feast of fools’) and the *factorem papam* (the ‘fool’s pope’), the notion of the clown was perhaps most vividly developed in the work of Shakespeare (Barber, 1963). Figures such as Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*

(1601) and Falstaff in *Henry IV* (1597) were exaggeratedly physical, distorted and disproportionate figures that derived their comedy either from the way they moved (Malvolio) or from their general physical degeneracy (Falstaff). This tradition was continued by a long line of popular British clowns, most notably the Regency comedian Joseph Grimaldi (1778-1837) and Charles Wetch, better known as Groucho (1880-1959).

Finally, it is also worth considering comedy's relationship with the forbidden physical pleasure of laughter. According to Stott (2005), hostility to laughter within cultural circles derived from early Christianity, where all sensual pleasure was considered suspicious and antithetical to the pursuit of pious abstinence. The more a person's body was closed to the world, the more it was considered open to god (2005: 129-131). Such ethical opposition to laughter remained strong in clerical circles throughout the early modern period and by the 18th century extended to exclude laughter more firmly from 'official' British culture (Roodenburg, 1997). Comedy and laughter were considered enemies of social distinction and Stott (2005) notes that an edict of the 18th century implored that 'men of quality' did not laugh on grounds of breeding (2005: 129). Laughter here was seen not as an enemy of god but an enemy of intellectual enlightenment. As Addison (1979) claims:

Laughter slackens and unbraces the Mind, weakens the Faculties and causes a kind of Remissness, and Dissolution in all the powers of the soul' (Addison and Steele, 1979, vol 2: 237-238).⁵

The British Field of Comedy: 1843-1979

Although comedy's lowly position in British culture may have had a strong historical precedent, it was arguably not until The Theatres Act of 1843 that it began to resemble a distinct field of cultural production. Before this comedy had mainly constituted a genre of theatre, but now it was able to assume a separate identity within the performing arts. Institutions, networks and genres of comedy all began to surface and a distinct 'universe of belief' began to emerge (Becker, 1982). In particular, The

⁵ For a more detailed explanation of the role of laughter in British cultural and religious history see Stott (2005: 127-146)

Theatres Act gave local councils the power to license theatres for the first time and this paved the way for the first true institution of comedy: the Victorian music hall. Boisterous and proudly working class, music hall was self-consciously skewed towards Bourdieu's sub-field of 'mass' cultural production (Bratton, 1986). A 1909 Home-Office memo summarised the Lord Chamberlain's assessment of its cultural worth:

It injures the theatre both financially and artistically, and produces a degraded taste for hurried, frivolous and brainless entertainment (Public Record Office in Rutherford, 1986).

Of the various forms of 'brainless entertainment' on offer, it was undoubtedly musical comedy that 'gave music hall its distinctive voice' (Bailey, 1984: 52). It was also through this musical tradition that the first meaningful genres of British comedy were established.

Physical and Obscene Comedy

The first and most notorious style of music hall comedy was the 'vulgar' comic singer, who combined sexual suggestiveness with lavatorial innuendo (in a manner reminiscent of Bakhtin's (1984) 'grotesque realism'). Such obscene comedy was hugely popular among music hall audiences, but was denigrated within high-art cultural circles as an 'agent of moral and cultural degeneration' (Bailey, 1984: 14). Notable early purveyors of this tradition include Dan Leno and Marie Lloyd, who both regularly threatened the livelihood of music hall operators, their risqué lyrics invoking the wrath of moral and social reform lobbies who called for 'fun without filth' (1984:16). However, arguably the most influential 'obscene' comic of music hall era was 'cheeky chappie' Max Miller. Miller was brash, mischievous and well-known for his risqué 'blue' humour. Indeed, suggestive double entendres such as this even earned him a ban from the BBC from 1932-1937:

I was walking along this narrow mountain pass - so narrow that nobody else could pass you, when I saw a beautiful blonde walking towards me. A beautiful blonde with not a stitch on, yes, not a stitch on, lady. Cor blimey, I didn't know whether to toss myself off or block her passage (Miller, 2002).

The second comic tradition to develop from music hall was physical comedy. Although strongly influenced by the traditional figure of the clown or fool, physical comedians of the music hall era, such as George Formby, Gracie Fields and Nellie Wallace, used their physicality in a new, more direct way (Double, 2002). These comedians interacted directly with their audience, creating a rapport similar to contemporary stand-up comedians. Wallace, for example, cultivated a grotesque image as a gawky unglamorous spinster, but further exploited this physicality with humorous movement and exaggerated speech (Double, 2002). Other comedians like Tommy Trinder were known for physical trademarks like a 'funny face', or in the case of 4ft 6in Little Titch, an unusual stature (Rutherford, 1986). Another physical trademark was impersonation. Whether 'Lions Comiques' where working class men pretended to be upper class 'toffs', or gender cross-dressing, such impersonation relied upon physical incongruity. Arguably the most famous drag queen of the era was Arthur Lucan's 'Old Mother Riley', a cantankerous Irish washerwoman known for 'her facial and bodily contortions, malapropism-filled tirades, and seasoned knockabout slapstick' (Dacre, 2006: 4).

As music hall began to recede in the 1920s and 1930s, it was succeeded by Variety, a more sanitised and upmarket format for presenting diverse entertainment. Variety launched the careers of many successful British comedians, but like music hall was largely considered low brow (Double, 2007). Variety also coincided with the growth of the British cinema industry, and the popularity of many Variety comedians extended to a much wider audience through film (Dacre, 2006). Again, the genres of physical and obscene comedy dominated the Variety era with most performers falling into one or both categories. In the obscene tradition, comedians such as Frank Randle and later Benny Hill enjoyed success, although it was largely physical comedy that transferred best onto film. Performers like Charlie Chaplin and Laurel and Hardy were synonymous with stunts, acrobatics and exaggerated violence - a kind of 'socially acceptable masochism' (Stott, 2005) - where comedy was created through clownishly exploiting human movement and pain. Later in the 1950s and 1960s, Norman Wisdom also became popular with a strongly physical approach. His character, 'The Gump', was well-known for wearing a suit at least two sizes too

small with a crumpled collar and mangled tie. However, the biggest comic success of the period was arguably the series of 29 *Carry On* films (1958-1978), which combined both physical and obscene comedy in the form of contrived slapstick and a constant stream of double-entendres.

Sitcom, Light Entertainment and 'Trad' Stand-up

By the 1960s and 1970s, Variety comedy had begun to die out and was being usurped by the new medium of television and its main comic output, the situation comedy or 'sitcom'. As Wagg (2003) notes, the sitcom quickly became a staple of British broadcasting, with notable exemplars of the era such as *Hancock's Half-Hour* (BBC, 1954-1961), *On The Buses* (LWT, 1969-1973), *Last of The Summer Wine* (BBC1, 1973-2010), and *Dad's Army* (BBC1, 1968-1977) regularly attracting mass viewing figures of over 15 million (Clark, 2006). However, despite their widespread popularity, most sitcoms were widely discredited by cultural critics⁶. As Mills (2009: 2) notes, sitcoms were traditionally perceived to be 'of less worth, of less invention, and less social value' than other forms of TV programming. One central reason for this derision was the form of sitcom – focusing on regular characters, familiar scenery and a self-contained plot – which, as a formula, was condemned as 'banal', 'conservative' and 'restrictive' (Wagg, 2003). Other criticisms focused around the sitcom's perennial use of canned laughter to signal its comic intent. As Mills (2005: 51) notes, by placing artificial laughter at jokes, 'the sitcom closed down alternative readings of its content', inhibiting the principle of aesthetic autonomy so central to notions of 'high' art.

As well as broadcasting, the death of Variety also heralded a new era of live comedy. In particular, it acted as the catalyst for the development of a stand-up 'circuit' governed by the Club and Institute Union (CIU). This new circuit revolved around working men's clubs and became synonymous with a new genre of comedy known as Traditional or 'Trad' Stand-up. In particular, Trad comedy was known for its distinctly formulaic approach, where comedians rarely had proprietary rights over their comic material and instead bought jokes 'in bulk' from the 'enormous repertoire' stored by the CIU (Critchley, 2002: 56-60). Jokes tended to be fast-paced

⁶ *Hancock's Half-Hour* was a notable exception to this critical disdain (Goddard, 1991).

and mainly concentrated on simple frames, such as ‘one-liners, short-jokes and wise cracks’, which inevitably led to ‘Trad’ being characterised as ‘low’ and unsophisticated (Stebbins, 2000: 56)

However, it was more than just the structure of Trad stand-up which elicited cultural condemnation. The material often had an ‘aggressive subtext, expressing in particular racist, sexist and homophobic sentiments’⁷ (Stott, 2005: 114). Comedians such as Bernard Manning, Frank Carson, Les Dennis and Jim Davidson were synonymous with ‘trad’ and during the 1970s were largely successful in introducing this style of humour to mainstream TV. A string of ‘light entertainment’ sitcoms emerged, such as *Curry and Chips* (LWT, 1969), *It Ain’t Half Hot Mum* (BBC, 1974-1981), *Mind Your Language* (LWT, 1977-1979) and *Love Thy Neighbour* (Thames, 1972-1976), all of which relied on racial stereotypes, or even the use of ‘blackface’, for much of their humour. The most explicit examples, however, were the popular Granada Television series’ *The Comedians* (ITV 1971-1992), which ran for more than 50 episodes throughout the 1970s, and *The Wheeltappers and Shunters Social Club* (Granada, 1974-1977), which was set in a fictional working men’s club. One of Bernard Manning’s more infamous jokes from *The Comedians* epitomises the ‘trad’ style:

There was a plane crashed in Madrid about six month ago... two hundred Japanese on that plane, broke my fucking heart... Six empty seats there was (Manning, 1993).

It is important to note that such politically sensitive humour wasn’t necessarily first introduced to British comedy by the trad comics. Indeed, racist and sexist undertones can be located throughout the comedy of the music-hall era, especially in stock stereotypes such as ‘the Irish’ or ‘the mother-in-law’. However, the discrimination in music-hall comedy was arguably more implicit than the open intolerance advocated by the trad comics. While this kind of comedy can provide a swift, charged and effective route to belonging, what Medhurst calls a ‘short-cut to community’, the way in which this was achieved was often at the expense of those occupying contrasting

⁷ The roots of this kind of comedy can arguably be found in the ‘superiority theory’ of humour first articulated by Hobbes (1991) and later by Billig (2005). Here humour and comedy are understood as tools for securing ‘insider’ identities by systematically humiliating ‘outsider’ groups.

and challenging identities (Medhurst, 2007: 18). In this sense aestheticians such as Critchley (2002: 121) argue such comedy is ‘reactionary’ and normatively inferior to ‘true’ humour, which ‘does not wound a specific victim but rather focuses on self-mockery’.

Wit/Satire

Despite the prevalence of physical, obscene and ‘trad’ humour, it should be noted that not all British comedy in the 19th and 20th centuries was considered ‘lowbrow’. For instance, comedy continued to constitute an important genre of theatre. The important distinction, however, was that the comic prose of playwrights like Shakespeare and Moliere was generally recoded as ‘wit’ rather than comedy (Palmer, 1994: 56).

Indeed, wit, defined by Addison (1979) as ‘the inventive drawing together of distant ideas for the amusement and intellectual thrill of the listener’ (1979: 189), has played a significant role in the evolving field of British comedy. The emphasis on linguistic inventiveness and intellect, for example, has ensured that this style of comedy has maintained a robust position of legitimacy in the cultural field. In 19th century Britain, Oscar Wilde embodied the sophisticated and intellectual image of wit. In plays such as *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde’s characters use wit as a tool for elevating themselves above the sober requirements of the establishment, seeing its use as a ‘sign of intelligence that equals freedom from conformity’ (Stott, 2005).

Such a tradition of self-professed ‘highbrow’ humour continued in the 20th century through the plays and poetry of Noel Coward (1917-1967), the satirical magazine *Private Eye* (1961-present), the surreal radio comedy of *The Goons* (BBC, 1951-1960), and the subversive TV comedies, *That Was The Week That Was* (BBC, 1962-1963), *Q* (BBC, 1969-1982) and *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* (BBC 1, 1969-1974). It also began to occupy an important position on the live comedy circuit, particularly during the ‘Satire Boom’ of the early 1960s. This was initially spearheaded by the Oxbridge Revue *Beyond The Fringe* (1960), but went on to gain wider prominence through Peter Cook’s satirical London comedy venue *The Establishment Club* (1961-1964) and successive generations of the *Cambridge Footlights* (Carpenter, 2002).

However, despite the considerable influence of wit and satire in British comedy - and the cultural gravitas assigned to its most famous proponents (Medhurst, 2000; Carpenter, 2002) – it is important to note that in statistical terms this kind of ‘legitimate’ comedy only made up a small fraction of overall British comedy output. It was also synonymous with an equally restricted group of ‘elite’ producers, most of whom were graduates from the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge (Carpenter, 2000; Wagg, 2003). Indeed, as Wilmut and Rosengard (1989) have noted, the majority of British Comedy during the 1960s and 1970s followed the mould of ‘lowbrow’ music hall and Variety comedy, manifesting as ‘light’ sitcom or working men’s club-inspired stand-up.

Disrupting The Field: The Birth of Alternative Comedy

From 1979 to 1988 a dramatic re-evaluation of comedy began to take place in Britain. Frustrated by what they saw as the casual bigotry of the ‘trad’ comics and the hackneyed light entertainment of TV sitcoms, a new generation of stand-up comedians emerged around London’s newly opened Comedy Store. Though highly varied in individual style, these comedians were united by an experimental approach to comedy that self-consciously attempted to push beyond the ‘lowbrow’ styles that had previously dominated the field. Drawing upon various authoritative histories of the ‘Alternative Comedy Movement’ (Wilmut, 1989; Double, 2000; White, 2002; Dugein, 2008; Medhurst, 2007; Thompson, 2004; Stott, 2005;), it is possible to identify 23 key protagonists that shaped this crucial ‘moment’ in the field. These include well-known names such as Alexei Sayle, Rik Mayall, Ade Edmondson, Keith Allen, Tony Allen, Robbie Coltrane and later Dawn French, Jennifer Saunders and Ben Elton⁸. Beginning as a loose organisation of stand-ups known as ‘Alternative Cabaret’, the group were eventually successful in setting up a nationwide ‘circuit’ for alternative stand-up. This first toured various pubs, arts centres and student unions, but later developed into a nationwide network of independent comedy clubs specialising in alternative comedy.

⁸ Other key actors were

Moreover, the reach of Alternative Comedy was not just confined to live stand-up. Indeed, the movement was brought to a much larger TV audience first through *Boom Boom...Out Go The Lights* (BBC2 1980) and then most notably through the anarchic sitcom *The Young Ones* (BBC2, 1982-1984) and flagship Channel 4 comedies *The Comic Strip Presents...* (Channel 4, 1982-2005) and *Saturday Live* (Channel 4, 1985-1987). Significantly, though, the alternative comedians not only performed in similar venues and TV programmes, they also constituted a dense social network. Nearly all of the 23, for example, had at least one significant tie with *every* other member, either through friendship, romance or common involvement in a comedy duo, troupe, cabaret, or 'improv' group. Indeed, acting as a diffuse network, the alternative comedians were able to function as a powerful instrument in the rehabilitation of comedy and the subsequent dissemination of new ideas. This new 'comic lexicon' (Ritchie, 1991: 54) is worth examining in more depth.

Post-Punk Political Comedy

One of the most significant cultural shifts effected by the alternative comedians was to take the British tradition of satire and reinvent it as an overtly political form of *stand-up*. Infused with the spirit of punk rock, comedians like Jeremy Hardy, Alexei Sayle, Malcolm Hardee, Tony Allen and Ben Elton advocated a radical political comedy rooted in Socialism. Unlike the elite-educated 'wit' of the Pythons, the main concern of these comics was 'political life as experienced by their audiences – many of them, young, radical and working class' (Wilmot, 1989: xiv). This often meant a collective political project aimed at raising awareness of rising unemployment, economic recession and social division in 1980s Britain. For these comedians, the revolutionary idea was that comedy could be more than just a banal perpetuator of 'false consciousness' and instead become a radical mode of communication to galvanise political action and energy (Rosengard, 1989: 9).

As well as political material, there was also a deliberately cerebral aspect to much of this new comedy. Audiences were expected not just to listen and laugh, as in the 'trad' era, but to possess the aesthetic tools and cultural knowledge to engage with complex ideas and themes. Alexei Sayle epitomised this 'alternative' intellectual

style, his ranting and relentless speed of attack demanding a constant intellectual participation ranging from Sartre references to Brechtian theatre (Wilmot, 1989):

One of the attitudes the working class adopt in this country is to limit their vocabulary – polysyllabic words have been appropriated into a kind of ruling class argot...A lot of what my comedy has been about saying is that you can speak working-class dialect and still express complex ideas (Sayle in Wilmot, 1989: 50).

Together, comedians like Sayle and Keith Allen also dared to transgress the normal emotional response expected from comedy. Their comedy did not necessarily intend to please or invoke laughter, but aimed to challenge audiences. This meant material that probed darkly humorous areas and often invoked unpleasant emotions such as shock, disgust and sadness.

Taking a Critical Approach

Although often overtly left-wing, the alternative comedians were arguably better defined in terms of what they stood *against*. In particular, this involved the vilification of the bigotry attributed to the ‘trad’ generation. Tony Allen, for instance, delighted in using deft parody to reveal the prejudice that was hidden behind much ‘trad’ comedy.

Ok, stand-up comedy, I know what you want...there was this drunk homosexual Pakistani squatter trade-unionist takes my mother-in-law to an Irish restaurant...says to the West-Indian waiter, ‘Waiter, waiter, there’s a racial prejudice in my soup... (Allen in Wilmot, 1989: 34).

Allen and others were responsible, in particular, for championing a form of distinctly ‘critical’ observational stand-up that asked audiences to see humour in the weaknesses of their own lives, not others. This was an inversion of the insider-centred approach of the ‘trad’ comics and often intended to turn the laughter back on the contradictions of British culture itself. It also represented another way in which alternative comedy borrowed principles from high-art. Alt comedians asked audiences to participate and engage in comedy, to detach themselves – in a Kantian sense – from ‘interest’ in their own identities and instead see the logic, truth and

humour of self-deprecation. As Cook (2001: 58) notes of alternative comedy, 'The best of it hits hard and it hurts, but it's philanthropic not misanthropic'. However, it wasn't just the lives of the audience that alternative comedians probed, it was also their own. Critical observational stand-up demanded the comic put him or herself in a deliberately vulnerable position, revealing, through laughter, the perceptions and prejudices of their own life (Stott, 2005: 85). As Ben Elton noted:

Irishmen are not stupid and it's not funny to say they are. Women's tits are not funny and it's not funny to say they are. So where did we look, we looked around us, inside ourselves and in what we were doing – that's where the comedy was (Elton in Wilmut, 1989: 55).

Form Over Function

Alternative comedy was also responsible for a significant re-evaluation of the performance techniques involved in stand-up comedy. In particular, 'alt' comedians objected to what they saw as the restrictive and inauthentic nature of the 'gag joke-form' (Stott, 2005: 119). Instead, there was a new emphasis on innovation in the craft of comedy that echoed the 'form over function' ideals of high-art (Bourdieu, 1984). Observational humour, for example, mutated away from formulaic commentary and usually took the form of long monologues of personal narrative, with punch-lines that were either hard to predict or simply never came (Wilmut, 1989). Many alternative comedians also borrowed directly from high-art traditions. Performers like John Hegley took from poetry when delivering material in his characteristically lyrical manner, whereas the critical approach of Tony Allen knowingly invoked the spirit of Brecht's Epic Theatre (Stott, 2005; Duguid, 2008). Alexei Sayle, who drew heavily on performance art, sums up his experimental aesthetic:

It was just a kind of bloody-mindedness to push, to not settle for the ordinary, to always include the erudite reference. Just being a troublemaker, really, always trying to blow things up. I had this terrible overriding impulse to just see what happened when I pushed things to the edge (Sayle in Friedman, 2011).

However, arguably the most significant high-art influence on alternative comedy was the tradition of Surrealism and Absurdism derived from visual art and Theatre of the

Absurd. Many alternative comedians, such as Keith Allen and Andy De La Tour, had previously worked in radical 'fringe' theatre and they drew upon this theatrical background to craft observational monologues that drifted self-consciously into surreal whimsy (Wilmot, 1989). Similarly, comedians like Rik Mayall and Aide Edmondson deliberately borrowed from the surreal narrative of plays like Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* to construct their early double acts (Duguid, 2008). And perhaps most notoriously, the anarchic Malcolm Hardee was renowned for performing absurdist stunts. For example, during the 1983 Edinburgh Fringe, he hired a tractor and, entirely naked, drove it over the stage of another performer who was disrupting his act by making too much noise (Stott, 2005).

British Comedy Since the Alternative Boom

While the Alternative Comedy Movement certainly altered the layout of the British comedy field, commentators disagree on the level of change it effected and the extent to which it increased comedy's cultural legitimacy. Certainly, the movement did not succeed in *fully* rehabilitating the cultural position of comedy. Indeed, Cook (2001), Medhurst (2003) and Ritchie (1991) have all noted how the cultural authority of many alternative comedians fell dramatically in the late 1980s and 1990s. As many of these artists were offered work on TV and radio, their comedy was accused of de-radicalising and assimilating into the 'lowbrow' 'mainstream' of British comedy culture (Stott, 2005: 119). The most maligned was arguably Ben Elton, who was labelled 'the biggest sell-out of his generation' by the cultural commentator Toby Young (Young, 2006: 212). Elton was originally considered one of the most critically-acclaimed political comedians of the alternative movement, but his legitimacy went into steady decline from the 1990s onwards after he wrote a number of popular, but critically denigrated novels and stage musicals (ibid). Contemporary stand-up Stewart Lee sums up the disappointment felt by many regarding the unfulfilled promise of the Alternative era:

When I was fourteen, I had a massive poster on my wall of a giant pop-art mouth advertising a Swiss exhibition of abstract art. My friends and family mocked my pretention, but I loved that poster and the hope it offered of an exciting world of thought beyond the boundaries of stifling Solihull. But one

day the poster fell off the wall and the dog pissed all over it, ruining it for ever, while my mother laughed. That poster is what the Alternative Comedy dream meant to me - the possibility of a better world. And now it is covered in dog's piss (Lee, 2011).

It is also worth considering that although the alternative comedians were largely successful in their attempts to get bigoted comedy removed from British television, 'lowbrow' 'trad' comedy has continued to enjoy widespread popularity, particularly on the live circuit. As Mills (2008) notes, comedians such as Roy 'Chubby' Brown, Jim Davidson and Jim Bowen continue to forge successful careers making controversial jokes about race, sexuality and gender. Indeed, Medhurst (2003) notes that the live shows of Roy 'Chubby' Brown still attract 350,000 people each year, and comedians like Jim Bowen, Les Dennis, and Frank Carson⁹ have recently enjoyed a revival after performances at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe and Glasgow Comedy Festival.

Similarly, forms of 'light' comedy continue to constitute a large percentage of the comedy produced in the UK - both on TV and in stand-up - despite continuing to be discredited by critics and academics (Mills, 2008: 134). For example, the most popular and longest-running British TV sitcoms since the 1980s, such as *The Vicar of Dibley* (BBC, 1994-2007), *2.4 Children* (BBC, 1991-1999), *Last of The Summer Wine* (BBC, 1973-2010) and *My Family* (BBC, 2000-2010), all use the form and narrative structure of the traditional sitcom. Likewise, a number of 'observational' stand-ups such as Michael McIntyre, John Bishop, Jason Manford and Russell Howard have all experienced unprecedented success on television, despite been criticised by critics for their 'light', 'safe' and 'inoffensive' material (Logan, 2010; Bennett, 2009). Moreover, many have argued that the rise of a handful of hugely powerful production companies, such as Off The Kerb and Avalon, has stifled 'creativity' in British comedy (Lee, 2013; Logan, 2013). These companies, who represent many of the most popular 'observational' stand-ups and who produce a number of high-profile TV comedy shows such as *8 Out of Ten Cats* (Channel 4 2005-) and *Live at the Apollo* (BBC, 2007-) have been accused of disproportionately

⁹ Frank Carson played at the 2011 Glasgow Comedy Festival before passing away in 2012

filling these TV programmes with their own acts, who in turn are deliberately chosen because they represent the 'safe middle ground' of the comedy 'mainstream' (Lee, 2010).

However, whilst the renewed popularity of 'lowbrow', popular and 'mainstream' humour illustrates important continuities in the cultural status of British comedy, there have also been unquestionable changes in the contemporary field. Indeed, one of the legacies of the Alternative Movement is that it began a significant expansion and diversification of the comedy industry, which has subsequently led to a notable growth in more legitimate comedy (Wagg, 1998: 21). On television, this was greatly aided by technological shifts away from mass public service broadcasting. Whereas television comedy traditionally fulfilled a 'mass social function' and relied on securing audiences of 10 million plus, the advent of Channel 4 in 1982 paved the way for a new broadcasting environment where comedy could be commercially sustainable even if it attracted much smaller audiences (Mills, 2008: 138). This, in turn, led to a rise in independent production companies who ushered in what Thompson (2004: xvi) terms an era of 'unprecedented creativity and innovation' in TV comedy production. Thompson thus celebrates the 1990s as 'a golden age' for British comedy, with experimental shows such as *The Day Today* (BBC, 1994), *Brass Eye* (Channel 4, 1997-2001), *Knowing me, Knowing You... With Alan Partridge* (BBC, 1994-1995) and *The Royle Family* (BBC, 1998-Present) all receiving critical acclaim across the cultural field (ibid).

In the 2000s and early 2010s, the foothold of 'highbrow' comedy has arguably only strengthened. The break up of the mass TV audience has intensified with the advent of the digital age and there is now a proliferation of niche channels devoted to, or specialising in comedy, such as BBC 3, BBC Radio 7, Dave, Comedy Central, Paramount Comedy and Channel 4. Notably, some like Channel 4 have also sought to position themselves against the main channels by claiming to provide more 'experimental' and 'innovative' comic content (Channel 4, 2012)¹⁰. In this new

¹⁰ Additionally, this 'splintering' of comedy production has also been aided by the asynchronous viewing possibilities offered by the internet and the growing DVD market.

broadcasting environment, where ‘niche is the new normal’ (Harris, 2008: 93), Mills (2008: 133-134) argues that comedy producers are increasingly able to cater for minority audiences, such as the upper middle classes, which are perceived to have more ‘highbrow’ tastes. Indeed, in moves that echo wider developments in the creation of ‘quality television’ (Jacobs, 2001), many TV comedy-makers are deliberately subverting the ‘lowbrow’ theatrical aesthetic normally associated with sitcom (Mills, 2008: 124-146). Among the most influential of these formalistic innovations has been the adoption of mock-documentary aesthetics in sitcoms such as *The Office* (BBC, 2001-2003) and *The Thick Of It* (BBC, 2005-Present), the development of a realist or naturalist approach in sitcoms such as *The Royle Family* (1998-Present) and *Gavin and Stacey* (2007-2010), and finally the use of experimental narrative techniques in series like *Spaced* (Channel 4, 1999-2001), *Green Wing* (Channel 4, 2004-2007) and *Peep Show* (Channel 4, 2003-Present).

However, although these comedies employ various aesthetic and narrative techniques, there is one common innovation that has been central to their cultural elevation; the abandonment of canned laughter. The use of canned laughter has traditionally acted as a signal of the way TV comedy is intended to be understood (Mills, 2005: 51). In contrast, the abandonment of canned laughter arguably returns the power of discerning comic intent back to the audience, mimicking the principle of aesthetic autonomy central to discourses of high-art appreciation (Kant, 1987). Moreover, reflecting on interviews with British sitcom writers, Mills suggests that producers of comedy see the abandonment of the laughter track as an automatic sign of ‘quality’ that, in turn, will directly lead to ‘critical acclaim’ (Mills, 2008: 105).

Legitimate forms of contemporary comedy also continue to be influential on the stand-up circuit, where the aesthetic principles championed by the original ‘alternative’ circuit arguably still represent the gold standard. The most useful barometer for charting this development is arguably the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, the largest arts festival in the world and the focal point of the British stand-up comedy field (Double, 2004). Comedy has flourished at The Fringe, with the number of shows rising from just 14 in 1980 to 940 in 2011 (Edfringe.com, 2011). Traditionally

associated with avant-garde art and underpinned by a general ethos of experimentation, The Fringe is an arena where comedians are highly rewarded for showcasing provocative and original work (Hall, 2007: 56). Indeed, arguably the most consistently consecrated Fringe stand-ups have been those that foreground the ‘alternative’ ethos of formal innovation, such as Stewart Lee, Josie Long, Richard Herring, Mark Thomas, Daniel Kitson and Tim Key.

The development of more ‘highbrow’ forms of British comedy has also been consolidated by the development of an emerging apparatus for consecration and legitimation. Although comedy continues to be overlooked by institutional consecrators such as the Arts Council, media interest has greatly expanded (see Chapter 5 for more detail). At present, all national newspapers employ at least one critic for live comedy, and most also employ a range of TV critics, commentators and columnists who frequently pass aesthetic judgment on comedy. At the Edinburgh Fringe, this critical apparatus is even stronger, with over 150 comedy reviewers registered in 2013 (Edfringe.com, 2013). These cultural intermediaries act as important ‘tastemakers’, consecrating certain comedians and embedding certain aesthetic standards as legitimate in the public discourse on comedy (Bourdieu, 1996: 229). A similar function is also fulfilled by a host of high-profile awards, such as the former *Perrier Award* (now *The Edinburgh Comedy Award*), *The British Comedy Awards*, *The BAFTAs* and *The Golden Globe Awards*. These prizes act as important measures of a comedian’s cultural worth and act as ‘bankable assets in the economy of cultural prestige’ (English, 2005: 52).

Conclusion

Trends in recent British comic production reveal a contemporary field characterised by increasing levels of complexity and diversity. While the styles of ‘lowbrow’ comedy that traditionally dominated the field continue to maintain a strong presence, both in terms of ‘trad’ stand-up and most significantly via popular and ‘mainstream’ TV comedy, the main legacy of the Alternative Comedy Movement has been to expand the ‘restricted sub-field’ (Bourdieu, 1993) of comedy, introducing more ‘highbrow’ niches, styles and artists. This has taken place both on the live circuit –

where the Edinburgh Fringe has proved the main incubator for innovative and original stand-up – but also in TV and radio comedy. In this broadcasting context, the abandonment of the traditional sitcom has proved the decisive move, yielding a significant minority of critically-acclaimed ‘comedies of distinction’ that ‘engage in industrial and textual work’ specifically aimed at ‘distinguishing themselves from traditional sitcom’ (Mills, 2008: 134).

What is clear from these developments, therefore, is that although most academics continue to view comedy as ‘low-brow art *par excellence*’ (Kuipers, 2006: 374), this invariant definition is no longer accurate in the British context. Indeed, defying Bourdieu’s (1993) sceptical model of popular culture, comedy has enjoyed significant upward mobility. Echoing similar developments in film (Bauman, 2001), fashion (Rocamora, 2004) and rock music (Regev, 1994), the ‘post-alternative’ field of British comedy is widely diverse, incorporating a complex internal hierarchy of legitimacy and an array of both ‘lowbrow’ and ‘highbrow’ producers.

However, while the kind of historical analysis undertaken here can provide much useful information about recent developments in British comic *production*, it provides little understanding of how this change has been reflected in patterns of *consumption*. Indeed, there has been remarkably little academic research on comedy audiences. As noted in the introduction, the vast majority of comedy scholarship has assumed the manner in which audiences read and interpret different types of comedy. Intellectually, this kind of presumption is dangerous, as it ignores the wealth of research that highlights the complex, mutable and active ways audience receive and decode forms of culture (Leal and Oliven, 1988; Hall, 1992; Ang, 1991).

Moreover, the developments in British comic production described in this chapter pose many salient questions about comedy consumption. If the field of production now contains a powerful distinction between more ‘‘highbrow’’ and ‘‘lowbrow’’ comedians, does this imply that a similar divide exists in comedy taste? For instance, is there evidence that audiences schooled in legitimate culture are developing tastes for ‘‘highbrow’’ comedy in the way they have traditionally done in other art forms?

And if they are, does such a form of comedy taste represent a form of cultural capital, or mark out a unique mode of distinction?

In the chapters that follow, this book uses both survey and interview data to answer these questions. However, before doing so, it is important to situate the analysis within the vast array of literature concerning cultural consumption. In particular, it is important to clarify the concept of cultural capital, and explain in detail the theoretical basis upon which I plan to use it in this book.

Part 1: Positioning The Research

Chapter 3: Cultural Capital: From Resources to Realisation

Introduction

In the sociology of culture, Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital has become a key conceptual tool for examining how the 'dominant' social classes use culture as a means of storing and accentuating privilege. Bourdieu (1984) argued that the middle classes are inculcated with valuable cultural resources during primary socialisation. These resources are then augmented in the fields of education and occupation, and activated in the social world in the form of 'legitimate' cultural tastes. In turn, he argued these expressions of cultivated taste should be considered cultural *capital*, because when they are deployed in social life they mark strong symbolic boundaries between the dominant and dominated in social space.

However, although this culturally-inflected notion of capital has been lionised by a number of sociologists, the concept has also been extensively criticised as reductive and deterministic (Lamont, 1992; Peterson, 1992, Goldthorpe, 2007). In particular, many critiques have argued that Bourdieu's assertions concerning the cultural hierarchy are outdated. Contemporary analysis of British cultural consumption, for example, appears to undermine Bourdieu's assertion that the culturally privileged use cultural taste as a tool of distinction, indicating instead that the middle classes have become all-embracing 'cultural omnivores', happy to graze on both 'high' and 'low' culture (Bennett et al, 2009).

This chapter aims to review the debates surrounding cultural capital, and in particular assess how the concept might be put to work in an empirical setting hitherto ignored; comedy. The chapter begins by attempting to unpack the historical and theoretical genesis of cultural capital. It then explains the distinction between its 'virtual' existence, as a set of resources anchored in the *habitus*, and its realisation in social life via particular cultural tastes (objectified cultural capital) and aesthetic styles (embodied cultural capital). It also explains how such cultural capital is only translated into symbolic capital, in terms of stratification and exclusion, when it is said to mark strong symbolic boundaries and widely (mis)recognised as legitimate.

Turning away from theory and towards contemporary empirical measurement, the chapter goes on to explain how inflections in the cultural landscape may have undermined both the notion of a unified *habitus* and the relevance of objectified forms of cultural capital. While some have interpreted these changes as evidence of the fading significance of cultural capital, this chapter instead turns to an emerging literature examining new expressions of distinction through the lens of *embodied cultural capital*.

Unpacking Cultural Capital

Bourdieu first developed the concept of cultural capital in the early 1960s to help explain the disparity in educational achievement between children from different social classes. Centrally Bourdieu argued that, stretching beyond purely economic factors, 'cultural habits and dispositions' inculcated via the family are decisive in

explaining the educational success of children from the dominant classes (upper middle and middle class) (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979; 14). For example, culturally active parents might talk about cultural topics at home or take their children to places of aesthetic interest, such as museums, theatres or art galleries. Significantly, though, this informal cultural schooling is not indiscriminate. It largely (but not exclusively) involves an education in forms of culture that occupy the 'legitimate' end of the cultural field – the 'sub-field of restricted production' (Bourdieu, 1993). Here 'high' culture such as opera, theatre, ballet, visual art and classical music are produced according to the autonomous logic of 'art for art's sake'. Moreover, these art forms also demand a specialised logic of consumption. Parents, therefore, do not just *introduce* their children to legitimate culture, they also teach them to *look* and *listen* in specific ways. In particular, they inculcate a 'disinterested aesthetic disposition' that helps facilitate the 'correct' decoding of legitimate culture (Bourdieu, 1984: 40-45). He defined this as:

A generalised capacity to neutralise ordinary urgencies and to bracket off practical ends, a durable inclination and aptitude for practice without a practical function which can only be constituted within an experience of the world freed from urgency and through the practice of activities which are ends in themselves, such as scholastic exercises or the contemplation of works of art (Bourdieu, 1984: 55).

The significance of this mode of appreciation - what Bourdieu (1970: 13) sometimes summarised as 'symbolic mastery' - will be further explored later in this chapter. However, in terms of the initial formation of cultural capital, the main significance of this aesthetic disposition is its embodied role within what Bourdieu called the *habitus*. The *habitus* represents a key conceptual tool in Bourdieu's social theory, representing both a 'structured' and 'structuring' force in individual social actions. He defined it as:

A system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions (Bourdieu, 1977: 95).

Thus Bourdieu argued that our conditions of existence, such as upbringing, education (and to a lesser extent occupation), form the 'structure' of the *habitus* and this

structure in turn generates ‘structuring’ practices, beliefs and dispositions that inform the individual’s aesthetic temperament. Bourdieu also stressed that this form of aesthetic socialisation is not a direct learning process, but largely an implicit and unconscious pedagogical mechanism. Children from middle class backgrounds accumulate cultural knowledge and competency *preconsciously* through acculturation, and therefore display a seemingly ‘natural’ understanding of culture (Robbins, 2005). The significance of this competency, according to Bourdieu, is that it constitutes a distinct resource in the social world. It represents a form of cultural ‘capital’ that along with the other main forms of capital – economic and social – can be ‘invested’ to yield social profits in different fields (Bourdieu, 1984: 70-87).

In particular, Bourdieu argued that cultural capital is most prominently ‘cashed in’ within fields of culture where the ‘dominant’ can directly exploit the scarcity of their cultural skills. Indeed, this logic of scarcity is very important in understanding how culture can be capitalised. Whereas the logic of economic capital is expressed through the consumption of goods with material scarcity, cultural capital is enacted via scarce aesthetic styles that ‘present themselves as *rare* and worthy of being sought after’ (Bourdieu, 1977: 178). I will return to this theme of cultural capital and profit later in the chapter. First, it is important to explain how dominant groups acquire the ability to use culture as a social weapon.

Understanding Cultural Capital Resources

Although some have argued (Lamont and Lareau, 1988; Kingston, 2001; Goldthorpe; 2007) that there is considerable theoretical confusion in the different ways Bourdieu deployed cultural capital in his research, a useful reading of the concept can be mediated through Holt (1997,1998). Holt argued that cultural capital exists both in a ‘single abstracted form’ that has only a ‘virtual’ existence, and also as many ‘realised particular forms’ when in it is activated in social life (1998: 96).¹¹

¹¹ In *Distinction* (1984: 81), Bourdieu disaggregated cultural capital in a similar way, distinguishing between cultural capital as ‘credentials’ (dependent variable) and cultural capital as cultural preferences (independent variable).

The virtual form of cultural capital, or what I refer to throughout this book as ‘cultural capital resources’, primarily concerns the ‘structured’ conditions of the *habitus* originally mentioned by Bourdieu. This begins with the process of primary socialisation, whereby middle class parents high in cultural capital inculcate in their children certain valuable ‘tools’, such as cultural knowledge and the disinterested aesthetic disposition, which they subsequently learn to embody with natural ease (Bourdieu, 1990b: 74).

However, this primary source of embodied cultural capital is not just a static resource but is subject to systematic ‘accumulation’ (Savage et al, 2005: 42). While it may first be transmitted via socialisation, virtual cultural capital is then further amassed via the education system. Here Bourdieu argues there is a powerful synergy between the middle-class *habitus* and the educational field. First, privileged children tend to carry with them valuable forms of *cultural knowledge* (most notably about music, literature and art but also of history and politics). Perhaps more significantly, though, children with strong embodied resources of cultural capital tend to feel like a ‘fish in water’ within the education system. Indeed, building on Bernstein’s (1964) observations about how children’s linguistic codes are fostered in the home, Bourdieu argued that the cultural and linguistic competencies embodied by middle class children are highly valued in educational settings. The disinterested principles of the aesthetic disposition, for example, are not just helpful in decoding cultural objects, but also encourage what Gouldner (1979: 28-29) describes as a ‘culture of critical discourse’, giving middle class children a clear advantage in the arts, humanities and social sciences, which emphasise critical abstract thinking and an understanding of ‘formal’ categories (Holt, 1998: 3). Furthermore, cultural skills and knowledge are often implicitly built into curriculums and therefore middle class children often achieve higher grades in examinations and assessment (Cooksan and Persell, 1985).

Rather than seeing subsequent class-based disparities in educational achievement as the result of advantaged socialisation, teachers and lecturers are prone to believe middle class children have inborn ‘talent’ or are ‘naturally gifted’ (Bourdieu and

Passeron, 1977: 344). Such students are thus earmarked as worthy of attention and cultivation, and subsequently excel at all levels. Moreover, through doing so, these students also accrue *additional* cultural capital resources. They amass both *institutionalised cultural capital* in the form of educational qualifications (Bourdieu, 1984: 110) but also further hone their ‘cultured *habitus*’ (ibid). In other words, education both transmits valuable credentials, but it also acts an incubator for the aesthetic disposition, allowing the cultured classes to build and nuance their capacity for symbolic mastery.

Although not without its critics (these will be examined later), this theory of resource conversion (middle class socialisation to scholastic success) has been supported by a number of educational sociologists. In particular, more contemporary work (Lareau, 2000; Reay, 1998) has shown how parental cultural capital manifests in the form of distinct systems of support and guidance, which help middle class children find the right school and assists them throughout their education careers. In contrast, working class children situated in the lower regions of social space are socialised by parents invariably struggling with the more practical demands of material necessity. They thus do not acquire this early immersion *in* and ‘natural’ familiarity *with* culture - what Coulangen (2007: 98) terms cultural ‘*Je ne sais quois*’ – and are subsequently caught in a spiral of negative cultural capital formation¹². In the education system this means they are often penalised unfairly, as they do not possess the dispositions (and subsequent *desire*) to accumulate culturally valuable knowledge. This is illustrated by Schubert’s (2008: 260) example of the ‘hard working’ working class student always considered inferior to their ‘naturally bright’ middle class school mate, or by Skeggs’ (1997) study of white, working class girls in the English Midlands, who continually feel like a ‘fish out of water’ in the education system.

Moreover, I argue here that the accumulation of cultural capital resources is further augmented by the conversion of educational achievement into occupational success. Although Bourdieu (1984) did not include occupation in measurements of cultural

¹² Although Bourdieu acknowledges some room for the working classes to ‘acquire’ cultural capital resources (this potential for habitus ‘transformation’ will be explored at the end of the review), such acquisition generally ‘flows’ from the conditions of the habitus (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977: 44)

capital, he did later (1987: 4) note the importance of accounting for ‘occupational effects’ that may profoundly affect a person’s habitus – in particular ‘the effects of the nature of work, of the occupational milieu, with its cultural and organisational specificities’. Indeed, he also noted elsewhere that students with the ‘cultured *habitus*’ are likely to be admitted to the most elite higher education institutions, which in turn act as gatekeepers to the best occupational opportunities (Bourdieu, 1977). Moreover, further work by Collins (1975), Willis (1979) Erickson (1996), Holt (1997, 1998) and recently Lahire (2007) have all emphasised the significance of the work environment as a site of significant acculturation.

Seen through this lens, cultural capital is not a static asset but a resource that can be honed through the life course, particularly as a result of contact with the education system and certain occupational cultures. While one’s ‘conditions of existence’ may be responsible for producing habitus, the effects of other significant socialising agents such as education and occupation have the ability to both compound and/or complicate the dispositions that make up this habitus (Atkinson, 2009: 906)¹³.

This cumulative and reinforcing process of accumulation completes what Savage et al et al (2005: 41) call the ‘circuit of cultural capital’. Because of the unique structured and structuring ability of the *habitus*, cultural elites are able to seamlessly (and unconsciously) convert primary cultural capital resources into further assets via their systematic advantages in the educational and occupational fields. Furthermore, the circuit also ensures that inequalities in cultural capital resources are continually socially reproduced through *inheritance* (ibid). Individuals with a privileged cultural socialisation not only use these initial reserves to accumulate resources in the educational and occupational fields, they then unconsciously transmit these privileged resources onto their children during primary socialisation (ibid).

¹³ It is important to note here that although socialisation, education and occupation may be the main agents affecting one’s resources for cultural capital accumulation, I am aware they are not the only ones. While it was difficult to operationalise all such factors in a quantitative study of this kind, the effect of partners, friends, media and regional location are all patently important in this regard (Atkinson, 2009).

Bourdieu's central assertion, then, was that the dominant classes 'are able to remake themselves, and their children, in remarkably persistent ways' (Bennett et al, 2009: 13). Holders of high cultural capital resources act like an aristocracy, or what Bourdieu called a 'cultural nobility', possessing an eminence defined not by blood but by aesthetic competence seen as a 'gift of nature' (Bourdieu, 1984: 29).

In order to understand the potential power of cultural capital in structuring comedy taste, this book intends to operationalise the three dimensions of acculturation as one dependent variable – 'cultural capital resources' (see Methodological Appendix for further details):

- **Primary socialisation** (+ families with highly educated parents whose occupations emphasise cultural skills and symbolic production)
- **Formal education** (+ achievement in educational institutions that emphasise critical and abstract thinking over particularised skills and trades)
- **Occupational culture** (+ high status jobs that emphasise cultural skills and symbolic production)

However, although the dominant may accumulate and transmit cultural capital resources, these will arguably not yield 'profits' unless they are activated directly in the social world. In order to reap the benefits of this accumulation, then, Holt (1997, 1998) argues that the dominant must instantiate their cultural capital resources in particular social fields. Only when virtual cultural capital is converted into 'field-specific cultural capital' can it become socially consequential as a form of symbolic capital (Holt, 1998: 3-5).

Cultural Capital and Taste

In *Distinction* (1984), Bourdieu explains that the main way in which the dominant activate their cultural capital resources is by converting them into distinct tastes and lifestyles in the field of cultural consumption. To understand how such resources can be expressed through taste, it's important to return to the notion of *habitus*. While cultural capital resources represent the 'structured' conditions of one's existence, the *habitus* also acts as a 'structuring' force, orientating individuals towards different

constellations of cultural taste. In particular, this orientation relies on an individual's mode of aesthetic appreciation, formed during socialisation and concretised through their experiences in the educational and occupational milieu. Cultural capital resources are therefore activated as a 'form of knowledge, understanding or internalised code which equips the social agent with a competence for deciphering artistic works' (Bourdieu, 1984: 22). As Bennett et al (2005: 50) note, 'taste becomes the symbolic sum of holdings of cultural capital'.

In relation to the consumption of culture, then, Bourdieu distinguishes differences in class-based *habitus* via different aesthetic orientations. The dominant classes activate their superior reserve of cultural capital resources by employing a 'scarce' aesthetic orientation of symbolic mastery unavailable to those with low cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1970: 13). As mentioned earlier, the key component of this 'pure' mode of appreciation is the Kantian (1987) idea of 'disinterestedness', which over time has disseminated into a public discourse (Ang, 1985). This is premised on a refusal of taste that is easy, facile, or concentrates on immediate sensation. Instead, it denotes that true artistic beauty and transcendence can only be experienced if one separates oneself from any physical, emotional or functional investment in an art work. By employing this principle of detachment and distance, the dominant classes are able to employ a 'pure gaze' in their appreciation of cultural objects, stressing the virtue of culture's formal properties rather than its function (Kant, 1987: 234).

It is important to note that Bourdieu (1984: 3) stressed that this aestheticising cognitive scheme could - in theory - be applied to *any* cultural object, a fact overlooked in many interpretations of his work (Lizardo and Skiles, 2008: 493). Yet it is also clear that his empirical research in *Distinction* revealed that, generally, the culturally dominant tend to selectively consume (Bourdieu, 1984: 128-9). They gravitate towards a certain pole of cultural production, the restricted sub-field, where 'high' cultural forms specifically demand disinterested appreciation (Bourdieu, 1993).

The disinterested aesthetic is diametrically opposed to the aesthetic orientation of those in the lower reaches of social space. Here the culture of the dominated (working

classes) is defined by its emphasis on ‘practical mastery’ (Bourdieu, 1970: 13), an ‘anti-aesthetic’ whereby audiences focus on goods that provide immediate sensual gratification, relate directly to everyday life and, above all, ‘imply the subordination of form to function’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 32). Again the *habitus* that produces this working class aesthetic also orientates consumers towards a certain space in cultural production. This is what Bourdieu calls the ‘mass’ or ‘large-scale’ sub-field, where ‘low’ and ‘discredited’ cultural forms such as pop music, television and traditionally *comedy*, are produced to reach the largest possible audience and achieve maximum economic profit¹⁴ (ibid: 41).

To illustrate the significance of these opposing orientations in the realm of humour, Bourdieu (1984:191-192) uses the pertinent example of laughter. Whereas the disinterested middle classes limit bodily reactions to humour by emitting only the ‘wrinkled nose of repressed laughter’, the working class ‘belly laugh’ foregrounds pleasure and physical sensation – ‘as if to amplify to the utmost an experience which will not suffer containment’ (ibid).

The *habitus* thus organises how individuals with different cultural capital resources approach, classify, and react to, different cultural objects. It produces practices so habitual that individuals ‘perform their social positionality almost as instinct’ (Bourdieu, 1993: 41). In the case of those with high cultural capital resources, this invariably (*but not always*) manifests as a relational desire for those objects which are consecrated and demand a disinterested appreciation, and revulsion for objects that demand only sensual appreciation. In turn, these ‘elective affinities’ illustrate how cultural capital resources are converted into socially consequential tastes.

Consumption of ‘high’ art items activates the profits associated with what Bourdieu (1986) terms ‘objectified’ cultural capital. However, before explaining the significance of such hallowed cultural objects, it is first important to explain the wider sociological significance of Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory.

¹⁴ Bourdieu (1984: 318-365) also detects a ‘middlebrow’ aesthetic orientation, ‘cultural goodwill’

The 'Symbolic' Power of Cultural Capital Resources

Thus far this chapter has explained how cultural capital resources are established, how they're accumulated and ultimately how they're converted into coherent systems of taste. What has not been explained, however, is why this process is significant and what implications it has in terms of inequality and stratification.

Bourdieu's social theory goes a long way in providing such an explanation. Indeed, arguably Bourdieu's most significant theoretical contribution was to illustrate that power is expressed not only through material goods, but also via the appropriation of symbolic goods. In this way he was able to locate culture as fundamental to processes of social exclusion. Centrally, Bourdieu argued that when high cultural capital resources are successfully activated and in social life - either through objective consumption or through interactional expressions of taste - they acquire a symbolic power. They are converted into 'symbolic capital' (Bourdieu, 1984: 291).

Essential to this conversion of cultural into symbolic capital is the (*mis*)recognition of legitimacy. For a virtual resource, such as an aesthetic style or particular taste, to be converted into symbolic capital it must be broadly recognised as prestigious. However, few tastes and practices are considered widely legitimate. For example, certain groups may regard specialised forms of knowledge or aesthetic styles as prestigious in their particular milieu, but such cultural assets are only profitable within the limited confines of that group. As Di Maggio (2004) notes, what is valued in such instances only 'constitutes local cultural barter systems rather than currencies for a natural cultural economy' (174). These kind of small-scale cultural hierarchies are best described by concepts such as Maffesoli's (1988) 'neo-tribe' or through Thornton's (1996) notion of 'sub-cultural capital'. In contrast, the most prestigious forms of culture in Western society, the 'high' or 'fine' arts, *are* traditionally recognised as legitimate throughout society (Di Maggio, 1992). These forms of culture, and the appreciation they demand, constitute what Lareau and Lamont (1989: 156) term 'widely shared high status cultural signals'. In particular, their legitimacy comes from two main channels; cultural intermediaries and the state.

Agents of Legitimation: Cultural Intermediaries and the State

First, the value of ‘high’ culture is deeply institutionalised by the state. For example, in the UK, the vast majority of the annual £575 million Arts Council budget is spent subsidising ‘high’ art forms such as theatre, dance, visual art and literature, with only the cryptically titled ‘combined arts’ representing a funded form of popular culture (Arts Council, 2011). In addition, this bias is reflected in the UK policy arena, whereby the ‘deficit’ model of culture prevails. As Miles and Sullivan (2010: 28) note, this government strategy deems those who do not take part in high cultural activities as somehow ‘socially excluded’, and therefore focuses interventions on encouraging this kind of ‘legitimate’ participation. ‘high’ culture is also consecrated by the education system, where arts and humanities subjects such as English literature, music, and art history not only promote ‘high’ art forms but more generally encourage students to employ the critical aesthetic lens of disinterestedness (Holt, 1997).

Second, the ‘high’ arts traditionally derive their legitimacy from the influence exerted by ‘cultural intermediaries’. This group encapsulates all those working in occupational areas that come ‘in-between’ creative artists and cultural consumers, and who specialise in the production, reproduction and circulation of symbolic goods (Hesmondhalgh, 2007: 54-65). As cultural products are produced, these intermediaries are charged with explaining both their use-value and exchange-value through various techniques of persuasion and marketing (507). They represent ‘pivotal generators of meaning’ in what Bourdieu (1996) calls the construction of the ‘science of works’ – producing and generating belief in the value and legitimacy of cultural goods (Bourdieu, 1996: 229)¹⁵.

¹⁵ However, despite identifying ‘high’ culture as the most legitimate and highly valued in society, Bourdieu’s theory - in its earlier forms at least - is devoted to revealing how such a system of classification is entirely *arbitrary*. Unlike Kant’s imagining of disinterestedness, which sees this aesthetic lens as a ‘pure’ route to the objective judgment of beauty, Bourdieu seeks to reveal the hidden force of domination threaded through these aesthetic judgments. For Bourdieu, then, ‘Kant’s insistence on disinterested aesthetics as a way towards beauty is nothing but the operation of a logic of classification of a privileged social class, one that conceals its class origins behind the façade of objectivity’ (Prior, 2005: 126). Indeed, other influential thinkers on culture such as Raymond Williams (1989) have echoed this notion of the cultural arbitrary. Williams argued that different forms of culture should be equally valued and derided the ‘fussiness’ of those that argue that only certain things can qualify as culture.

Two groups of intermediaries, cultural critics and talent scouts, are particularly powerful in the (re)production of cultural value. Critics, for example, are the only group invested with the ‘authority and legitimacy necessary to assess artistic works’ (Bourdieu, 1993: 66) and also possess the unique ability - through newspaper reviews and arts awards - to control the public discourse on art (English, 2005). This means they have the power to ‘consecrate’ not just individual cultural works, but also to reproduce the value of particular aesthetic criteria and cement their value in the public imagination. Traditionally, critics have largely operated in the realm of ‘high’ culture, but in recent decades they have also begun to have a significant impact in popular cultural fields such as rock music and film (Regev, 1994; Bauman, 2001).

Another less visible type of cultural intermediary - the talent scout - also plays an important role in the legitimation of culture (Blumer, 1969; Entwistle, 2006; Franssen and Kuipers, 2013). Responsible for selecting which new artists are propelled to larger publics, scouts decide what types of artists are suitable for certain distribution channels – channels that are likely to already have well-established audiences. In this way, they become key ‘tastemakers’ (Mears, 2011) that play a pivotal role in ‘framing’ the field of cultural consumption and shaping what forms of culture are available to certain audiences (Maguire, 2011). Yet as many have previously noted, scouts rarely have completely reliable knowledge about audiences (Havens 2006; Bielby and Harrington, 2004). Indeed, most must make scouting selections based on ‘imagined audiences’, on ‘gut’ instincts about the fit between types of culture and types of audiences (Błaszcyk, 2008; Kuipers, 2012). In this regard, how and why scouts come to associate *certain types of audience* with *certain types of artist* has significant implications for the reproduction of taste differences between social groups.

Considering the theoretically important function of these two types of cultural intermediaries, a key concern of this book will be to empirically examine the role that both critics and scouts play in the British comedy field. More specifically, particular attention will be paid to the power wielded by these intermediaries in constructing

certain comedy as valuable and legitimate, and subsequently whether they can be said to contribute to symbolic boundaries separating different kinds of comedy taste (see Chapter 8 and 9).

Symbolic Boundaries, Social Exclusion and Symbolic Violence

Once one's cultural capital resources (in the form of tastes or aesthetic styles) are commonly accepted as legitimate, Bourdieu argued they assume an important symbolic function. Possessing such cultivated taste acts as a potent signal of one's membership in a high status group, and their symbolic distance from those who do not belong. Significantly, though, Bourdieu argued that such symbolic boundaries are rarely drawn explicitly. Instead, the cultural hierarchy ensures that all tastes necessarily negate one another. Thus to express 'one's own virtues, one's own certainties, one's own values, in a word, the certainty of one's own value...*implies condemnation of all other ways of being and doing*' (Bourdieu, 1984: 223, emphasis added). In addition, he argued that this boundary is particularly durable because those with low cultural capital resources are unable to access the tastes of those with high resources. These individuals do not possess the 'tools' to successfully decode high cultural objects and therefore contact with them tends to invoke strong feelings of alienation and inferiority. Subsequently, these individuals tend to 'self-eliminate' from participating in the 'restricted' sub-field of culture (Bourdieu, 1984: 379).¹⁶

Moreover, such symbolic boundaries are not only enacted in the act of consuming, as illustrated above, but also in the limitless communications people engage in concerning cultural objects. It is through these innumerable interactional encounters that cultural capital reveals itself as such a pervasive form of power. Each expression of taste becomes a micro-political act, with those possessing lower resources constantly deferring to 'highbrow' taste, or giving away their social position by the 'mistakes' they make during discussions about 'high' culture (Prior, 2005: 124).

¹⁶ Some researchers have noted that the value of cultural practices is not always defined relationally, as Bourdieu suggested (Lamont and Lareau, 1988: 158). Instead, dominated groups often have their own cultural norms and tastes that are autonomous rather than deferent to dominant groups (Hebdidge, 1979; Willis, 1977).

Bourdieu argued that it is through this process of *misrecognising* arbitrary systems of classification as ‘natural’ and authoritative that dominant groups are able to systematically reproduce their power in society. They commit what he (1990: 139) called acts of ‘symbolic violence’ against dominated groups. And because this violence is so effectively concealed, the application of taste as symbolic capital constitutes a particularly brutal form of oppression (Bourdieu, 1961: 161).

It is worth noting, however, that in recent years many have questioned Bourdieu’s theorising concerning ‘implicit’ symbolic boundaries (Halle, 1992; Erickson, 1996). In particular, Lamont (1992) has argued that class-based differences in cultural taste do not always necessarily imply hierarchically-ordered boundaries, in the way Bourdieu presumed. In her study of middle class lifestyles in the US and France, for example, Lamont found that aesthetic boundaries were often quite weak, particularly in the US. Middle class Americans were largely tolerant, rather than snobbish, about other people’s tastes. Significantly, she also found that respondents drew symbolic boundaries not just on the basis of aesthetic disposition, as Bourdieu argued, but also on political, moral, and socio-economic grounds. She therefore argued that if future researchers wish to link cultural taste to processes of exclusion and symbolic violence they must specifically and empirically interrogate taste *boundaries*. It is only through such direct enquiry, she argues, that it is possible to see ‘the lines that include and define some people, groups and things while excluding others (Lamont, 2007: 1). Indeed, incorporating this useful critique, an important principle underpinning the analysis in this book is not to take for granted any taste differences I uncover. Instead, in Chapter 7, I seek to explicitly examine whether taste divisions in the field of comedy constitute meaningful symbolic boundaries.

‘High’ Culture and Objectified Cultural Capital

Having explained the potential symbolic power of cultural capital, it is now useful to return to how it is directly instantiated in social life. As mentioned, one of the main ways Bourdieu detected the activation of high cultural capital resources was through

the elite consumption of ‘high’ or ‘fine’ arts such as visual art, opera, theatre, classical music and dance. These cultural objects are not only considered widely legitimate but also inherently ‘difficult’ to consume. As Figure 3.1 illustrates, one must have appropriate resources of knowledge and a disinterested lens to extract meaning and fully ‘enjoy’ their consumption. Thus elites activate what Bourdieu (1986) termed ‘objectified’ cultural capital through the consumption of cultural objects that require a high level of embodied cultural capital to consume ‘successfully’. These objects, in turn, become imbued with their own stratificatory power. They infer a certain cultural aptitude on the part of the consumer, and signal his or her membership in a rarefied group (Holt, 1997: 101).

It is significant to note that since the publication of *Distinction* (1984 [1979]), nearly all subsequent studies concerning cultural consumption have focused their attention on examining the potential power of such ‘objectified’ cultural capital. Using large-scale statistical surveys, researchers in the US, UK and the Netherlands have documented strong associations between socioeconomic status and ‘high’ artistic taste (Di Maggio and Mohr, 1985; Mohr and Di Maggio, 1995; Van Eijk, 1997; Di Maggio, 2004; Bennett et al, 2009).

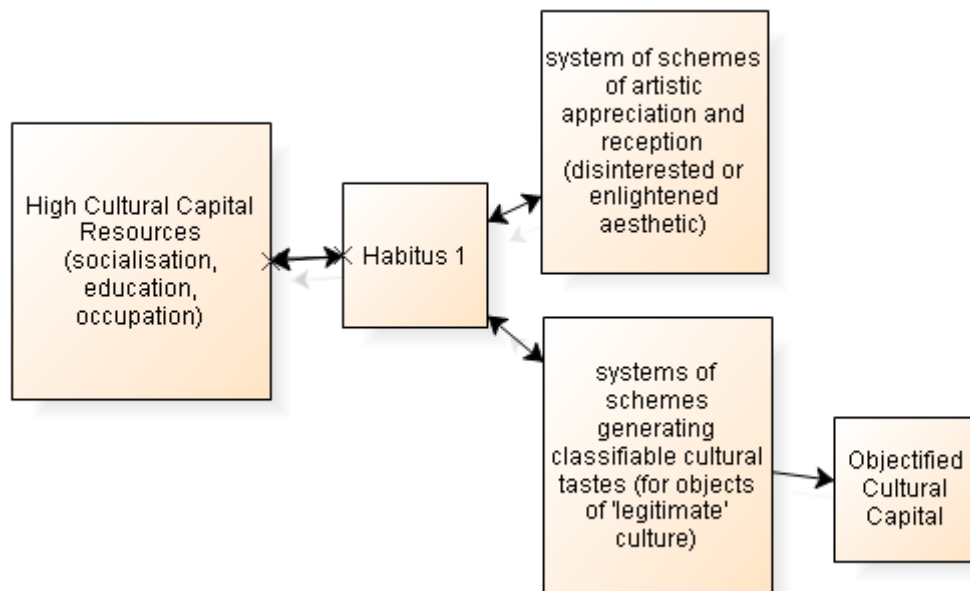


Figure 3.1 Objectified Cultural Capital (Adapted from Bourdieu, 1984: 171)

However, despite the persistence of this empirical support for the notion of 'high' art as objectified cultural capital, many commentators have noted that the utility of these goods as status markers has weakened significantly in recent decades (Lamont, 1992; Di Maggio, 1991). There are several factors that may be useful in explaining this shift.

First, the reach of the contemporary 'culture industries' has arguably become so pervasive that it has begun to inhibit the ability of institutions such as universities, schools and arts organisations, to act as agents in the continued legitimisation of the 'high' arts (Warde et al, 1999). Simultaneously, these industries have consciously attempted to break down traditional hierarchies of value by opening up 'high' cultural products and marketing them to the greatest number of people (Coulangeon, 2005). A number of researchers have documented this process of popularisation, what Collins (2002) collectively terms 'High-Pop'. For example, Storey (2002) charts the increasing popular consumption of opera, Wallach (2002) the emergence of the 'blockbuster' art exhibition, and Donnat (1994) how previously 'rare' classical music has become increasingly commonplace through the advent of records and CDs. Furthermore, there is also evidence that audiences for distinguished art forms are falling rapidly in the face of increasing competition from other cultural activities (Di Maggio, 2004).

Second, many have argued that a process of 'de-institutionalisation' has taken place within the 'high' arts (Di Maggio, 1991). In particular, a number of producers operating within fields such as visual art and classical music have attempted to self-consciously dissolve the objectified cultural capital associated with these art forms. For example, high profile artistic movements such as Pop Art transgressed the boundaries between 'high' and 'low', rejecting elite art forms such as abstract expressionism in favour of popular source material taken from advertising and consumer culture (Malpas, 2005; Cook, 2000). Such developments coincide with the doctrines of prominent postmodern theorists such as Baudrillard (1995) and Featherstone (1991), who argue that late modernity is defined by a massive and

bewildering production of 'commodity signs'. This constant proliferation of signs has arguably inhibited the ability of social groups to clearly connect consumer objects to social groups in any meaningful way. Indeed, under the strain of a rapidly expanding consumer field, some have argued that the entire cultural hierarchy is in a process of breakdown, with categories of high and 'low' art almost meaningless in the contemporary world (Featherstone, 1991).

Finally, connected to these debates about the crumbling cultural hierarchy, it is important to add Peterson's (1996) influential notion of the 'cultural omnivore'. Using data on American musical tastes, Peterson argued that contemporary 'elites' no longer consume only legitimate culture but are better characterised as 'cultural omnivores', happy to incorporate both high *and* low cultural forms into their consumption repertoires. This theory has effected a significant paradigm shift in cultural sociology, with many researchers reporting similar trends in the Netherlands, Canada and the UK (Di Maggio and Mukhtar, 2004; Van Rees et al, 1999; Van Eijk and Knulst, 2005; Bennett et al, 2009).

For many, the rise of the cultural omnivore confirms that symbolic hierarchies underpinning cultural consumption have finally and definitively collapsed. Indeed, one of the key attitudes of the contemporary omnivore, according to recent studies, is an explicit rejection of 'snobbism' (Bennett et al, 2009: 186) and instead a celebration of cultural diversity (Bryson, 1996). If anything, omnivore theorists argue, it is now this ethos of eclecticism that acts as a resource in the cultural field, enhancing one's ability to communicate with diverse groups (Erickson, 1996) or denoting a new marker of 'cool' (Warde et al, 1999).

Such a thesis has obvious implications for objectified cultural capital. If 'high' cultural objects have lost their signifying power, and cultural elites are now happy to consume popular culture, does that mean it is increasingly difficult for individuals to 'cash in' their cultural capital resources? As Holt (1997: 102) notes, objectified cultural capital can only operate effectively within a stable cultural hierarchy, and

without this it becomes a much weaker mechanism for maintaining exclusionary class boundaries.

However, it is also possible to argue that the discovery of the contemporary cultural omnivore does not necessarily imply a large scale disruption to symbolic hierarchies. While I do not dispute the empirical findings of this extensive literature, it must be noted that such findings are usually predicated on large statistical surveys, where entire art forms or artistic genres are coded *invariantly* as either high or 'low' art. Yet these cultural categories are arguably far too large and amorphous to effectively capture the intricacies of contemporary cultural consumption. Indeed, a number of studies such as that by Regev (1994), Shusterman (2000) and Holt (1997), as well as my own analysis of comedy in Chapter 2, have all pointed to the fact that significant hierarchies of legitimacy now exist *within* fields of popular culture.

One of the main questions this book aims to address, then, is whether the notion of objectified cultural capital is actually disappearing or simply moving on? By inspecting cultural consumption in a field traditionally considered 'lowbrow' – i.e. comedy - but at the same time by examining fine-grained tastes at the level of *individual* comedians, I will be able to examine whether British comedy tends to bring people with different resources of cultural capital together or whether it tells them apart. In other words, does comedy taste acts more as a social *bridge*, providing a multitude of weak preferences that become 'fodder for least common-denominator talk' (Di Maggio, 1987: 443) among diverse groups, or a *fence* in which those from privileged backgrounds accentuate their exclusivity by selectively consuming only the most legitimate objects?

Embodied Cultural Capital and Enlightened Eclecticism

While recent literature may make a strong case for the weakening hold of objectified cultural capital, this does not necessarily mean that differences in cultural capital resources do not possess other forms of social stratificatory power. For example, the taste diversity reported in omnivore studies does not necessarily presuppose that the dominant are now indifferent to aesthetic hierarchies (Coulangeon, 2004). In

particular, as Lizardo and Skiles (2008) note, what these studies fail to acknowledge is that Bourdieu's theory of distinction was not just based on the consumption of legitimate cultural objects. Indeed, in *Distinction*, Bourdieu stressed that the disinterested aesthetic was often utilised as a *generalised* disposition that could - in theory - be applied to all cultural objects in all fields of cultural production. Thus what many recent projects predicated on large-scale statistical surveys tend to miss is that the pursuit of distinction is not just a matter of *what* objects are consumed, but the *way* they are consumed and the *aims* pursued in doing so (Holt, 1997; Coulangeon, 2005; Hennion, 2001). The culturally dominant, in other words, potentially have the capacity to maintain their 'rarity' simply by consuming culture in a way that utilises their superior reserve of cultural capital resources.

This is what Bourdieu (1986) called 'embodied' cultural capital. As Figure 3.2 demonstrates, the culturally privileged use the scarcity of their 'disinterested' aesthetic disposition to consume cultural objects in a manner inaccessible to those with less cultural capital resources. In some cases, this can even involve aestheticising far beyond the intention of the artist. As Bourdieu (1984: 40) outlines:

'Nothing more rigorously distinguishes the different classes than the disposition objectively demanded by the legitimate consumption of legitimate works...*and the even rarer capacity to constitute, aesthetically, objects that are ordinary or even 'common'...or to apply the principles of a pure aesthetic in the most everyday choices of everyday life*' (emphasis added).

By consuming any cultural object using the 'pure aesthetic', then, elites always have the ability to convert their embodied resources into field-specific cultural capital (Holt, 1997, 1998; Varness, 2013). However, although Bourdieu himself coined the phrase 'embodied cultural capital', he did not explore it extensively in the context of popular cultural consumption (for rare examples see Bourdieu, 1984: 3; 62)¹⁷. For this reason, perhaps, his work has been consistently misread as implying that cultural capital had to be defined exclusively in terms of 'high' art consumption.

¹⁷ Rather, for Bourdieu, embodied cultural capital was more often invoked as a means of explaining how elite groups specifically used their *bodies* to communicate distinction (i.e. posture, gesture, accent, pronunciation); how they expressed their bodily *hexis* (Bourdieu, 1984: 193) Bourdieu (1984: 91; 173; 190-193) argued the body is 'the most indisputable materialisation of class taste' (191) through its dimensions, shapes and via the way it is employed in work and leisure.

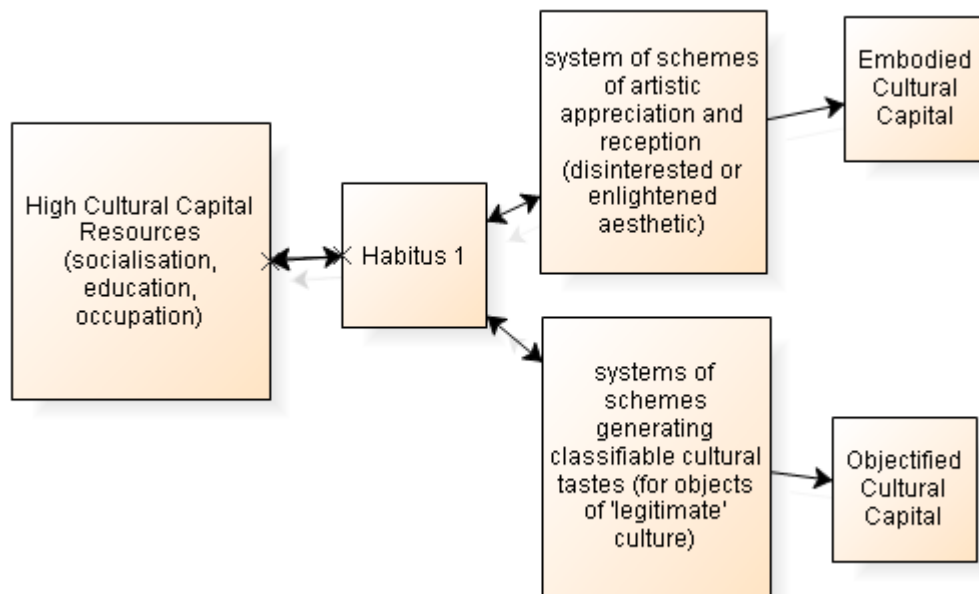


Figure 3.2: Embodied Cultural Capital (Adapted from Bourdieu, 1984: 171)

One of the main intentions of this book, then, is to try and reinvigorate the notion of embodied cultural capital by critically examining its power in structuring the consumption of popular culture, and specifically comedy. While Bourdieu certainly saw the aesthetic disposition as potentially transferable to popular culture, he failed to provide much empirical evidence as to how it was *practically* applied in these realms¹⁸ (Prior, 2005). He was also arguably sceptical about the aesthetic possibilities of popular cultural *production* and doubtful of any ‘paradigm change’ in relations between the sub fields of restricted and mass production. Indeed, some have accused him of espousing a peculiarly static and one-dimensional view of mass culture (Fowler, 1997; Shusterman, 2000). Certainly, during his career he afforded ‘low’ culture strikingly little empirical attention and in later work even deriding it as alienating (Bourdieu, 1996).¹⁹

¹⁸ One area of popular culture Bourdieu (1984: 26) did examine in this way, however, was cinema.

¹⁹ Theorists like Fowler (1997) and Shusterman (2000) have thus argued that while Bourdieu brilliantly exposes the ‘veiled interests’ of high-art, his hostility to popular art demonstrates he was partially ‘captured’ by dominant ideology himself.

However, in the contemporary West, the field of culture has arguably evolved into an increasingly mobile space where the classification of art forms is in a process of constant evolution. For example, many popular cultural forms such as film, fashion, jazz, rock, musical theatre and even rap music have experienced upward mobility in recent years, gaining increased legitimacy and recognition (Regev, 1994; Baumann, 2001; Rocamora, 2004; Shusterman, 2002; Kuipers, 2005). Certain popular objects, then, have become increasingly aestheticised, while at the same time elite objects have frequently been ‘massified’.

In this contemporary environment, Prior (2005: 135) argues ‘we need to find satisfactory ways of updating and warping Bourdieu’s ideas to account for inflections in the cultural landscape’. We need categories that can ‘keep up with an accentuated modernity, where cultural forms are more mobile and more permeable’ (ibid).

It is my argument here that the notion of embodied cultural capital may represent exactly the kind of ‘category’ Prior recommends. Indeed, in today’s era of a supposedly ‘omnivorous’ elite, charting the activation of embodied resources may be far more useful in understanding distinction than focusing solely on taste for traditionally legitimate cultural objects. Indeed, as Coulangeon (2007) notes, the use of embodied cultural capital may actually constitute a more audacious form of domination. Through ‘borrowing forms of expression from outside the perimeter of ‘highbrow’ art’, the privileged showcase their ability to ‘culturally empower’ forms of popular art and only further demonstrate their symbolic ‘droit du seigneur’ (‘The [Feudal] Lord’s Right’) in the realm of cultural taste (127).

Contestation over Habitus and Cultural Capital

While this chapter has outlined the theoretical and empirical grounds on which I plan to operationalise cultural capital in this book, it is important to acknowledge that the critical literature has identified many significant problems with the concept. These do not just constitute contestation over its contemporary relevance, as just outlined, but more broadly concern the theoretical platform around which Bourdieu built the notion of culture as capital.

In particular, many have questioned the concept of *habitus* and its role in determining one's 'cultural capital resources'. De Landa (2006: 63-66), for example, criticises Bourdieu's 'automated' imagining of the *habitus* as a 'master-process'. He questions the ability of the *habitus* to secure a reliable unity between the resources gained in parental socialisation, and their subsequent development through education and occupation. For De Landa, the *habitus* does not guarantee the reproduction of cultural capital resources in the way Bourdieu sets out. Instead, the *habitus* is continually evolving in complex and contradictory ways, drawing on 'interpersonal networks and institutions' that help leverage one's cultural resources at any one time (ibid). Similarly, Bottero (2010) argues that Bourdieu underestimates the extent to which social agents are 'intersubjective' entities. She notes that the development of one's *habitus*, and the cultural tastes it engenders, is a collective accomplishment where agents must 'take into account and act in accord with the expectations of the people they encounter in social contexts' (Bottero, 2010: 13-15).

Specifically examining the influence of home life on educational outcomes, Goldthorpe (2007) is also sceptical about the explanatory reach of *habitus*. In particular, he questions Bourdieu's insistence that the *habitus* is profoundly resistant to other socialising factors. He argues that the education system, for instance, offers an opportunity not just to underwrite the *habitus* acquired in the home, but also to redress it through a process of re-socialisation. Drawing on the influential empirical work of Halsey et al (1980), Goldthorpe highlights the process of upward educational mobility that has occurred in the UK since the 1950s. He notes that many of the children that have reached selective secondary schools and higher education in this period have been 'first generation' (i.e. their parents had not reached a similar level). This is compelling evidence, according to Goldthorpe, that schools and universities do not just *reproduce* cultural capital resources, they can also *create* them for those that haven't secured them via upbringing (See Chapter 6 for a more detailed discussion of *habitus* and social mobility)²⁰

²⁰ Bennett (2006) has also noted that the contribution of UK education to the circuit of cultural capital has decreased in recent years due to a shift away from promoting arts and humanities towards subjects like business and hard science, where cultural resources are arguably less important.

Other theorists have problematised the notion of *habitus* by examining its outputs in terms of cultural taste. Lahire (2004), for example, uses data on intra-individual variations of taste to dispute Bourdieu's unitary conception of the *habitus*. He shows that most people have 'dissonant' rather than 'consonant' cultural tastes that straddle the cultural hierarchy. These dissonant tastes, he argues, do not necessarily imply an 'omnivorous' orientation but rather should be seen as 'cultural errors' that people make in relation to class. These errors occur, according to Lahire, because the *habitus* is impeded by both 'a plurality of socialising agents' and a range of contextual factors. These factors can override the *habitus* in determining what culture we like and consume. For instance, Lahire notes that culture may be consumed because it is compulsory at school, or because of professional pressures, or to support a partner or child, or undertaken out of politeness.

Finally, in a British context, Bennett et al (2009) also use data on cultural taste to question Bourdieu's notion of the *habitus*. In particular they argue that the Kantian aesthetic, which supposedly underpins the *habitus* of the dominant classes and orients their taste towards legitimate culture, holds little purchase among the contemporary British middle class. On the contrary, they find that for the contemporary middle classes it is the rejection of cultural exclusiveness and snobbery that now acts as a more significant 'badge of honour' (Bennett et al, 2009: 186).

Although mindful of these far-reaching criticisms of Bourdieu's *habitus*, I have nonetheless decided to tentatively retain the notion of *habitus* in this book. It is the mechanism that purports to unite one's cultural capital resources and without it the concept of cultural capital seems, to me, to lose any semblance of coherent theoretical grounding. It is also my opinion that the critiques of *habitus* do not fully acknowledge the capacity for agency inherent in the original articulation of the concept. It's important to remember, for example, that Bourdieu's (1984: 114) conception of social space was constructed along *three* dimensions – volume of capital, composition of capital *and* "change in these properties over time". Thus he did have a theoretical conception of individual agency – albeit a somewhat limiting one – as a "band of more or less probable trajectories" based on one's "volume of

inherited capital”. Moreover, although Bourdieu (1977: 94) notes that in most cases the conditions embodied in *habitus* ‘are placed beyond the grasp of consciousness and hence cannot be touched by voluntary deliberate transformation’, in later work he did acknowledge that in certain instances the *habitus* can adapt and change (Bourdieu, 2005).

Yet despite these qualifications, it is important to note that the use of *habitus* in this book will be *critically orientated*. In particular, it will pay particular attention to those respondents who have experienced long-range social mobility (both upward and downward) and for whom, therefore, initial resources of cultural capital have not necessarily stayed unified over time in the way theorised by Bourdieu. It will examine whether the comedy tastes and styles of these mobile respondents reflect ‘a wholesale escaping of the *habitus*’, as described by Friedmann (2005) in his study of working class social mobility, the defiant working class ‘*habitus* of recalcitrance’ expressed by Skeggs (2004: 89), or the more flexible version of a reflexive, self-improving *habitus* depicted by Sweetman (2003) and Reay et al (2009).

Researching Comedy Taste

Before proceeding to the empirical chapters of this book, it is worth briefly outlining the mixed method research that I draw upon (A more detailed account of the research design is outlined in the Methodological Appendix). The study consisted, first, of a survey (n = 901) and 24 follow up interviews carried out at the 2009 Edinburgh Festival Fringe, the largest arts festival in the world and the focal point of the British comedy industry. The survey aimed to measure ‘comedy taste’, with respondents asked to indicate their preferences across 16 stand-up comedians and 16 TV comedy shows. It also asked a number of demographic questions in order to construct variables for gender, age and notably – ‘cultural capital resources’. This latter variable was made up of equally weighted measures for social origin (parental occupation and education), education and occupation.

In terms of sampling, the true ‘population’ of comedy consumers at the festival was impossible to document, so the survey used the sampling frame of the Fringe

programme and took a systematic random sample of every twentieth comedy show. The survey was then distributed at each of the chosen shows (n = 34). The response rate was very high at approximately 90 per cent. It is important to note, however, that previous research has indicated that Fringe audiences tend to be disproportionately drawn from middle-class backgrounds rich in cultural capital (Scottish Arts Council 2007). Indeed, such a skew appears to be somewhat confirmed in my sample – 31 per cent of respondents were from ‘low cultural capital’ (LCC) backgrounds, 30 per cent from ‘mixed cultural capital’ (MCC) backgrounds and 39 per cent from ‘high cultural capital’ (HCC) backgrounds.

In order to achieve a synthetic analysis of comedy taste, I followed the example of Bourdieu (1984) and more recently Bennett et al. (2009) in using Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA). In MCA, individual responses to questions are categorized as modalities and then using geometric analysis the relationship between the different modalities is assessed and axes are identified that separate the modalities relationally in the form of a visual map. This allowed me to compare one respondent’s pattern of comedy taste in relation to every other respondent, and therefore plot the symbolic distance between each modality in the map. MCA is also attractive because it allows for social demographic variables to be superimposed onto initial taste axes (without affecting their coordinates) to establish whether they are associated with taste (Bennett et al. 2009). This meant that ‘supplementary variables’ such as cultural capital resources, age and gender, could be overlaid onto the comedy map (For an exhaustive explanation of MCA see Le Roux and Rouanet 2004).

Mindful of the inability of survey data to explore the *way* people consume comedy, 24 respondents were also interviewed about their aesthetic orientation to comedy. Sampling for the interviews was based on a theoretically defined sub-sample of the original survey respondents and were chosen primarily to reflect the demographic distribution of the survey sample. Thus there were 9 interviewees with high cultural capital resources, 8 with mixed resources and 7 with low resources. I also tried to reflect the gender, age and location proportions from the survey.

As well as the central triangulation of survey and interview data on comedy taste, I also examined two other important actors in the British comedy field; comedy critics and comedy scouts. First, textual analysis was used to examine the role of comedy criticism in the legitimation of certain comedy tastes and styles of appreciation. The analysis drew upon reviews of five different comedians at the 2009 Edinburgh Festival Fringe, all of whom were included in the original survey; Stewart Lee, Hans Teeuwen, Simon Amstell, Michael McIntyre and Jim Bowen. Although this was a small non-probability sample, the comedians were nonetheless chosen to reflect the diversity of British comedy genres and the different taste communities uncovered in the survey. In addition, in order to engage with the internal ‘field’ of comedy criticism, reviews of these comedians were examined in five different publications; *The Guardian*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Daily Mirror*, *Chortle*, and *Fest Magazine*. These review publications were chosen to represent the differing sources of comedy criticism that exists nationally, locally and online.

And finally, at the 2012 Edinburgh Fringe, I conducted ‘go-along’ participant observation, followed by interviews, with 9 cultural intermediaries (comedy agents, venue bookers, producers and TV and radio commissioners) who work as temporary ‘talent scouts’ at the Fringe. I shadowed each scout for approximately 4-6 hours and in this period they scouted between 2-4 comedy shows, depending on their schedule. In total I went to 22 comedy shows with scouts. Immediately after shadowing I conducted an interview with each scout, lasting approximately 1-1.5 hours.

Conclusion

The main aim of this chapter has been to outline the theoretical backbone of this book and its grounding in Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital. In particular, it has sought to explain how I intend to put the concept to work empirically, first in terms of measuring respondent’s cultural capital ‘resources’ and second by examining whether these resources are being used, through the consumption of comedy, to activate ‘realised’ forms of objectified and embodied cultural capital. Indeed, this underlines the main empirical task that I aim to tackle in the following chapters. Chapter 4 thus begins by analysing responses to the survey, examining the major fault lines in British

comedy taste and assessing whether any of these indicate that comedy preference may be becoming a status marker in British society. Chapter 5 then shifts the emphasis away from specific comedians and instead looks at differing styles of comic appreciation. In particular, it aims to establish whether those from privileged backgrounds use their embodied cultural capital to rarify their consumption of comedy and demonstrate their cultural distinction. In Chapter 6, the power of embodied cultural capital is further investigated but this time through the lens of upwardly mobile interviewees who have accumulated rather than inherited cultural capital resources, and therefore lack the ability (and desire) to communicate distinction through their taste.

With the patterning of comedy taste explored, the analysis moves on to examining its wider sociological significance. Chapter 7 therefore aims to explicitly examine the symbolic boundaries separating the tastes of different social groups, investigating in particular the *strength* and *significance* of such dividing lines. In Chapter 8 and 9, the implications of comedy as cultural capital moves from symbolic boundaries to issues of *legitimacy*. Chapter 8, in particular, uses textual analysis to explore the role played by comedy critics as mediators of value in the comedy field, and Chapter 9 focuses on the ways in which comedy scouts frame the way people consume comedy and, in so doing, whether they act to intensify taste boundaries.

Part 2: The Cultural Currency of a 'Good' Sense of Humour

Chapter 4: Liking the 'Right' Comedy

Stewart Lee is not your 'gateway drug' into comedy, but crack cocaine for those who find they can no longer get a high from the softer comedy of Peter Kay or most of the Jongleurs roster (Steve Bennett on Stewart Lee, 2005)

About halfway through Wednesday night's final episode of Brass Eye, it began to occur to me that Chris Morris might possibly be God (Will Self on Brass Eye, 2001)

[Roy 'Chubby'] Brown's giving unashamed comic voice to a certain section of the populace that still calls a spade a spade is probably defensible. But his belief that this requires selling them jokes cheaper and in worse taste than a bashed can of out-of-date baked beans, is not. Comparing Venus Williams to a "black leather settee"? Punching an inflatable Jade Goody doll, anyone? The rest was like being locked in a room with a biblically drunk, cretaceously smutty great uncle, all fart and knocking jokes (Malcolm Jack on Roy 'Chubby' Brown, 2011).

Introduction

Comedy invokes strong reactions. As illustrated above, those who write about comedy tend to have a very clear sense of what constitutes 'good' taste. Critics like these are constantly making value judgments about whether particular comedians are funny or not and, having worked as a critic myself for the last 10 years, I have always been struck by how consistent their critical judgments are. For most critics, at least,

British comedy can be plotted in terms of a relatively robust cultural hierarchy, with some comedians and comedy TV shows valued very highly and others very obviously discarded (see Chapter 8 for more on comedy critics). Yet what is less clear is whether such pronounced taste differences also exist among ordinary comedy consumers? Are comedy audiences as selective as critics in what they like, and if so what variables might help us explain divisions in comedy taste?

This chapter aims to tackle these questions by examining the contemporary patterning of British comedy taste. In particular, it draws upon a survey (n = 901) distributed at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in August 2009. The survey asked respondents to indicate their preferences for 16 comedians and 16 TV comedy shows, and responses were then analysed using Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) (see Methodological Appendix for more detail). It will not escape some comedy fans that the visualisations created by MCA may appear, at first, suspiciously similar to the nonsensical mock-graphics used in comedy TV shows *Brass Eye* and *The Day Today*. However, I would urge sceptical readers to persevere with MCA. It may seem ‘a bit *Brass Eye*’, but in reality the method offers a highly powerful tool for plotting the relational distribution of tastes. Not only was it Bourdieu’s (1984) favoured analytic technique, but it has also become one of the most widely used methodological instruments in cultural sociology²¹.

The chapter thus proceeds first with a general inspection of the three main MCA axes that distinguish comedy taste in contemporary Britain. It then explains how each of these axes is related to social-demographic variables. It concludes that the most significant tension and polarity in the field of comedy sets apart ‘highbrow’ comedy tastes, preferred generally by respondents with high levels of cultural capital (HCC) and ‘lowbrow’ comedy tastes, preferred mainly by respondents with low levels of cultural capital (LCC). This finding, I go on to argue, indicates that certain ‘highbrow’ comedians have – to some extent - become ‘objects’ of cultural capital in contemporary Britain. However, the chapter closes by illustrating that, as well as cleavages, there are many comedy tastes that appear to connect respondents. These

²¹ For more detail on MCA see (Le Roux and Rouanet, 2004; and more generally (Bennett, 2009: 262-264).

uniting tastes may at first seem to undermine the activation of cultural capital, but if one uses qualitative data to examine how such tastes are actually *expressed*, it is possible to see how HCC respondents distinguish themselves through the use of rarefied *styles of comic appreciation*.

The Field of British Comedy Taste

Carrying out MCA on my survey data, I retained all 32 comedy taste variables (16 for stand-up comedy and 16 for TV comedy), generating 115 ‘active’ comedy taste modalities. 13 rare modalities (i.e. frequencies less than 5% of the sample) were excluded from the analysis (Bennett et al, 2009: 262-264). From these parameters, three principal axes were identified (see Table 4.1) that best characterised the field of comedy taste. From interpreting the Eigen values for each of these axes, it was possible to detect that Axis 1 (contributing 61% of modified cumulative variance) was particularly important, Axis 2 (20%) was relatively important and Axis 3 (7%) was marginally important. From axis 4 onwards little additional variance was explained, implying that 3 axes provide a powerful summary of the organisation of British comedy taste.

Number	Eigenvalue	Variance rates	Modified Cumulative Variance
Axis 1	0.2139	3.334	61.0
Axis 2	0.1377	1.134	81.1
Axis 3	0.0922	0.371	87.8

Table 4.1: Eigen values and rates of cumulated variance

Figure 4.1 displays the coordinates of the 41 (of 115) comedy taste modalities that contributed significantly to Axis 1²² (displayed from top to bottom). Where a taste symbol has a plus sign that indicates it is liked, a minus sign that it is disliked, an equals sign that it is neither liked nor disliked and a question mark that it is unknown.

²² When visually interpreting the axes, the general rule is that active modalities are retained when their contribution to the axis is greater than the mean contribution – here $100/115 = 0.87\%$. The real contribution and weight of each comedy taste modality to each of the 3 Axes is detailed in Appendix 2. Those modalities which were retained for inspection on each of the 3 Axes are detailed in bold.

At the top of Axis 1 are a cluster of preferences for comedians such as Stewart Lee, Andy Zaltzman, Hans Teeuwen and Mark Thomas and TV comedy shows *Brass Eye*, *Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle* and *The Thick Of It*. There are also a cluster of dislikes for comedians such as Roy 'Chubby' Brown, Bernard Manning, Jim Davidson and Karen Dunbar, and TV shows like *Bullseye*, *Last of The Summer Wine* and *The Bob Monkhouse Show*. In contrast, at the bottom of Axis 1, although there is no cluster of dislikes, there is a clear group of preferences for comedians Bernard Manning, Benny Hill, Roy 'Chubby' Brown and Jim Davidson, and TV shows *The Benny Hill Show*, *The Bob Monkhouse Show* and *Last of The Summer Wine*. There is also a large cluster of comedians that are unknown (i.e. items respondents 'have not heard of')

Thus, the comedy taste division in Axis 1 appears to separate what may be considered 'highbrow' comedy taste at the top from 'lowbrow' comedy taste on the bottom. Comedy items preferred at the top of the map can be characterised as 'highbrow' because each has been highly consecrated in the comedy field. They are what Mills (2009: 134-136) terms 'comedies of distinction'. In contrast, items at the bottom have generally received very little consecration. Traditionally, the source of artistic consecration and legitimacy has come from two main channels: via the state and from key intermediaries such as cultural critics. While British comedy has received only minimal attention from the academy, the influence of critics in the field is relatively strong. Critics are not only key gatekeepers in the communication of comedy to the public but they are also considered independent 'experts' and given the unique 'authority to assess artistic works' (Bourdieu, 1993: 229). Through the deployment of influential reviews and awards, they are therefore able to endow certain comedians with value and legitimacy (Bauman, 2001) (See Chapter 8 [p.198-207] for a longer discussion of this).

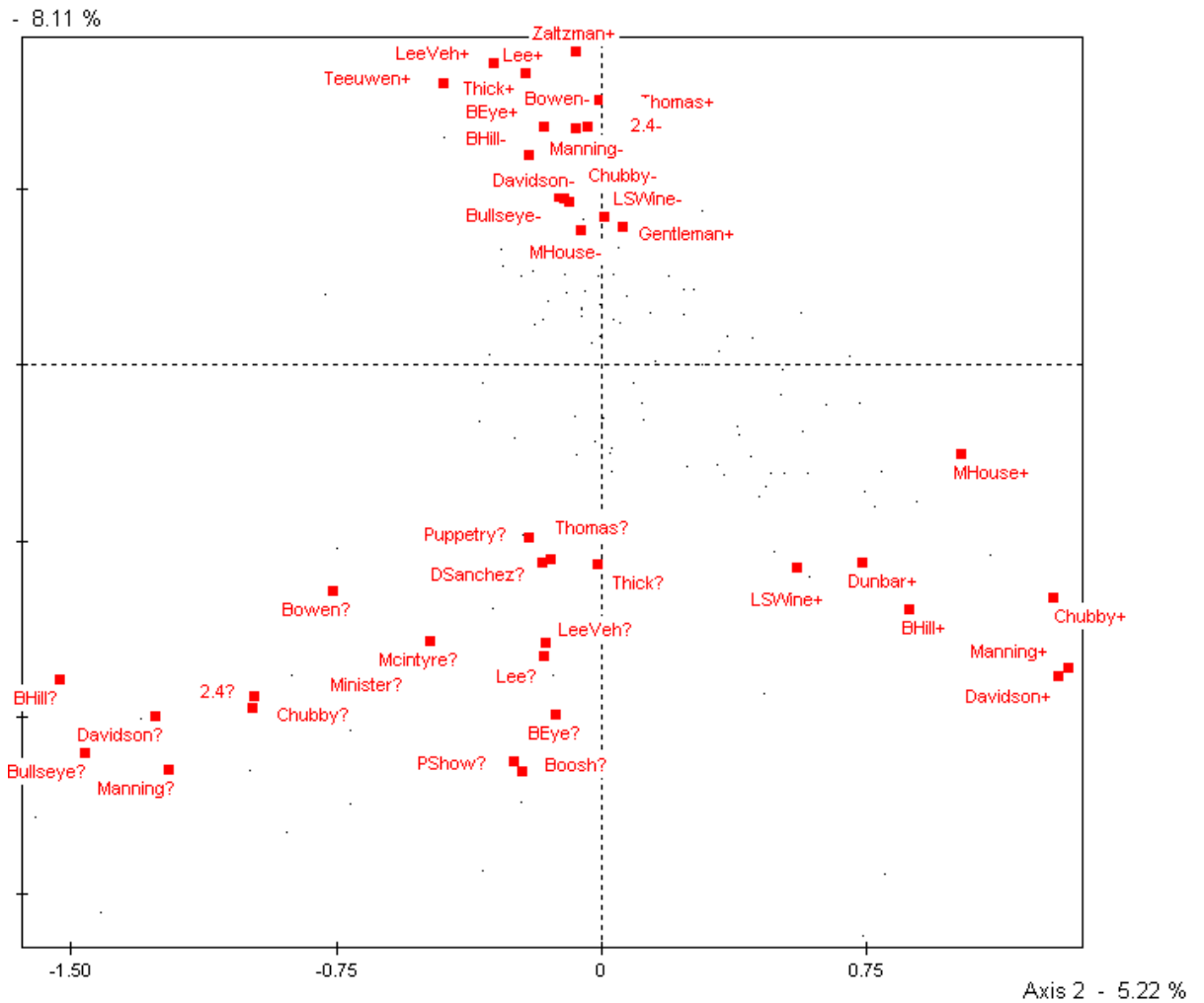


Figure 4.1: Axis 1 and 2, indicating modalities contributing to Axis 1

Thus, one robust way to know that comedy items at the top of Axis 1 can be characterised as “highbrow” is that each item has been extensively legitimated by British comedy critics (see for example Cavendish, 2009; Deacon, 2009; Hall, 2008; Richardson, 2009; Bennett, 2006; Self, 1997). It is also worth noting that some comedy items at the top of Axis 1, such as Stewart Lee and Brass Eye, have also been consecrated by academics (Stott, 2002; Mills 2004; Quirk, 2011; Friedman, 2013; Leggott and Sexton, 2013). In contrast, the comedians preferred at the bottom of the axis have received little consecration from critics, either receiving bad reviews or even more tellingly, ignored by reviewers (Deacon, 2010; Gardner, 2010; Jack, 2008; Hattenstone, 2003; for a defence of Roy Chubby Brown see Medhurst, 2007).

An additional way to deduce the cultural ‘value’ and position of comedy items on Axis 1 may be to look at their popularity. According to Bourdieu (1993: 114), cultural tastes are categorised in terms of their rarity. Thus comedy items ‘tend to lose their distinctive value as the number of consumers both inclined and able to appropriate them grows.’ In other words, ‘popularisation devalues’. Considering this it is worth noting that, on the whole, the comedy items preferred at the top of Axis 1 have much smaller audiences than those at the bottom of Axis 1. For example, the highest viewing figures recorded for Brass Eye (1.5 million) and Stewart Lee’s Comedy Vehicle (1 million) were much lower than that of Last of The Summer Wine (18 million) and The Benny Hill Show (21 million) (British Comedy Guide, 2011). In terms of scarcity, then, comedy items at the top of Axis 1 may be considered ‘highbrow’ not just because they are highly consecrated but also because they can claim a certain rarity.

It is important to note at this point that my concern in this book is not to explicitly address whether this high-low division of comedy is normatively just. Indeed, following Bourdieu and Passeron (1979: 4-15), my suspicion is that such a system of cultural classification is largely ‘arbitrary’, with no taste culture able to validly claim universal and essential value²³. Instead, the cultural hierarchy is a system of meaning that I believe is largely imposed by dominant groups and then ‘misrecognised’ as legitimate by society as a whole. This misrecognition of authority constitutes what Bourdieu calls symbolic violence, ‘the process whereby power relations are perceived not for what they objectively *are* but in a form which renders them legitimate in the eyes of the beholder’ (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979: Xiii). Furthermore, any claims about the ‘true’ legitimacy of the cultural hierarchy have been undermined recently by the work of Miles and Sullivan (2010), who show that measures of good health and well-being are not associated with those who engage in ‘high’ cultural activities *per se*, but rather with those who engage in *any* forms of culture. However, for my purposes, the normative legitimacy of the cultural hierarchy is largely immaterial.

²³ Some have argued (Bennett, 2005, 2007: 215-16) that in works such as *The Rules of Art* (1994) and *Pascalian Mediations* (2000), Bourdieu altered his standpoint towards notions of intrinsic cultural value. In these books, he appears to validate the notion of artistic autonomy, arguing that this represents a legitimate struggle against the encroachments of the market and the state, and that interventions should focus on ‘universalising access’ to the fruits of this form of cultural production.

What is more important is that the legitimacy of a cultural hierarchy is widely *perceived* to exist and has historically held considerable social power in the British cultural field (Stott, 2002; Featherstone, 2007).

Moving onto Axis 2, Figure 4.2 displays the coordinates of the 32 (of 115) comedy taste modalities that contribute significantly to this axis (displayed from left to right). On the left of the axis are a large cluster of comedians, both ‘highbrow’ and ‘lowbrow’, that are unknown and on the right hand side are a set of preferences for ‘lowbrow’ comedians. Axis 2 therefore appears to counterpose those who are generally uninformed about all types of comedy and those who generally like ‘lowbrow’ comedy.

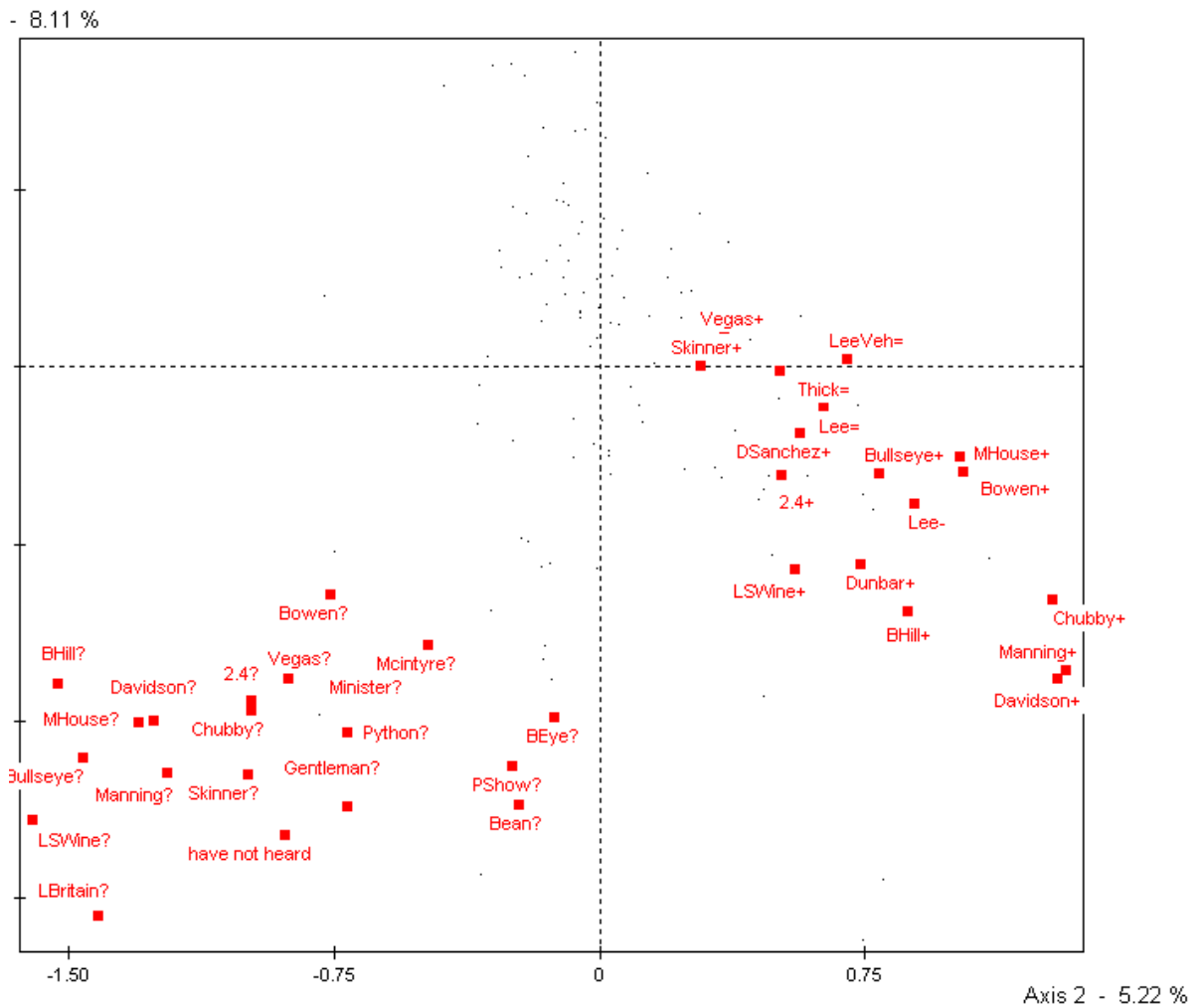


Figure 4.2: Axis 1 and 2, indicating modalities contributing to Axis 2

Finally, Figure 4.3 examines the 35 (of 115) comedy taste modalities that contribute to Axis 3 (displayed from top to bottom). At the top of the axis is a cluster of ‘neither like nor dislike’ responses to both ‘highbrow’ and ‘lowbrow’ comedians whereas at the bottom there is a cluster of dislikes for many of the same comedians. This axis is harder to interpret, but seems to indicate a divide between those who are generally unsure or undecided about much British comedy and those who are generally sceptical.

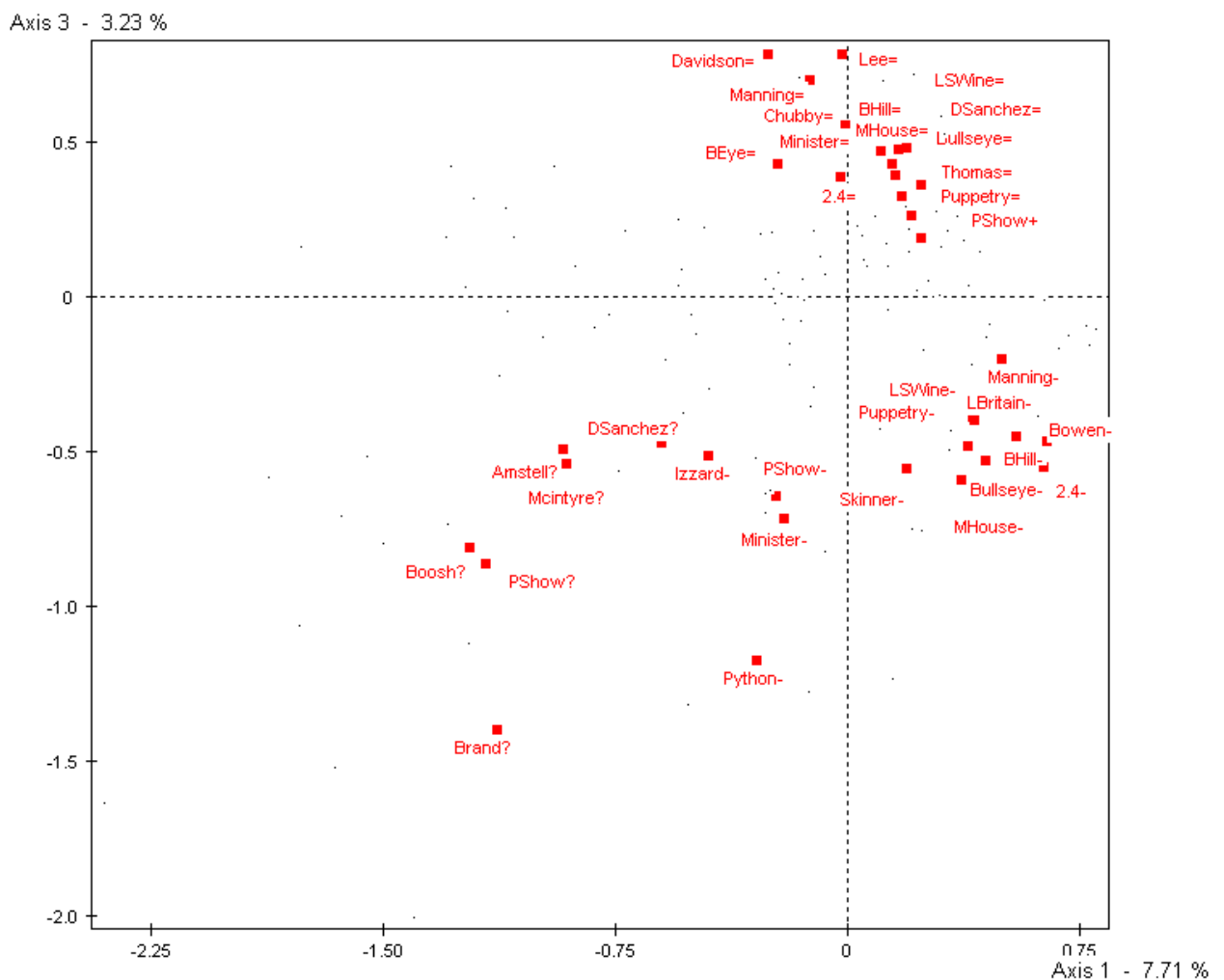


Figure 4.3: Axis 3 and 1, indicating modalities that contribute to Axis 3

British Comedy as Objectified Cultural Capital

It is important to reiterate here that although Axis 1, 2 and 3 are constructed entirely from the relative positioning of different items of comedy taste, it is possible to superimpose ‘supplementary’ socio-demographic variables onto these axes without disrupting the coordinates of the taste modalities. This involves overlaying certain variables such as age, gender and cultural capital resources onto the dimensions of the comedy taste map in order to interpret whether they are associated with taste differences. When examining these demographic variables, the general rule is that deviations in the coordinates of two supplementary modalities greater than 1 is considered large and deviations less than 0.5 small (Bennett et al, 2009: 262-264).

In Figure 4.4, gender, age and cultural capital are overlaid onto the factorial plane for Axis 1 and 2. Notably, the deviation in cultural capital resources ordered along Axis 1 is very large ($d = 1.23$). This indicates that the variance on Axis 1 is primarily associated with cultural capital – with high resources strongly associated with preferences for ‘‘highbrow’’ comedy items at the top of Figure 3 and low resources with preferences for ‘‘lowbrow’’ items at the bottom.

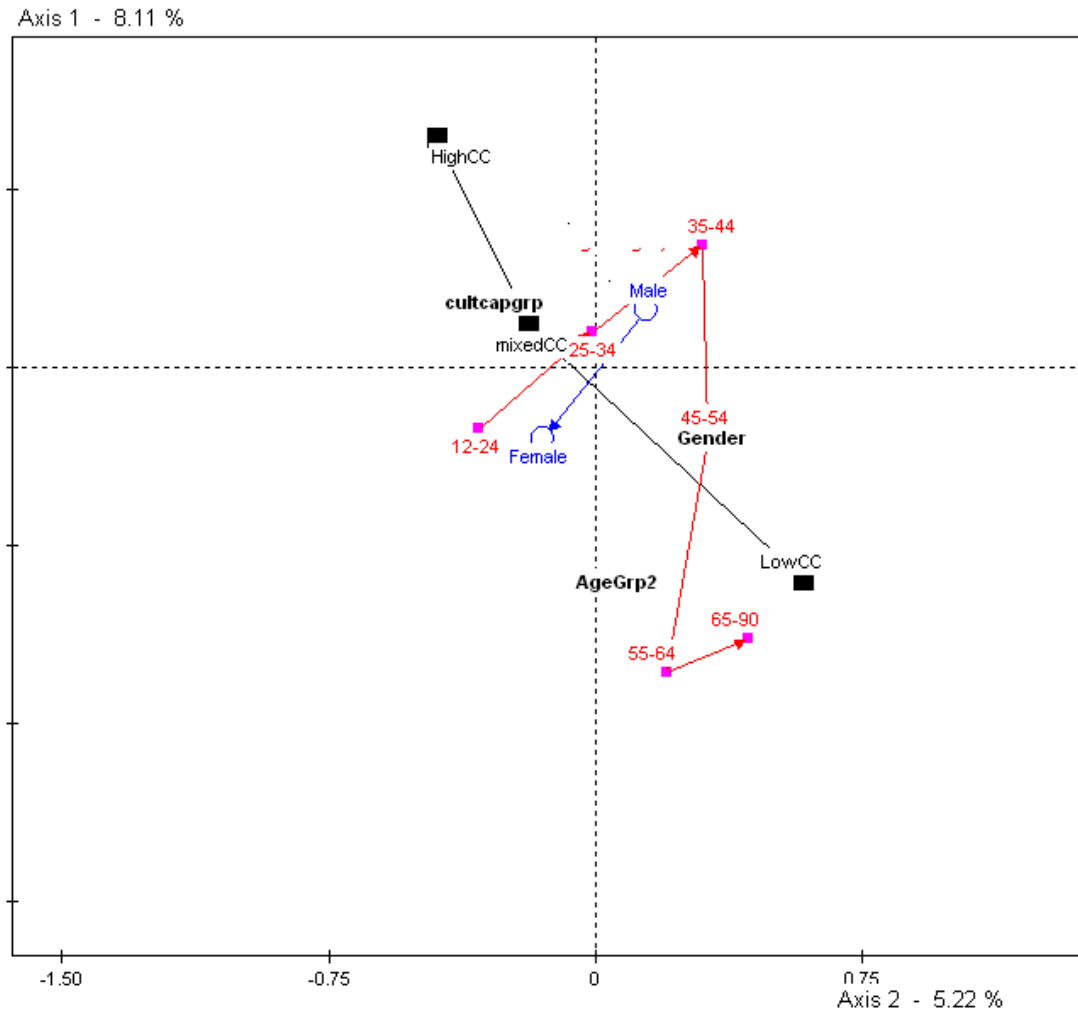


Figure 4.4: Gender, age and distribution of cultural capital, Axes 1-2

This partition of cultural capital resources is also illustrated in Figure 4.5, in terms of the cloud of individuals. Although there is some overlap between the three cultural capital groups, the ellipses show that respondents with high resources are much more likely to be located at the top of the comedy taste map and those with low resources at the bottom of the map.

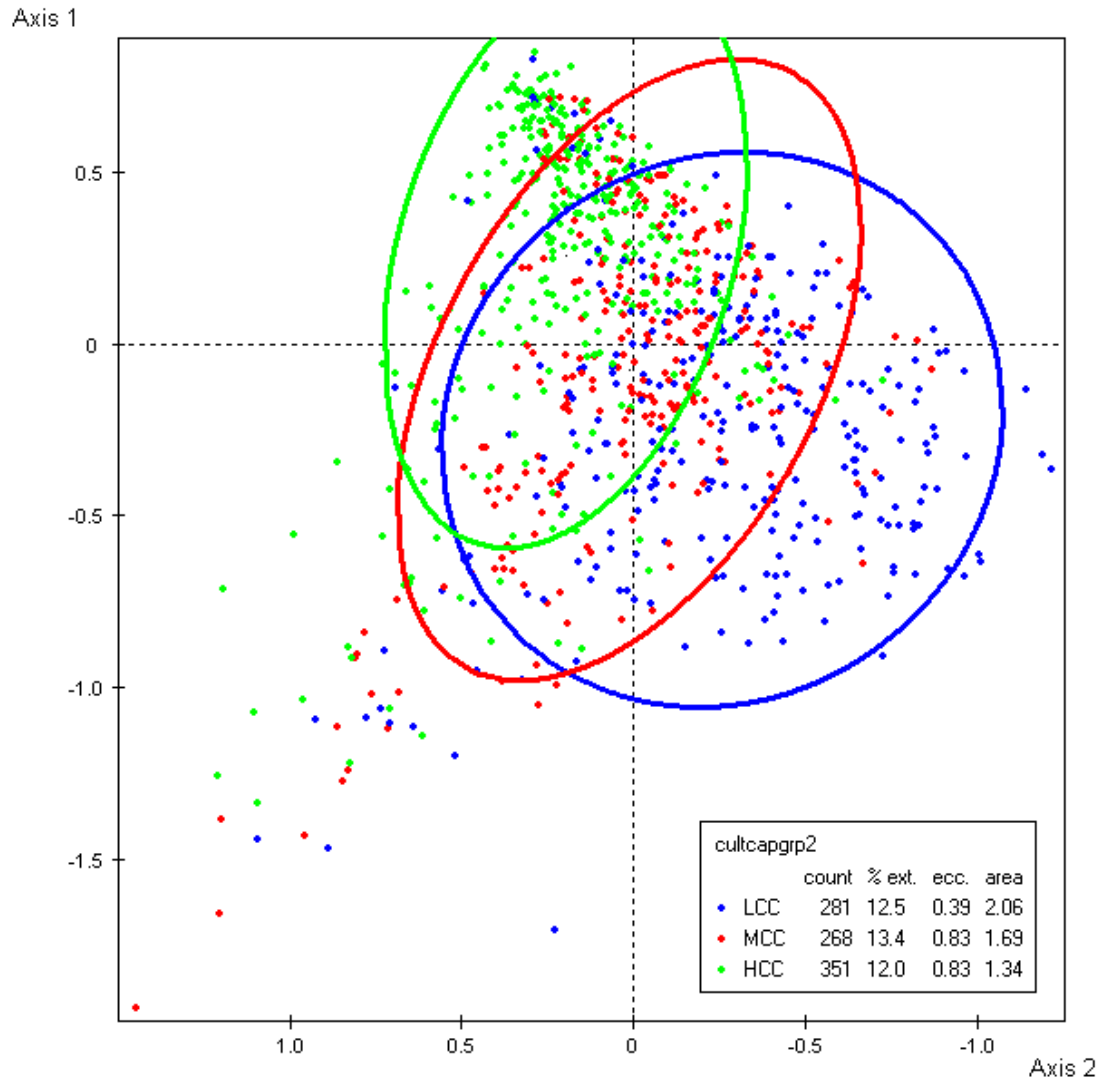


Figure 4.5: distribution and ellipses of cultural capital groups in the cloud of individuals, Axes 1-2

The main point here is significant enough that it deserves reiterating. The main axis distinguishing contemporary British comedy taste appears to separate on the one hand, *legitimate comedy taste and high cultural capital resources*, and on the other hand, *illegitimate taste and low resources*.

This finding is important for a number of reasons. First, it suggests that despite comedy’s traditional academic coding as ‘low brow art *par excellence*’ (Kuipers, 2006: 374), it is now widely popular among the culturally privileged British middle classes. Perhaps even more significant than this, though, comedy taste is strongly

differentiated according to one's cultural capital resources. Thus culturally privileged HCC respondents do not like *all* forms of British comedy, but instead report a clear cluster of preferences for more legitimate or "highbrow" comedy items. In contrast, LCC taste is characterised by preferences for less legitimate "lowbrow" comedy.

Crucially, this suggests that the culturally privileged are, to some extent, activating their cultural capital resources through the careful consumption of certain British comedians. Moreover, the association between cultural capital and 'highbrow' comedy taste also indicates that certain comedy items are becoming imbued with a sense of rarity traditionally reserved only for the 'high' arts - an 'objectified cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1986).

The main implication of comedy items being identified as objects of cultural capital is that, in turn, they become identified as what Lareau and Lamont (1988: 56) term 'widely shared high status cultural signals' and are imbued with social stratificatory power. As objects of rarity, what Goffman (1951: 295) calls 'status symbols', they infer a certain cultural aptitude on the part of the comedy consumer, and therefore signal his or her membership in a high status social group. Conversely, for those that don't laugh at this 'high status' comedy, these items only act to elicit a sense of exclusion. As Mills (2009: 112) has noted of audience reactions to critically-acclaimed TV comedy *The Office*, most respondents that did not find the show funny 'maligned themselves' for not having the 'interpretative expertise' to access the humour. Consumption of a legitimate cultural good thus offers a special opportunity for the construction and maintenance of symbolic boundaries because, 'the relationship of distinction is objectively inscribed within it, and is reactivated, intentionally or not, in each act of consumption' (Bourdieu, 1984: 227).

It is also important to note that in Axis 1 the mechanism of distinction is not only activated through comedy preference, but also through the strategic expression of cultural aversion. Among HCC respondents at the top of the map, there is not just a cluster of 'highbrow' 'likes' but also an equally evident cluster of 'lowbrow' 'dislikes'. Conversely, LCC respondents are much less likely to express "highbrow"

aversion, the bottom part of the map characterised instead by either ‘lowbrow’ preference or a lack of knowledge of comedy. Indeed, it is notable that the modalities representing dislikes for most of the ‘highbrow’ comedians, such as *Brass Eye*, Mark Thomas and *The Thick of It*, were eliminated from the analysis because their frequencies were so low (less than 5% of the sample). This finding supports the assertion first made by Bourdieu (1984: 56-57) and later by Lamont (1992: 100-105) that for the privileged, cultural ‘dislikes’ can be even more important than preferences in the expression of distinction. As Bourdieu (1984: 56) noted: ‘Tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes... Aversion to different lifestyles is perhaps one of the strongest barriers between the classes.’

By rejecting ‘lowbrow’ comedy items, HCC respondents therefore show that they have constructed strong symbolic boundaries between their own legitimate comedy taste and the ‘bad taste’ of LCC respondents (the role of dislikes in boundary-making is discussed further in Chapter 7). Notably, this is in stark contrast to the recent findings of Bennett et al (2009: 194), who argue that the expression of cultural dislikes has become muted among the contemporary British middle classes. They argue that it has now become a badge of honour to be eclectic in one’s cultural preferences and *not* to be seen as an exclusivist cultural ‘snob’. From my findings, however, such a norm of cultural tolerance seems to be notably absent in comedy consumption.

Gender, Age and Comedy Taste

Returning to Figure 7, it is important to inspect the influence of gender and age on Axis 1, 2 and 3. Notably, the deviation between sexes is small across all three Axes. Considering the male-dominated nature of British comic production (Akbar, 2007; Barreca, 1992) and the reportedly strong gender differences in ‘sense of humour’ (Cantor, 1976) and more general cultural consumption (Bennett et al, 2009), this is arguably a surprising finding. It seems that gender has both little impact on whether one likes ‘highbrow’ or ‘lowbrow’ comedy and also whether one has more or less knowledge of comedy.

However, in contrast, age appears to have an impact on each of the three axes. Although the variance in Axis 1 is chiefly associated with cultural capital resources, there also appears to be a medium age effect ($d = 0.59$), particularly between those aged 25-44 and those aged 55+. This indicates that younger and early middle-aged respondents are associated with more 'highbrow' comedy taste and older respondents with more 'lowbrow' comedy taste. This finding is interesting as it appears to contradict much existing literature (Kolb, 2001; Bennett et al, 2009), which points to a widespread decline in 'highbrow' cultural taste among younger generations.

However, the age effect found here may be better explained as a generational or cohort effect, resulting from changes that have taken place in the production of British Comedy since the late 1970s (see Chapter 2 for more detail). For example, most of the 'lowbrow' comedy items enjoyed by older respondents are older themselves, with many such as *Last of The Summer Wine*, Benny Hill, and *The Bob Monkhouse Show* produced in the 1970s and 1980s. Therefore when those who are now over 55 were growing up and establishing their cultural taste, the British comedy field was arguably dominated by these less consecrated comedy items, and this is reflected in their comedy tastes. Indeed, Mills (2005: 142) has noted how comedy taste is often bound up in matters of memory, with humour connecting to nostalgic recollections and re-enactments of past pleasures. In contrast, those who are 44 and below have grown up with British comedy after the 'Alternative Comedy' boom - when many new 'highbrow' comedians entered the field - and this may therefore explain their tastes for these more contemporary comedy items.

Moving onto Axis 2, Figure 4.4 indicates that the variance appears to be even more strongly conditioned by age. For example, the deviation between ages is relatively large ($d = 0.76$), particularly in the bottom two quadrants of the factorial plane. In Figure 4, this therefore indicates that among those with low cultural capital resources, there is a clear division between those who are younger and tend to have less knowledge about comedy and those who are older and tend to prefer a small set of 'lowbrow' comedians.

Significantly, this finding may lend some support to the cultural omnivore-univore book, particularly in relation to the young. Whereas among older generations there seems to be a straight division between ‘highbrow’ and ‘lowbrow’ comedy taste, among younger generations this is slightly different. Whereas those with high cultural capital resources mimic older generations in their preferences for many items of ‘highbrow’ comedy, those with low resources tend to be characterised by a distinct lack of engagement and knowledge of comedy. This accords, in part, with many recent studies on cultural taste and participation (Bennett et al, 2009; Hall, 1999; Li, Savage and Pickles, 2003) which note that the most significant contemporary tension in the cultural field lies between the ‘engaged’ and the ‘disengaged’, cultural ‘omnivores’ and cultural ‘univores’. Although the ‘highbrow’ comedy consumption of young HCC respondents indicates they are not necessarily omnivorous, the distinct lack of engagement among young LCC respondents indicates they do somewhat resemble the image of the cultural univore (in terms of comedy, at least).

More specifically in terms of comedy taste, Kuipers (2006: 365-369) points to the fact that the comic taste hierarchy is ‘rooted in’ the distinction between those who are knowledgeable about comedy and those who are not. She asserts that without the relevant knowledge of comedy - both in terms of ‘humour-specific knowledge’ and the knowledge to recognise ‘highbrow’ incongruity - LCC respondents do not have the ‘feelers’ to decode ‘highbrow’ comedy and are excluded from accessing and consuming the objects of cultural capital available to those from more culturally knowledgeable backgrounds (This is discussed in further detail in Chapter 5 [p. 145-148]).²⁴

Finally, Figure 4.6 indicates that the variance in Axis 3 also appears to be primarily associated with a large age effect ($d = 0.97$). As the variance accounted for by this axis is quite low, it is only possible to come to tentative conclusions about the significance of this age effect. Nevertheless, the finding seems to indicate that among the young in Figure 4.3, comedy tastes are more likely to be undecided and flexible,

²⁴ It is also possible to argue that the relative lack of comic knowledge among young LCC respondents may be rooted in the fact that, according to Wagg (1998) and Mills (2005), representations of working class life in British TV comedy are much rarer than middle and upper class representations.

whereas among older respondents tastes are more unequivocal and largely negative. This is somewhat supported by the work of Scherger (2008) who reports an association between ageing and a general decline in interest in popular cultural participation.

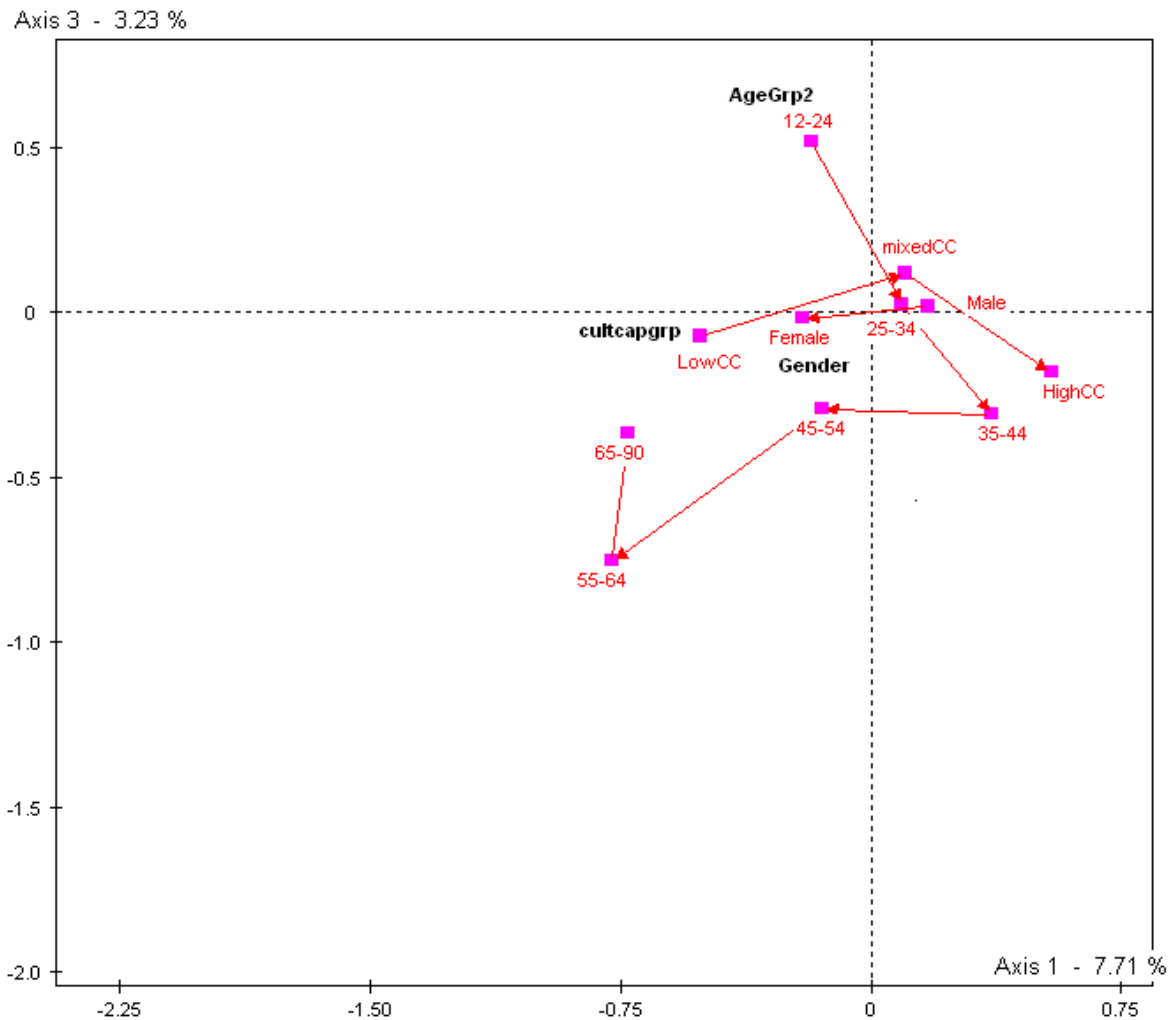


Figure 4.6: Gender, age and distribution of cultural capital, Axis 3

Conclusion: Moving Beyond The Object of Taste

As the first ever large-scale examination of British comedy taste, the results presented in this chapter provide a number of important findings. First, contrary to research into other areas of British cultural consumption, gender appears to have little effect on British comedy tastes. Second, results concerning age suggest important generational differences in comedy taste. Older generations, particularly those over 55, tend to

have a largely sceptical view of comedy, rejecting the vast majority of new comedians and instead reporting tastes for mainly older, 'lowbrow' comedians. In contrast, taste for 'highbrow' comedy appears to be much more prevalent among those 44 and under. Again, although this finding seems to contradict existing literature, I suggest that one important contributing factor may be the post 1979 aestheticisation of comedy, which has coincided with the cultural socialisation of these younger generations.

Third, and most importantly, the findings suggest that the most significant division in British comedy taste separates those with high cultural capital resources, who prefer 'highbrow' comedy and reject 'lowbrow' comedy, and those with low resources, who prefer 'lowbrow' comedy and have not heard of most 'highbrow' comedy. In particular, this suggests that HCC respondents are, to some extent, activating their cultural capital resources through the careful consumption and rejection of certain British comedy items. These items, in turn, are becoming recognisable objects of cultural capital. For the culturally privileged, then, liking and disliking the 'right' comedy *does* appear to act as a status marker.

However, although such findings are significant - particularly considering comedy's historically discredited position - it is important not to over-emphasise the activation of objectified cultural capital through comedy. As Bennett et al (2009: 34) note, there are serious limitations of thinking of social space in the purely geometrical terms that MCA implies. There is a danger, for instance, that separating comedy tastes geometrically can artificially polarise oppositions between different respondents. As Bennett (2007: 213) highlights, such visualisations can 'salami slice' the tastes of individuals depending on where the statistical nucleus for each taste is located. This leads to a 'dramatisation' of the significance of taste differences between social groups. According to Lahire (2004: 160-165), this is what occurred in Bourdieu's use of MCA in *Distinction*, where the analytical emphasis disproportionately focused on taste differences that were often of minor significance to the overall activity of each social group.

It is also possible to argue that a similar dramatisation occurs in my main comedy taste map (see Figure 4.1). For example, this map located HCC respondents and a number of ‘highbrow’ comedy taste preferences very close to each other in social space, thus suggesting HCC respondents have consonant tastes for all ‘highbrow’ items. However, as Table 4.2 illustrates, HCC respondents rarely liked all ‘highbrow’ comedy items, or had solely ‘highbrow’ taste. For example, 32% of HCC respondents liked at least one ‘lowbrow’ comedy item.

	Low Cultural Capital	Mixed Cultural Capital	High Cultural Capital
Like at least 1 “highbrow” comedy item	31% (87)	77% (206)	95% (333)
Like at least 2 “highbrow” comedy items	21% (59)	68% (182)	92% (323)
Like at least 3 “highbrow” comedy items	17% (47)	39% (105)	77% (270)
Like at least 4 “highbrow” comedy items	7% (19)	21% (56)	62% (218)
Like at least 1 “lowbrow” comedy item	83% (233)	77% (207)	32% (112)
Like at least 2 “lowbrow” comedy items	62% (174)	51% (137)	5% (18)
Like at least 3 “lowbrow” comedy items	44% (124)	28% (75)	1% (3)
Like at least 4 “lowbrow” comedy items	29% (81)	14% (38)	1% (2)

Table 4.2: Consonance and dissonance of comedy preferences by cultural capital resources

Thus, Lahire (2008) argues that when examining patterns of cultural consumption it is important to focus not just on the tastes that distinguish social groups, but also the tastes which unite these groups. Following this, it is important to consider a number of qualifications to my main conclusion concerning British comedy and the activation of objectified cultural capital. First, it is worth noting that one group, mixed cultural capital (MCC) respondents, did not clearly identify with either ‘highbrow’ or ‘lowbrow’ comedy taste. As the MCC ellipsis in Figure 4.5 demonstrates, most of these individuals were located in the centre of the cloud of individuals for Axis 1 and 2. Indeed, in statistical terms at least, the taste profile of this group appeared to defy the notion that consuming ‘highbrow’ comedy was the most socially valuable. Instead, most of these respondents resembled comedy ‘omnivores’, often combining

preferences for both ‘highbrow’ and ‘lowbrow’ comedy items. It could be argued that if such a large group (representing 30% of the overall sample) was happy to traverse the comic hierarchy this undermines the very notion that a meaningful taste hierarchy actually *exists* in the field of comedy (see Chapter 6 for a more detailed discussion).

Second, it is also important to consider that comedy items themselves are unstable and cannot be categorised as having invariant ‘‘highbrow’ or ‘‘lowbrow’’ meaning. Just as the field of comedy consumption is constantly changing and evolving, so is the field of production. In a manner similar to how Thornton (1996) described the ever-changing tastes in ‘clubland’, it’s important to consider, that the legitimacy and rarity of my comedy items will change over time and this may greatly affect their currency as objects of cultural capital. Indeed, even as I write this book in July 2013, the status of many of the comedians that I surveyed in August 2009 has changed significantly. The trajectory of standup Michael McIntyre (who was included in the survey) provides a case in point. In the early 2000s, when McIntyre started his stand-up career, he received very good reviews from critics and was nominated for the prestigious Perrier Comedy Award in 2003 (Chamberlain, 2006; Thompson, 2004). However, as Dessau (2010) notes, in the last few years, as McIntyre’s popularity has grown, his level of consecration among critics and other intermediaries in the comedy field has fallen considerably (see Chapter 8 on ‘critics’ for more detail on Michael McIntyre).

Furthermore, invariantly categorising comedy items also misses the potential for purposeful inter and trans-generic mixing in comedy (Jancovich, 2000). For example, many British comedians are well-known for deliberately mixing ‘highbrow’ and ‘lowbrow’ comedy and intentionally producing different output for different audiences in different contexts. For example, the stand-up Simon Amstell is well-known for his role as the host (BBC 2, 2006-2009) of popular TV comedy panel show *Never Mind The Buzzcocks*. While such TV panel shows generally receive only moderate consecration in the comedy field (Sturges, 2010), Amstell has received widespread critical praise for his live stand-up (Logan, 2009; Copstick, 2009). Thus, the example of McIntyre and Amstell demonstrate that even if comedians can be

identified as objects of cultural capital at one point in time, this status is inherently unstable and always subject to change.

Finally, and most significantly, it is worth considering that although survey data demonstrated that several comedy items *are* associated with cultural capital groups, there are also many items which *are not*. For example, Table 4.3 illustrates that preferences for comedians such as Michael McIntyre, Russell Brand, Eddie Izzard, Jonny Vegas, and Frank Skinner and comedy shows such as *Monty Python* and *Little Britain* appear to be relatively evenly distributed among those with high, mixed and low cultural capital resources. As Figure 4.7 shows, these tastes were tightly clustered in the centre of Axes 1 and 2, but did not appear on the original graphs because they did not contribute significantly to the variance of either Axis.

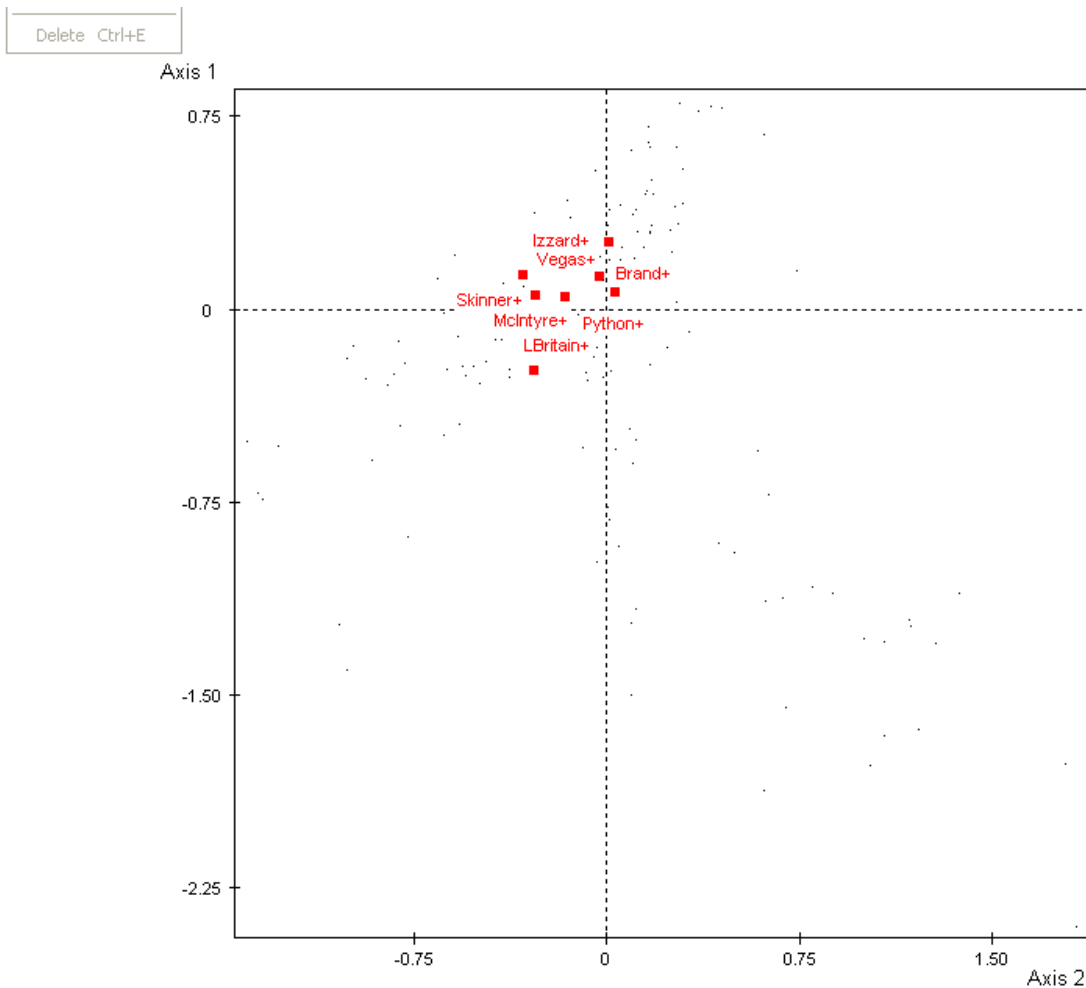


Figure 4.7: selected comedy taste modalities, Axes 1-2

Together, these qualifications are important as they indicate that not all British comedy taste is associated with distinction and boundary-making. Indeed, many comedy items in Table 4.3 appear to unite rather than polarise social groups and appear free from what Bennett et al (2009: 51) call ‘symbolic baggage’.

Comedy Item	Low Cultural Capital	Mixed Cultural Capital	High Cultural Capital
Like Stewart Lee	15% (42)	45% (121)	77% (270)
Dislike Stewart Lee	11% (31)	5% (13)	4% (14)
Like Mark Thomas	7% (20)	28% (75)	59% (207)
Dislike Mark Thomas	6% (17)	4% (11)	4% (14)
Like The Thick of it	10% (28)	24% (64)	59% (207)
Dislike The Thick Of It	5% (14)	1% (3)	1% (3)
Like Brass Eye	22% (62)	46% (123)	77% (271)
Dislike Brass Eye	8% (22)	4% (11)	3% (11)
Like Eddie Izzard	58% (163)	72% (193)	77% (270)
Dislike Eddie Izzard	15% (42)	9% (24)	5% (18)
Like Russell Brand	44% (124)	46% (123)	41% (144)
Dislike Russell Brand	36% (101)	33% (88)	30% (105)
Like Monty Python	75% (211)	83% (222)	85% (298)
Dislike Monty Python	10% (28)	5% (13)	4% (14)
Like Mr Bean	52% (146)	35% (94)	44% (154)
Dislike Mr Bean	27% (76)	28% (75)	30% (105)
Like Michael McIntyre	64% (180)	59% (158)	58% (204)
Dislike Michael McIntyre	8% (22)	7% (19)	14% (49)
<i>Like Jim Davidson</i>	<i>56% (157)</i>	<i>41% (110)</i>	<i>2% (7)</i>
<i>Dislike Jim Davidson</i>	<i>31% (87)</i>	<i>44% (118)</i>	<i>79% (277)</i>
<i>Like Benny Hill</i>	<i>48% (135)</i>	<i>19% (51)</i>	<i>5% (18)</i>
<i>Dislike Benny Hill</i>	<i>16% (45)</i>	<i>29% (78)</i>	<i>52% (183)</i>
<i>Like Last of the Summer Wine</i>	<i>35% (98)</i>	<i>28% (75)</i>	<i>14% (49)</i>
<i>Dislike Last of the Summer Wine</i>	<i>30% (84)</i>	<i>30% (80)</i>	<i>43% (151)</i>
<i>Like Roy 'Chubby' Brown</i>	<i>34% (96)</i>	<i>16% (43)</i>	<i>3% (11)</i>

<i>Dislike Roy 'Chubby' Brown</i>	31% (87)	52% (139)	72% (253)
<i>Like Bernard Manning</i>	31% (87)	5% (13)	2% (7)
<i>Dislike Bernard Manning</i>	28% (79)	52% (139)	79% (277)

Table 4.3: Selected comedy preferences by cultural capital ('highbrow' comedians in bold and 'lowbrow' comedians in italics)

However, while many British comedians do not hold any intrinsic rarity, this does not necessarily mean that they are not being used in the activation of cultural capital resources. As Bourdieu (1984: 504-519) notes, most cultural capital is not activated in the act of consumption, but through the multiple interactions people engage in concerning taste. In these interactions it is not the objects of consumption that are important, but arguably the manner in which consumption is expressed – the 'modality of practice'.

In order to tap this notion of consumption *practice*, I attempted to deepen my survey data by conducting 24 in-depth interviews with a sub sample of my survey respondents. Interview data describing preferences for Eddie Izzard illustrated the utility of this methodological eclecticism. In the survey, Izzard was shown to be not only the most popular comedian (liked by 67% of the sample), but as Table 4.3 demonstrates, he was also liked by the majority of respondents from across the cultural capital spectrum. However in interviews, when respondents were asked to explain why they liked Izzard, their reasons were often very different. Izzard's comedy was found to be a polysemic resource, open to multiple readings. For instance, among LCC respondents the main appeal of Izzard tended to be his 'energy' or his 'silliness':

I think it's his energy. He's the kind of guy who can just pick up a story even when he's totally lost his place. He talks about a lot of intelligent stuff that totally goes over my head, but he still makes it funny for me (Ivan, hairdresser²⁵).

I remember when I went to see him and he was talking about (imitates Izzard's voice) 'what do spiders actually do'. And then he starts talking about chutney

²⁵ For more detailed information on the demographic characteristics of interviewees see Appendix 1: 'Cast of Characters'.

and chutney manufacturers. Absolutely mental! It's not all about real life. It's more silliness (Finn, tree surgeon).

In contrast, HCC respondents tended to emphasise the more 'surreal', 'whimsical' or 'challenging' elements of Izzard's comedy:

He's something pretty much unique in comedy. I mean he does a lot of cuddlier stuff, but it's still clever. When you talk about cats and dogs, it's a bit of hackneyed comedy thing, but he talks about a cat drilling for food behind the couch, that's brilliant, it's a beautiful flight of fancy (Trever, TV writer).

I like the way he can make links with things that other people miss. And I do think he tries to make you think, although he covers it all up with a lot of stuff about fruit and that (Graham, photographer).

These HCC descriptions of Eddie Izzard offered very different readings to those posited by LCC respondents. Although Trever and Graham seemed to be aware that Izzard's comedy was open to other readings, phrases such as 'cuddlier stuff' and 'covering it up' demonstrated their belief that such decodings were less sophisticated and missed out on Izzard's full comic potential. Instead, they saw what Trever described as a 'whole other level' in Izzard's comedy that was not only higher in the hierarchy of possible readings but closer to the authentic intentionality of Izzard himself. Above all, Trever and Graham appeared to present themselves as comedy connoisseurs, accentuating elements of their appreciation that they think are missed or ignored by other consumers²⁶.

The case of Eddie Izzard therefore underlines an important distinction in the relationship between cultural capital resources and comedy. Although in some cases a taste for certain 'objects' of comedy was sufficient to communicate distinction, this was not always the case. In the case of Izzard and other comedians such as Simon Amstell and Jimmy Carr, the object itself did not hold any rarity and therefore distinction had to come from an embodied style of appreciation (Holt, 1997) – what in everyday life we might informally term one's 'sense of humour'. Important here

²⁶ Notably, this data echoes a number of other studies that highlight the 'active' nature of comedy audiences. Research on receptions of *The Simpsons* (Gauntlett and Hall, 1999), *Goodness Gracious Me* (Gillespie, 2003) and *Little Britain* (Mills, 2010), all highlight the variety of readings employed by different audiences.

was not the act of liking a particular comedian, but liking them *differently* (Varness, 2013: 121). Consumers with high cultural capital thus preserved their rarity by applying certain aesthetic principles to comedy that drew upon their embodied cultural resources.

Following this, the next chapter of this book examines whether this use of embodied cultural capital could be detected in broader *styles* of comic appreciation. In particular, it examines whether those with different cultural capital resources resemble 'interpretative communities' which share a common 'sense of humour' and aesthetic style in their reading of comedy (Fish, 1980).

Part 2: The Cultural Currency of a 'Good' Sense of Humour

Chapter 5: Working for your Laughter: Comedy Styles and Embodied Cultural Capital

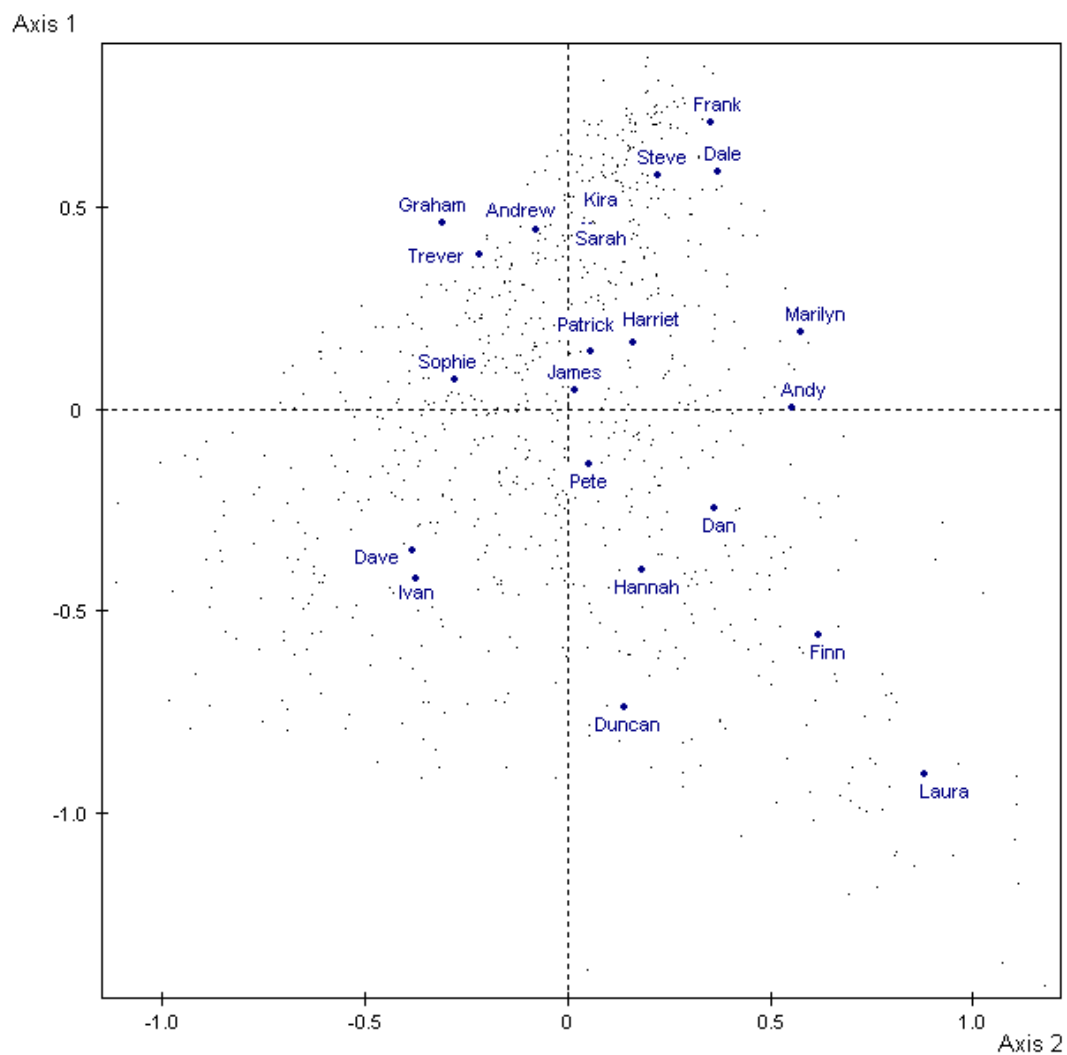
People who didn't like [Stewart Lee's] Comedy Vehicle had complained about the lack of jokes. I resolved to meet their criticisms head on, by writing as few jokes as possible and aiming to go in the opposite direction, toward maybe two or three ideas, explored at maximum length. Ideally, it would not have a single quotable line or joke, just vast textural blocks defined by their tone rather than their line-for-line content (Stewart Lee, 2011)

I don't think comedy is meant to push boundaries, I think it is meant to reflect what's out there." (Jimmy Carr, 2010)

Introduction

Taste is not just about *what* you like but *why* you like it. As the previous chapter illustrates, this is particularly the case with comedy. While survey data revealed that taste for some British comedy has become a status marker, it also showed that the majority of comedians appear to be free from such symbolic baggage. However, what surveys tend to miss is that the pursuit of cultural distinction is not just a matter of what objects are consumed, but also the *way* they are consumed. Of course comedians play an important role in how people consume their comedy. In the case of Stewart Lee and Jimmy Carr, for example, it is possible to see from the quotes above how each has a very different perspective on what audiences should expect from their comedy. Both seem to imply that a certain sense of humour, a certain aesthetic sensibility, is necessary to enjoy their comedy in the manner they intend it. While Stewart Lee wants to challenge his audiences, to subvert their formal expectations of comedy, Jimmy Carr's aim is much less aesthetically provocative, desiring simply to

reflect his audience's perceptions of what's already 'out there' in the world. Yet while the intentions of comedians provide a useful framework for understanding why people like the comedy they do, they can't provide direct empirical insight. Survey data on comedy preferences is similarly limited. Thus, in order to explore in-depth the way people consume comedy, I chose to conduct 24 in-depth interviews with a stratified sub-sample of my survey respondents. These interviews examined in detail respondents' aesthetic orientation to comedy. Figure 3 shows the locations of the 24 interviewees chosen from the main sample, positioned in relation to Axis 1 and 2²⁷.



²⁷ These respondents were chosen primarily to reflect the demographic distribution of the survey sample (see [p. 84-86] for further detail) and Figure 3 suggests that, broadly, the interviewees represented a satisfactory spread of the main sample, with at least two respondents located in each quadrant of the comedy taste map.

Figure 5.1 : Position of interviewees in main comedy taste map, Axes 1 and 2

This chapter proceeds by analysing 9 interviews conducted with respondents with high cultural capital and 7 interviews with respondents with low cultural capital (the 8 MCC interviewees are examined in Chapter 6). In particular, it argues that underpinning HCC and LCC taste judgments, it was possible to identify two relatively clear and coherent *styles of comic appreciation*. While HCC respondents privileged a somewhat disinterested aesthetic lens and preferred clever, dark and inventive comedy, LCC respondents stressed the importance of observation, physicality and, most of all, laughter. However, as the chapter goes on to demonstrate, these different styles of appreciation are not valued equally in the cultural hierarchy. Instead, HCC styles possess a widely (mis)recognised legitimacy that are increasingly making them powerful expressions of ‘embodied’ cultural capital.

HCC Styles of Comic Appreciation

Clever, Ambiguous, Experimental: The Shadow of ‘Disinterestedness’

The Search For Clever Comedy

Above all, respondents with high cultural capital characterised the comedy they liked in terms of sophistication. Favourite comedians were ‘intelligent’, ‘complex’, ‘intellectual’, ‘smart’, ‘subtle’, ‘complicated’ and most of all ‘clever’. In particular, ‘clever comedy’ was defined in terms of resonance. Whereas LCC respondents often talked of comedy as a temporary escape, HCC respondents wanted comedy to be memorable, something ‘that you can remember months on, that you can keep drawing from in the future’ (Kira, environmental consultant). For example, Sarah, a student, noted that one of the ways she knew Mark Watson’s 2008 Fringe show was ‘worthwhile’ was that ‘he said a few things that really stuck’. Frank further elucidated this notion of resonance:

One idea is sustainability. That you haven't just had a moment of cheap pleasure. But that in hundred years, or even in your tenth viewing, you will still be finding it funny or good. For me that's an aspect of needing and wanting intelligence and sophistication in comedy (Frank, arts professional).

What appeared to unite accounts concerning 'clever' comedy, however, was the notion of 'difficulty'. As Frank illustrated, respondents were looking for more than 'cheap pleasure', comedy that was not *just* funny. Indeed, such styles resonated with academic notions of comic 'quality' explored in Chapter 2. As Mills (2005: 20-21) has noted of existing scholarly work, 'comedy is only of interest – and of worth – if it is doing something else at the same time as being funny...it is seen as a legitimate mode only if its purpose is complex, and in the end, *serious*' (emphasis added).

Fundamental to this search for difficulty was the idea that good comedy should involve some effort and knowledge on the part of the audience. As Andrew, an IT consultant, articulated, 'with comedy, you get out what you put in'. In one sense this notion of 'effort' referred to concentration, meaning the more attention you devote to complex comedy, the more humour you 'get'. For instance, Steve noted that he has to watch *The Thick of It* 'a couple of times because there's so much going on'. Other respondents like Sarah explained how she liked to discover 'layers of comedy' that revealed themselves from watching again and again. For these respondents, the effort invested in comedy translated into a distinct sense of achievement:

I used to watch *Have I Got News for You* when I was a kid and I suppose I never really got it. And then when I was about 17 I remember the penny started to drop and I started getting it. And I remember it made me feel smart because it was topical, y'know (Andrew).

As Andrew illustrated, the main 'gain' that HCC respondents equated with comedy was pedagogical. They wanted comedy to make them 'think' (Steve), to teach them something new about the world. Thus comedians such as Stewart Lee, Chris Morris and Armando Iannucci, as well as American comedians such as Bill Hicks and Lenny Bruce were celebrated as 'discussers of ideas' (Steve), as 'benevolent dictators' (Frank), as those that can 'present things in a completely different way' (Andrew).

These respondents saw the best comedians as intellectual resources, what Critchley (2002: 345) calls ‘the anthropologists of our humdrum everyday lives’. They give us an ‘alien perspective on our own practices’ and subsequently act as tools for self-improvement (345). Dale recalled such an instance of auto-didactic learning from a recent gig:

I don’t understand why people want everything so easy, so they’ll get every joke, so there won’t be a reference they don’t get. If I go to comedy and there’s a reference I don’t get, I’ll go home and *Google* it. And I might buy a book, y’know. Last year Robin Ince did half his set about Carl Sagan. I’d never even heard of Carl Sagan. I felt a bit left out. So I went out and bought *Cosmos*. And it was brilliant. And that led me onto something that challenged me. Great. I want people to introduce me to things.

This pedagogical relationship to comedy was notable in its similarity to the cultural orientation of the British ‘professional-executive class’, as described by Bennett et al (2009: 136-137). These authors argue that using culture as self-improvement is reminiscent of the wider theme of ‘self-mastery’ outlined in Kant’s account of the aesthetic. Thus, by adopting a pedagogic relation to comedy, respondents echoed the Kantian ideal of distinguishing that which ‘gratifies’ from that which simply ‘pleases’ (Kant, 1985).

The Dark Side of Comedy

HCC respondents also sought to differentiate their comic style by distancing themselves from the common sense notion that comedy must be pleasurable. Instead, most saw the function of humour as much more ambiguous. ‘Good’ comedy provoked a wide range of emotions, and many respondents expressed preferences for ‘dark’ or ‘black’ comedy where disturbing subjects are probed for humorous effect. These respondents argued that by invoking negative as well as positive emotions, the comedian was better placed ‘to challenge’ them intellectually. Kira, for example, recounted a ‘brilliant set’ she saw at the 2009 Edinburgh Fringe performed by experimental comedian Kim Noble. She explained that Noble’s show began by him explaining that he was going ‘to kill himself at the end of the Fringe’ and continued to follow him through the nervous breakdown he suffered in 2002. For Kira this

performance was ‘insane’, but at the same time ‘exactly what good comedy is all about’. She described leaving the gig crying and noted that Noble’s comedy had ‘really lodged itself in her mind’. Andrew recollected a similarly uncomfortable experience at the 2008 Edinburgh Fringe, where he saw controversial Australian stand-up Brendon Burns:

He [Burns] plants some lady in the audience and gets into an argument with her, but in the audience you don’t know what’s going on. You just think, shit, this is going completely off the rails, this is really uncomfortable. But afterwards, when it’s over, you think holy shit that was so well crafted, really brilliantly done, makes you think, challenges you. At the time I was really uncomfortable but it was really good.

For other respondents exploring negative emotions was not only acceptable in comedy, but often integral to achieving a satisfying aesthetic experience:

I think with anything you go and see there needs to be highs and lows. Otherwise you don’t really feel the highs. If you go and see Daniel Kitson, for instance, he’s the absolute classic. He’ll take you on lovely passages where you’ll feel very sensitive to him, or his family, or his friends, and then there’ll be sad bits, parts of his latest show, say, which was about dying, that are really sad and really dark. But I think that means you experience the funny bits more, almost like there’s no pleasure without pain (Dale).

What is striking about both these passages is how they echo the critical aesthetic theory of Adorno and Horkheimer (1944). These theorists argued that ‘light-hearted’ laughter was one of the main aesthetic effects co-opted by the culture industry to assuage people’s fears and attempt to help them escape the harshness of real life. They note: ‘In the culture industry, jovial denial takes the place of pain (1944: 141). However, Adorno later noted that experiencing pain through aesthetic experience is essential for understanding reality. It promotes a higher level of self-understanding. He remarked in *Minima Moralia* (1974: 26): ‘It is the sufferings of men that should be shared: the smallest step towards their pleasures is one towards the hardening of their pains’ (156). The principles of this aesthetic doctrine are clearly evident in

Andrew and Dale's style of comic appreciation, where comedy that is 'uncomfortable' is 'good' and where 'there is no pleasure without pain'²⁸.

Invention, Experimentation and 'The Next Big Thing'

Another key element in HCC styles of appreciation was a robust commitment to 'originality' in comedy. The best comedians were therefore the ones that 'take a risk' (Dale), who offer 'a completely different perspective' (Andrew). Steve explained his preference for those 'pushing the boundaries of comedy':

I think it's purely that if you haven't seen or heard something before, it's far more interesting than something you've seen a hundred times. So I go to a lot of comedy nights and there'll maybe be six new acts every time you go and the ones that'll stick are the ones who are doing something different.

Notably, a desire for original comedy often underpinned HCC orientations to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. The Fringe was valued particularly highly by HCC respondents because many argued that its artistic ethos was underpinned by the principle of innovation. As Kira noted simply, the Fringe is a place 'where comedians try new things out'. Indeed, many noted that the main reason they visited the Fringe was to 'discover' new comedians:

I mean when me and my wife go to the Fringe we generally go and see two or three people we like and then try to find some people we don't know. Y'know it's about finding the 'next big thing'. And y'know these guys are experimental, they're raw. They don't hold back. Whereas I think later you see them and they're a bit more conservative (Andrew).

One of the other ways that HCC respondents identified 'originality' was by seeking out comedians that experiment with the form of comedy. Dale mentioned favourite comedians like Simon Munnery, Robin Ince and Josie Long who he argued deliberately 'toy around with comedy'. He liked the fact 'they're not sure where they're going', that there was an element of 'danger' in their performance. Other respondents mentioned Stewart Lee as the archetypal experimenter:

²⁸ This valorisation of dark humour also appears to echo the Aristotelian distinction between tragedy and comedy. For the comic to gain true artistic credibility, then, he or she must always borrow or draw upon principles belonging to the tragic.

Shoot us if we skip across the word postmodern in this but he [Lee] absolutely does self-referentially, ironically, know and play to, play with, and turn on its head, form. But he does that with everything, he does that with ideas, he does that with language, and that's where I'm getting the kicks from (Frank).

In these sections concerning clever, dark and inventive comedy, it is possible to detect a strong *echo* of Bourdieu's (1984: 32-48) notion of the Kantian-inspired 'disinterested aesthetic'. In particular, HCC respondents seemed careful at all times to distance themselves from what Frank described as the 'cheap pleasures' that resonate from 'first-degree' comic perception. In other words, there is a clear 'refusal of vulgar surrender' to what Bourdieu (1984:35) termed 'easy seduction and collective enthusiasm'. Instead, HCC respondents asserted the superiority of an aesthetic disposition that desires comic 'intelligence and sophistication' (Frank), that appreciates 'the highs and the lows' (Dale) and that is willing to look for those 'doing something different' (Steve). In other words, these respondents affirmed that by denying initial emotional or moral reactions to comedy, they were somehow reaching a higher, purer, more disinterested plain of aesthetic perception.

Rejecting 'the Prosaic'

Similar to the preferences revealed in the survey, HCC respondents strongly differentiated their comic style by what they disliked. Central to this was a rejection of what Trever called 'the prosaic things in life'. This encapsulated a lot of 'popular' comedy based on everyday observation, such as the style of comedians like Michael McIntyre, Peter Kay, *Last of The Summer Wine* and *2.4 Children*. While this observational style of comedy was central to the LCC comic style, HCC respondents were highly critical, labelling these comedians and comedy TV shows 'banal', 'simple' and 'predictable':

But I don't want it [comedy] to be about the prosaic things in life. I want it to be about the fact that I was born, and I'll live and I'll die, I want it to be about big things, the fact that my parents are religious and I'm not, I want it to be about that part of my life. I want it to be about my hopes and dreams. Not just the general mundane things that happen (Trever).

I really dislike Michael McIntyre. It's just lowest common denominator. With McIntyre it's the kind of thing your parents and your 12-year old kid can sit around, over dinner, and watch one of the DVD's. It's that thing where we say 'oh yeah, we do that, don't we' but that's all it is. It's just that safe, comfortable feeling (Steve).

Underpinning these dislikes for 'mundane' or 'comfortable' comedy were concerns about form. HCC respondents saw such comedy as mass produced, 'lowest common denominator', its creative potential contaminated by the homogenising effect of the free market. In this sense, it was inauthentic, 'prosaic', derivative, and highly removed from Romantic HCC ideal of the comedian as the sole and autonomous author. Dale summed up the comedy of Michael McIntyre: 'It's almost like you've fed something into a computer, like you've interviewed 5000 people about lots of different things and you've worked it out on graphs...I just find it lazy lazy comedy.'

For HCC respondents, observational comedy was also problematic because it was too clearly signposted as 'funny'. As already noted, HCC respondents preferred comedy that was more ambiguous, where they didn't know when to laugh. They desired an element of shock or surprise, where 'you can't see a punchline coming a mile away' (Sarah). As Frank Emden noted of physical TV comedy show, *Mr Bean*: 'I think oh he fell over, he kicked his arse. It's too obvious. You see it coming, where is the art in that?'

Connected to this theme was also a strong dislike of TV comedy that employed canned laughter. In most accounts, this objection was again connected to the notion of *autonomy*. HCC respondents were particularly critical of comedy which 'manipulated' their emotions; where they felt they were 'being played' (Marilyn, actress). Canned laughter was therefore considered fundamentally coercive and respondents resented the implication that 'you're being told when to laugh' (Trever).

Indeed, laughter emerged as one of the key battlegrounds in different styles of comedy appreciation. Although most HCC respondents admitted that some laughter was needed to enjoy comedy, it was not seen as a legitimate basis for the judgment of quality. As Andrew declared: 'something can be funny without you needing to laugh'.

For some HCC respondents, laughter was even seen as contaminating the true experience of comedy:

I don't think laughter is integral. It's really irrelevant for me personally. I know a lot of friends who go to a lot of gigs and say they don't really laugh at all. I mean they'll say that comedian was really funny but I think you just get jaded after a certain amount of time. And I suppose you're taking in the artistic value rather than just purely what makes you laugh (Steve).

It is interesting to note how this disavowal of laughter echoes the hostility to laughter - as an uncivilising force - expressed by British elites in the 17th and 18th century (see Chapter 2) and by Bourdieu's (1984) French elites in *Distinction* (see Chapter 3)]. Indeed, it is also through these sentiments that we arguably see the strongest shadow of Kantian disinterestedness in HCC comic styles. In an attempt to distinguish aesthetic appreciation from 'barbarous sensate pleasures' (Kant, 1987: 121), many HCC respondents travelled as far as to reject what is considered the natural physiological reflex mechanism of comedy; laughter (Dunbar, 2005). For Steve it was only through this ultimate act of embodied detachment that he and his friends could genuinely appreciate 'artistic value'.

Beyond Disinterestedness: Political, Moral and Emotional Criteria

Although elements of 'disinterestedness' appeared to shape the HCC orientation to comedy, this was often mixed with different and sometimes conflicting taste criteria. For example, many HCC respondents talked at length about the 'experience' of watching great comedy, revealing a distinct emotional 'interest' in their aesthetic experience. Marilyn recalled the intensity of seeing Monty Python at The Albert Hall. 'I was just completely blown away. At the end of the show I remember thinking that everything else that's going on in my life, I just didn't think about it at all. I was just taken away from anything else that matters.' Frank described a similar experience:

I get a wee bit wanky when I talk about stand up. Because I think it can really make you think. And what I get from a very good gig is a certain feeling when you leave, y'know, or goose bumps. The emotional response you get from

within yourself, you're not just necessarily listening to a particular joke, it's more about the entire experience.

What was striking about such statements of aesthetic experience was the combination of the intellectual *and* the emotional. Whereas in many parts of their interviews both Frank and Marilyn foregrounded analytical approaches to comedy, their recollection of the most satisfying comic experiences was also distinctly emotional. Memorable comic performances were, above all, pleasurable. Respondents therefore described fleeting moments where they were 'blown away', or which invoked a 'certain feeling', where comedy yielded what Hennion (2001: 14) describes as an 'indescribable "sublime" moment which words can only trivialise'. This is significant because it appeared, at first, to somewhat undermine Bourdieu's (1984) presumption that the culturally privileged mark their distinction through the disinterested rejection of emotion and pleasure.

Significantly, though, HCC accounts of comic pleasure still implied a hierarchical distinction between emotion and intellect. Thus while many respondents reported markedly passionate reactions, these emotions only took hold after initially being thrilled intellectually. HCC respondents like Frank thus reported a distinctly emotional experience from comedy, a 'certain feeling...or goosebumps', but this was only achievable when mediated through an intellectual proxy that makes 'you think'. The implication of this, then, was that emotional experiences that sidestep the intellect were normatively inferior. Disinterestedness, or at least the shadow of it, was still the driving force in achieving an emotionally satisfying comic experience. Indeed, in many ways such accounts are reminiscent of Csikszentmihalyi's (1988) account of the 'flow' experience. Csikszentmihalyi argues that it is possible to experience truly transcendent and emotionally gratifying aesthetic experiences, but only if one is willing to devote considerable psychic energy and intellectual focus.

However, although 'higher' emotional experiences did not necessarily conflict with detached HCC taste criteria, frequent political and moral judgments were more questionable. In particular, most HCC respondents expressed a preference for 'alternative comedy', which was usually defined as a particular 'style' rooted in the

work of a set of performers from the 1980s Alternative Comedy Boom. Although many elements of this preferred style were formalistic, it was also undoubtedly bound up with an explicitly liberal, left-leaning and secular agenda. For many HCC respondents, then, it was important that some comedy carry an explicit social role and political message. Certain topics were thus ripe for being ‘brilliantly deconstructed’, as Andrew noted, whereas other topics of satire were ‘bullying’ and ‘offensive’. For example, comedians who satirise those in positions of power, or who subvert areas of social life dominated by traditionally conservative values - such as religion and drugs - were applauded because they ‘aren’t afraid to deal with topics that might offend people’ (Steve). However, when ‘trad’ comedians who satirise from a more conservative and reactionary position were discussed, such as Roy ‘Chubby’ Brown and Bernard Manning, HCC respondents were quick to distance themselves:

What I feel from Manning and ‘Chubby’ Brown is that in a complex socio-economic situation where it’s only too easy for people without opportunities to despise those who have limited use of language or different colour, they add fuel without love. A string of empty racist jokes. It’s a way of saying fuck it I want to hold on to my disgust at, I want to hold on to my hatred of, I want to hold on to my lessening of, that I’m more of. It is just pitiful (Marilyn).

The crucial moral and political distinction here was that ‘Trad’ comedy ‘kicked’ downwards rather than upwards, ridiculing groups that are already socially marginalised and subordinated (Pickering and Lockyer, 2005). Thus while these comedians might ‘push boundaries’ in terms of challenging dominant norms, their subversion conflicted strongly with political and moral values supported by HCC respondents who strongly rejected racism, sexism and homophobia.

It is worth noting that my point here is not to normatively judge the validity of this moral/political standpoint, but simply to illustrate its centrality to the HCC sense of humour. For these respondents the way that humour relates to social inequalities and wider structures of power is clearly a powerful consideration. This is significant because it supports Hanquinet et al’s (2013) argument that the dominant aesthetic may have altered in important ways. Unlike Bourdieu’s vision of the aesthetic disposition, which Hanquinet et al (2013) argue is rooted in a Modernist

preoccupation with detachment and distance, the HCC style includes a clear valorisation of comedy that is *actively engaged in society*. Here the power of ‘alternative comedy’, in particular, lies in its postmodern emphasis on agit-prop and explicit social critique rather than solely aesthetic disinterest.

It’s also worth noting the *confidence* of HCC respondents in expressing objections based on such political and moral criteria. Although most had never even seen ‘trad’ comedy, they rarely struggled to articulate their disapproval. Furthermore, when clips of ‘trad’ comedians were shown, respondents often reacted strongly. One clip of Roy ‘Chubby’ Brown featured his ‘Political Correctness Song’ where he defiantly arranges politically incorrect terms and phrases into a song. Sarah looked visibly angry when I mentioned this clip, covering her face with her hands and shaking her head in disbelief as she recounted:

It was hideous! The song, with the whole audience joining in, it was hideous! I mean I can laugh at quite sick things but when it comes to making jokes about minorities I don’t find that funny. I just think there is something genuinely malevolent behind it.

This passage illustrated that HCC respondents ‘never saw *nothing*’ in the texts they disliked (Kuipers, 2006: 373). Instead they employed ‘rejected readings’ (Morley, 1980) or ‘unlaughter’ (Billig, 2005), where the meaning of the jokes was easily decoded and then confidently rejected. Indeed, there was a deeply embodied sense of assurance when HCC respondents spoke about the comedy they disliked. Their bodily *hexis* exuded a ‘natural’ cultural confidence and compared to those with LCC, they tended to speak louder, for longer, and make more eye contact throughout interviews. Yet, to reiterate, what was perhaps most significant were their *terms* of rejection. Comedy was rejected not based solely on ‘disinterested’ aesthetic criteria, but sometimes also on moral and political grounds. In these cases, HCC appreciation was not ‘morally agnostic’, as Bourdieu (1984: 5) would presume, but instead performed a distinct ethical function.

Comedy is Art

The aesthetic style of HCC respondents can perhaps best be summed up with the overarching idea that comedy *is* art. Throughout HCC interviews, respondents continually referred to comedians as ‘artists’ and to comedy as an ‘art form’. One respondent, Steve, was even part of a movement called ‘Comedy is Art’, which is currently lobbying the Arts Council to recognise comedy as a legitimate art form and provide public funding for aspiring comedians. Other respondents attempted to bolster comedy’s claim to legitimacy by explaining how their favourite comedians had successfully transferred their artistic talents to more legitimate art forms. Some examples included comedians such as Daniel Kitson, now an acclaimed playwright, Tim Key (2009 winner of the Edinburgh Comedy Award), who doubles as a poet, and AL Kennedy, a respected novelist-turned standup.

However, arguably the strongest indicator that HCC respondents viewed comedy as art emerged during discussions about comedy’s relationship with other art forms. Significantly, comedy was not seen as an art form that existed outside the realm of mainstream culture, but instead tightly knitted into the fabric of wider cultural tastes. Thus, for many, the aesthetic style employed to appreciate comedy was easily transposed to other art forms like music and film. Indeed, in many cases, appreciation between art forms was not just connected but inextricably linked:

I like my music, film, comedy and drama to interconnect like that. Like I want to move on from a comedy show and go and see something else because of it. Or listen to a fantastic album where certain things are referenced and think ‘god, I’ve never really heard of those things’. Like when I listened to ‘Cemetery Gates’ by The Smiths when I was 16, I thought, ‘I want to go and read Keats and Yeats now’ (Dale).

No I’m just as obsessive about film and TV drama as I am about comedy. it’s exactly the same. I need to be hit hard. Either viscerally and emotionally or intellectually and cerebrally. I like a strong, full on, satisfying cultural experience. Be that comedy, film or whatever (Trever).

This connection between different art forms illustrated that comedy taste was not seen as subcultural. Instead, comedy, and more specifically the aesthetic lens applied to comedy, had significance far beyond the boundaries of the comic field. This was

important because it implied that, to some extent, the cultural capital activated via an extensive knowledge and aesthetic understanding of comedy was not just a form of ‘subcultural capital’ (Thornton, 1995) – conferring status only in the eyes of comedy consumers. In contrast, many HCC respondents saw their comedy taste as a form of transferable cultural capital, convertible in other fields of cultural consumption. Again, this appears to contradict the findings of Bennett et al (2009: 93), who note that in the field of music, for instance, a discriminating aesthetic disposition is rarely converted into cultural capital in other fields of consumption.

This point was further illustrated by the fact that in some cases (although not all) applying this generalised aesthetic lens appeared to be directly convertible into social capital. A conversation with Marilyn illustrated this:

Marilyn: In our arty, middle class world, a knowledge of something new is always good. Like ‘I’ve just seen this new film and...’ or ‘I’ve seen this new comedian and...’. It doesn’t really matter which.

SF: That’s interesting, what do you mean by finding ‘something new’?

Marilyn: You’re constantly on a quest, I suppose. Not in an egotistical way, more like ‘I want you to see this person, they’re absolutely brilliant’. And if I go and see a great play I tell all my friends you have to go and see this. And it’s the same with comedy.

What’s striking about this conversation is that it illustrated how Marilyn cashed-in her comedy taste, in conjunction with taste for other art forms, as a means of increasing her status within her peer group. Marilyn’s ‘quest’ for cultural knowledge, for example, can be seen as a process of amassing ammunition for micro-political acts of distinction, which she then deployed by imparting her recommendations to friends and acquaintances. Clearly, such limited data is not sufficient to argue that comedy-specific cultural capital is *definitively convertible* in other cultural domains. But it does indicate that despite comedy’s absence from recent studies of British cultural consumption, the field does occupy a relatively central position in the British cultural imagination.

LCC Styles of Comic Appreciation

Laughter, Pleasure and The Everyday

‘You’ve Got To Laugh’

For LCC respondents, comedy was inextricably linked to laughter. Amusement was the currency of comedy and the amount a comedian made LCC respondents laugh generally determined how good they judged that comedian to be. Notably, these respondents also laughed significantly more during interviews, particularly when recalling particular jokes or TV comedy sketches. In fact, a number of LCC respondents expressed a general disbelief that anyone would *not* judge comedy on laughs. As Hannah, an office manager, stated, ‘You’ve got to laugh’. Finn, a tree surgeon, elaborated:

I want to go and see comedy and be sore with laughter (laughs). I’ve seen Billy Connolly and come out aching, y’know.

Not only was laughter the most important aesthetic criteria in comedy, but many respondents also described their sense of disappointment when a comedian failed to make them laugh. There was a sense that comedians were paid to produce laughter, and had a duty to meet this expectation²⁹. Duncan, an electrician, recalled a Rich Hall gig at the 2008 Edinburgh Fringe:

Unfortunately it [laughter] doesn’t happen every time. I mean you often come out feeling angry, as well. Like with Rich Hall. I felt let down. You’re waiting on that, I mean maybe the anticipation is a bit high. But then so it should be, these guys are getting paid a lot of money to make people laugh. I mean you roughly know his material, you think this should be good. And then you leave angry, thinking this cost me 15 quid!

²⁹ Historically, this attitude is reminiscent of the non-autonomous ethos of artistic patronage, whereby certain cultural audiences, or patrons, paid or sponsored artists and in return expected to control and dictate the content of the art produced (Becker, 1982: 99-107).

Comedy = Pleasure

The importance of laughter was closely linked to the main function of comedy – ‘to make you feel good’ (Sophie, retired primary teacher). For LCC respondents, the importance of pleasure and enjoyment was paramount. If you see a good comedian ‘you should be buzzing when you come out’ (Finn); good comedy ‘should be light-hearted’ (Laura, secretary). This was often expressed in terms of an ‘escape’, where the pleasurable expectation of comedy was used as a way of ‘relaxing after a stressful day at work’ (Laura), or as a device to aid ‘vegging out in front of the TV’ (Sophie):

I’m a huge wallower. If I’m down I’ll put something on that’s going to go along with my mood, like *The Hours* or something. But if I’m in a great mood, I’ll put something funny on (Ivan, hairdresser).

For LCC respondents, then, comedy was a distinct ‘technology of the self’ (De Nora, 2000³⁰). Good comedy was ‘like a drug’ (Finn), it guaranteed a pleasurable response and respondents were calculated consumers. They used comedy as a tool, helping to change, complement or enhance their mood.

It is also significant that this sensual appreciation was also reflected in LCC orientations to the Edinburgh Fringe. Whereas HCC respondents saw The Fringe primarily as a place for comic discovery, LCC experiences of the festival were more *hedonistic*. In particular, comedy gigs were not mentioned as autonomous cultural activities, but as part of a ‘night out’. Here, comedy’s relationship with alcohol was central, with one complementing the other. ‘Having a few drinks’ before a gig, in particular, was frequently mentioned as a good way of ‘loosening you up for comedy’ (Finn).

Among LCC respondents, there was also a sense that good comedy should not invoke negative emotions. This humour was judged to be defying the pleasurable spirit of comedy and often even deemed offensive. For instance, Laura didn’t like ‘dark’

³⁰ This also demonstrates that, in her own work, De Nora may have underestimated the extent to which culture as a ‘technology of the self’ may vary according to one’s demographic characteristics such as social class and cultural capital resources.

comedy such as *Brass Eye* because it dealt with subjects like paedophilia or disability ‘which just aren’t funny’. Instead, there was a sense among LCC respondents that comedy exists to be a counterbalance or diversion from the negative aspects of life:

To be honest with you I see enough shit in the newspapers and the news every day, I’d rather see things that make me laugh. I don’t want to see anything too ‘highbrow’ or too morose. I just want to be entertained in a light hearted way, y’know’ (Duncan).

The ‘Cleverness’ of Observation

Like HCC respondents, those with low cultural capital resources also repeatedly expressed their preference for ‘clever’ comedy. However, whereas HCC respondents largely attributed ‘clever’ comedy to complexity, it meant something quite different to those with LCC. For these respondents, clever comedy was often expressed in terms of the ‘skill of the comedian’s delivery’ (Duncan). Cleverness was also associated with comedians like Bob Monkhouse, who employed ‘clever wordplay’ (Andy) or others who constructed humorous puns, innuendos and one-liners.

However, the main LCC criteria for cleverness hinged on the comedian’s ability to construct humour from everyday life. Comedians like Michael McIntyre and Peter Kay were therefore revered for their skill in ‘pointing out the obvious’ (Dan) or ‘showing us things we know are there but don’t necessarily see’ (Laura). As Finn explained:

I think pointing out what people do is the funniest thing in life. Watching what people do. I know when me and my brother get together it’s just looking at people and things and that’s how you make humour. Or when a comedian says something and you think ‘that’s right. That’s what I do’.

For other respondents, the enjoyment of such observational comedy stemmed from the fact that it related directly to their lives. Hannah, who is retired and has four grown up kids, noted that she particularly likes *2.4 Children* and Jack Dee ‘because they make comedy out of family life, and I relate to that’. Similarly, Dan, who works at Sainsbury’s, explained why he likes one of Karen Dunbar’s characters:

Like there's a sketch where she's in the supermarket being abusive. So I've worked on a till and you do get people like that, they do come in, so it's funny. You can imagine it happening which makes it funny.

A 'Funny Face'

In LCC descriptions of their favourite comedians, physicality was almost always mentioned. This didn't necessarily mean a preference for the genre of physical comedy, but more that good humorists used their bodies to enhance or increase their comedy. In particular, it was noted that comedians who looked 'odd' were able to amuse almost automatically:

First impressions count for a lot. I think if you're just a normal Joe Bloggs then you've got to work really hard. But if you've got something quirky about you then straight away you get people laughing (Andy).

In many instances, this boiled down to the notion that certain comedians simply had the gift of a 'funny face' (Dave). For example, the 'cheeky, chubby face' of Michael McIntyre was mentioned (Laura), as was the 'quirkiness' of Karen Dunbar's features (Dan). The way comedians dressed was also important. This could be amusing in terms of being 'outrageous', such as Finn's description of Roy Chubby Brown's clown-style, or 'daring' in the case of Eddie Izzard. Or it could be the incongruity of a comedian's dress, as Ivan explained when recounting a drag act in Dublin: 'It was an alternative Miss Ireland and she had a beard! Y'know, that was funny. He looked funny but also quite threatening (laughs)'.

There are obvious parallels between these various accounts of LCC appreciation and Bourdieu's (1984) notion of the 'taste for necessity' or 'popular aesthetic'. Despite recent work by Bennett (2007) and Rose (2001), who point to a rich history of 'highbrow' cultural taste among the British working class, I found little evidence of this in LCC comedy orientations. In contrast, the strong emphasis on laughter and pleasure demonstrated that LCC respondents were, on the whole, content to 'subordinate form to function' in their consumption of comedy. Similarly, preferences for physical and observational comedy that 'relate' to everyday life reflected an

appreciation where there was a clear ‘continuity between art and life’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 32).

Defiance Vs Deference

The difference between the comic styles of LCC and HCC respondents was also underlined by the LCC attitude to comedy they did not like. It’s worth recalling from the survey that these respondents tended to dislike much less comedy items than HCC respondents, and in particular tended to lack knowledge about ‘highbrow’ comedians rather than necessarily disliking them. However, again the interviews showed this finding to be somewhat misleading. Although it was true that LCC respondents rarely mentioned disliking specific ‘highbrow’ comedians, some strongly rejected the HCC *style* of appreciation. In particular, comedy that ‘tries to make you think’ was labelled boring, irritating or ‘too clever for its own good’ (Laura). There was a fundamental sense that good comedy did not ‘need’ to fulfil these intellectual functions:

My take on comedy is that it’s got to make me laugh, it doesn’t mean to say I need to think about it, except for that split-second in the punchline. I’m not looking for them to educate me (Dave).

In some cases, this orientation away from ‘higher’ comedy was even more defiant. Several LCC respondents, for example, appeared to draw on alternative aesthetic ‘repertoires of evaluation’ (Lamont, 1992; 2000) that directly countered the ‘highbrow’ criteria of HCC respondents. The most prominent of these repertoires was rooted in the belief that the working classes, or the ‘normal people’, simply have more fun, a better time, and a better sense of humour. Thus some LCC respondents confidently asserted that the working classes were responsible for the ‘funniest’ British comedy, and were also the most receptive consumers of comedy. Finn, for example, argued that although the working classes are ‘perceived as less intelligent’, they are best suited to making people laugh because their lives are more ‘extreme’, they’ve got more experiences to call upon:

Working class people are definitely livelier. They’re not afraid to express themselves. I see a lot of people, especially in Edinburgh, where people are a bit stand-off-ish. Whereas working class people, lets just say they’ve hung out their

dirty washing in public not just in their lifetime but probably their grandparents as well (laughs). So there's nothing to hide.

What was significant about this comment was that it illustrated how forms of humour associated with the working class were not always considered to be 'lower' in the cultural hierarchy. Indeed in Finn's statement, there is almost a sense of pity for those who desire sophistication in comedy. These unfortunate people 'are a bit stand-off-ish' and can't enjoy the more instinctively pleasurable elements of comedy. Finn, Andy and other critics of HCC seriousness drew on a somewhat idealised image of working class life, which they oppose to the constrained, pedantic, middle class restrictions on 'having a laugh'.

While Bourdieu (1984: 377-380) would argue that such sentiments illustrate how LCC respondents make a 'virtue out of necessity' in terms of their preferences for less aesthetic styles of comedy, Medhurst (2007) would counter that this sense of working class ownership over British comedy is historically rooted, reaching back many generations through the traditions of working men's clubs, variety, and music hall. Indeed, for Nutall and Carmichael (1977: 24), working class comedy functions in the same way as 'highbrow' comedy – it excludes certain groups, in this case elites, who cannot access or understand the pleasures it offers.

Although admittedly limited to only half of LCC interviewees, this data was nonetheless important because it demonstrated that some LCC respondents refused to concede the legitimacy of HCC comic styles and did not blindly uphold what Bourdieu termed the 'dominant values'. Indeed, echoing the findings of the classic 'Birmingham School' study of Punk (Hebdidge, 1979), this demonstrated that the field of comedy consumption should not be considered a simple zero-sum hierarchical field. Instead, it is more accurately characterised as contested terrain, with two comic styles competing to define what 'legitimate' British comedy is.

However, while there was evidence of an alternative LCC value system for assessing comedy, it was much less clear whether this aesthetic style was recognised in the dominant cultural economy. There was little sign, for example, that cultural

intermediaries working in the field of comedy valorised this approach (see Mills, 2005 and more generally Chapter 8 and 9) nor that HCC respondents recognised its legitimacy. Indeed, the legitimacy of LCC aesthetic styles appeared to be confined to their own personal networks, indicating that they may represent more subcultural than cultural capital³¹ (Thornton, 1996: 20).

Moreover, it must be noted that the majority of LCC respondents, including curiously many of those who registered defiance toward ‘highbrow’ comedy, *also* registered feelings of puzzlement, deference and failure in the face of ‘higher’ comedy. Whereas all HCC respondents vociferously rejected LCC comedy, most LCC respondents were more uncertain when talking directly about ‘‘highbrow’’ comedians. Many appeared to report a mechanism Bourdieu (1984: 379) termed ‘self-elimination’, whereby ‘highbrow’ comedy engendered a feeling of insecurity or intellectual inadequacy, and therefore respondents purposefully avoided it. Dan, for example, noted that ‘some people just get things quicker than others’ and most ‘highbrow’ comedy ‘just goes over my head’. Indeed, the sentiment that ‘highbrow’ comedy somehow passed ‘over’ the aesthetic capability of LCC respondents - that they simply couldn’t ‘get it’ - was mentioned frequently. In the case of Ivan and Dave, this status anxiety stemmed from a feeling of not having adequate knowledge, of being uneducated:

I don’t have the background for it. When I say background, I mean education. If someone was to do stand-up about key figures in WW2, it would go over my head. It would be everyone laughing and me going... ‘ok’. I was once in a show called *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. And I learnt the lines and delivered the lines just like the director told me. And it was only until the show night when people were laughing that I knew which bits were funny because unfortunately it was beyond me. I didn’t have that education (Ivan).

It’s [*The Thick Of it*] very dry, maybe. Not my sort of thing at all. I’m not massively into politics anyway. It either goes right over my head or I just don’t find it funny. I think you have to understand whatever policies or whatever they’re talking about to get the joke. But not being into politics it just goes over my head (Dave).

³¹ The notion that working class humour carries subcultural currency has also been described in other studies such as Willis’s (1977) description of the importance of ‘having a laugh’ for young British working class men and similarly in Bourdieu’s (1991: 99) description of the status derived from being ‘the funny guy’ in French working class café culture.

These accounts demonstrated what Bourdieu termed the *misrecognition* of cultural value among many LCC respondents. Although there is arguably nothing intrinsically superior about political or intellectual comedy, the frequent use of vertical metaphors such as ‘going over my head’ and ‘beyond me’ implied that many LCC respondents had conceded the legitimacy of these comic styles and aesthetic principles. Such phrases ‘implied a recognition of the dominant values’, a sense of ‘cultural goodwill’ that, in turn, signalled their deference to the embodied capital of HCC respondents, who have the interpretative ability to decode this ‘legitimate’ comedy (Bourdieu, 1984: 386).

Challenging The Politically Correct

As shown in Table 4.2, most LCC respondents (83%) reported liking at least one of a cluster of comedians situated at the bottom of Axis 1. To recall, these comedians were Roy ‘Chubby’ Brown, Bernard Manning, Jim Bowen, Karen Dunbar, Jim Davidson and Benny Hill. As well as receiving low consecration, most of these comedians are also infamous for their ‘politically incorrect’ comedy. Many, in fact, have been criticised for harbouring racist, homophobic or sexist undertones in their comedy (Deacon, 2010; Gardner, 2010; Jack, 2008; Hattenstone, 2003) However, notably, this wilful political incorrectness was something that constituted an important element of the LCC styles of comic appreciation. As Ivan noted: ‘In comedy, nothing should be out of bounds.’

This is not to say that these respondents necessarily aligned themselves with racist, sexist or homophobic sentiment in comedy. They didn’t. It was more that they were happy to give comedians a ‘comic licence’ to ‘shock’, and the subsequent humour was derived from the precise awareness that such comedy was temporarily socially problematic. The notion of temporality was crucial here. For these respondents, it was morally acceptable for comedy to kick downwards socially because it only involved

the *temporary suspension* of ethical norms, not their outright rejection³². Indeed, there was a widespread resentment that what LCC respondents considered to be ‘natural’ comic devices, such as mockery, parody and stereotyping, were now socially unacceptable. There was also a sense that ‘trad’ comedians were rebelling against what was perceived as the creeping and unnecessary protocol of political correctness. Dave, for example, who worked in events, described how in his industry ‘everybody’s so PC about everything, you’re not allowed to do this, you’re not allowed to do that’. For him Roy Chubby Brown was funny, not because he was racist, but because he mocked people ‘who told him how to think’:

There’s just so many people wanting to moan about how we should be and what we should say. And I think comedians who just rip that apart are really amusing because everybody underneath probably thinks, y’know, it’s alright to call me a white person but I can’t call you a black person or an Indian person, and it’s just out of control. So I like comedians who hone in on that.

What we see in this passage is again the complex tension between *defiance* vs. *deference* in LCC styles of appreciation. Whereas respondents like Dave often described comedians like ‘Chubby’ Brown as ‘guilty pleasures’, thus acknowledging their social unacceptability and ‘lowly’ aesthetic position, they simultaneously reiterated that ‘taking the piss out of people’ is one of the basic, most honest, most unpretentious functions of humour. Moreover, they were particularly resentful of those (presumably HCC respondents) who they saw as trying to set limits on their humour. As Finn told me at the end of his interview, with an exasperated shrug: ‘If we can’t laugh at each other, then I don’t know...’

Thus while most LCC respondents deferred to the *aesthetic superiority* of HCC comic styles, the majority were much less willing to recognise the legitimacy of *moral values* communicated through ‘highbrow’ comedy. This was important as it illustrated that a widely recognised moral hierarchy was much less clear than an aesthetic hierarchy in the field of comedy³³. These findings echo Lamont’s (2000)

³² This arguably echoes the Relief Theory of humour, which suggests that comedy is inextricably linked to social repression and functions as a release from such suppressed feelings (Freud, 1991 [1905]).

³³ Even these moral counter-repertoires still arguably recognised some sense of latent hierarchy. LCC indignation seemed to contain an element of class resentment: ‘we’ are decent but are not allowed to tell

study of repertoires of evaluation among French and American working class men. For these individuals, morality was an important resource to preserve their dignity. However, because morality is socially variable and contested, such moral evaluations do not easily convert into universal repertoires of evaluation. Hence, again, morally-inflected LCC styles functioned more as ‘subcultural capital’ with little currency beyond one’s own social group (Thornton, 1996).

Style Variations

As with specific tastes, it is important to note that not all elements of aesthetic style were coherent among, and different between, cultural capital groups. For example, although HCC comic styles often seemed to echo established doctrines of aesthetic theory, this wasn’t always the case. As Frith (2002) notes, people’s everyday judgments about culture tend to take place in ‘noisy social situations and free-wheeling conversations’ and people often ‘draw upon ready-made discourses on culture, but they also sometimes confuse them’ (Frith, 2002). Thus the comic styles I have presented so far were not as entirely consistent and coherent as I have perhaps implied in this chapter. For example, most respondents displayed at least some element of ‘intra-individual’ (Lahire, 2008) idiosyncrasy that set their aesthetic style apart from others, or were hard to categorise. Hannah, for example, talked endlessly about her love for comic ‘puns’, whereas Marilyn confessed she hated comedy ‘where everything went wrong’. Similarly, Graham and Steve both described a ‘guilty pleasure’ for ‘self-injury’ comedy such as *Dirty Sanchez* and *Jackass*. There was also some evidence that, regardless of cultural capital resources, certain people just had a more active sense of humour than others. Dan, for instance, admitted that he doesn’t ‘laugh much’ in life in general, whereas James seemed to like every type of comedian and comedy style I mentioned.

In addition, not all respondents fitted perfectly into the two aesthetic styles outlined. As I will outline in Chapter 6, mixed cultural capital respondents (MCC), making up nearly 30% of the original sample, could not be located in either taste culture.

certain jokes; whereas ‘they’, with ‘some sort of degree’ laugh freely, *and* at the same time try to keep ‘us’ from doing so.

Furthermore, some HCC and LCC respondents committed ‘cultural errors’ (Lahire, 2008) by combining elements of both taste cultures.

One theme that also emerged during interviews was the significant influence that contextual factors exerted on individual’s comic styles. For instance, when I sat down to interview 59-year old Sophie, she began the interview by reeling off the names of about a dozen prominent young stand-ups that she had been to see recently.

Considering her age, I was somewhat surprised. However, she then explained that two years ago her cousin’s teenage daughter, Stef, started coming to stay with her during the Edinburgh Fringe. Stef was really interested in ‘modern alternative type comedy’ and needed an adult to go with her. So Sophie started to see shows and this opened up a whole new interest in alternative comedy. She admitted that until then she probably had quite ‘conservative’ comedy tastes:

But y’know some of the people I’ve seen because of a 16-year old, I would probably never go to see normally, at my age you probably wouldn’t. But I’ve really enjoyed it. I mean at one of the gigs Stef turned round in a very loud voice and said ‘oh, mum and Aunt Sophie, you two are the oldest ones here!’

Contextual factors have also had a large impact on Hannah. Hannah told me that she liked ‘dark’ comedy but doesn’t get to access this preference. She explained that her husband had ‘had a major depression in his life’ and therefore that meant ‘we don’t go and see things, y’know, that are a bit strange or sad.’

These two examples illustrated how ‘individual mobilities’ (Lahire, 2008) often had a profound effect on respondent’s aesthetic styles and demonstrated how comic readings were often inflected through personal experience. As Mills (2010: 150) has argued, the consumption of comedy is often a ‘collective experience’ and this means that audiences often watch comedy in groups even though they might avoid the same comedian or comedy TV show if they were alone. Indeed, in the case of both Hannah and Sophie, socialising factors that were ‘compulsory’ and had nothing to do with their cultural capital resources were responsible for shifting and re-forming their comedy consumption.

It is also important to consider the effect of other background variables. The minimal effect of gender outlined in the survey findings was largely substantiated by the interview data. However, there was one gender difference relating to the style or genre of 'self-injury' comedy. This included TV comedy shows like *Jackass* and *Dirty Sanchez*, where groups of young men deliberately injure themselves carrying out implausible physical stunts. While around half of male respondents appeared to like this kind of comedy, it was disliked by all female respondents. Indeed, a number of female respondents questioned whether this kind of TV show should even be categorised as comedy³⁴.

Although sexual orientation was not recorded in the survey, the sexuality of the one gay interviewee Dave did appear to have some influence on his comedy taste. In particular, he expressed preference for a number of gay comedians not in the survey and not mentioned by other respondents, such as Craig Hill, Pam-Ann and Alan Carr, as well as an interest in comedy 'drag' shows.

Another variable not recorded in the survey but explored in interviews was respondent's geographical *location*. This appeared to have a particular impact on the tastes of LCC respondents. As explained, one of the favourite comic styles of these respondents was humour that derived from observing habits and stereotypes of people in everyday life. What became clear, however, was that such habits and stereotypes were often highly geographically specific and thus comedians from certain parts of Britain appealed disproportionately to respondents who hailed from the same area. The most striking example of this was the Scottish comedian Karen Dunbar. Except for one HCC respondent, all the Scottish interviewees (10/24) expressed a preference for Dunbar. In particular, they focused on her skill at representing different caricatures of Scottish society. Dave recounted a sketch about a Glaswegian single-mother:

³⁴ One explanation for this gender difference may have to do with the different ways men and women are socialised concerning such risk-seeking behaviour. For example, the research of Morriengelo and Dawber (1999) and Green (1997) has suggested that from an early age girls are encouraged to be cautious, whereas boys are allowed to take risks. Being 'careless' with physical safety, then, even in a humorous way, may be widely perceived by men as a sign of courageousness.

We all know a Schemey family, who wears gold earrings, and where the Father's trying to get the son's girlfriend pregnant. If you go to some areas of Glasgow you would see that. And that's what makes it funny.

In contrast, interviewees from outside Scotland tended not to have heard of Dunbar. When shown clips of her humour, most tended to react with confusion or incomprehension. Trever noted that her strong Glaswegian accent meant that he couldn't understand a lot of what she was saying and similarly Marilyn noted that the humour was 'lost' on her as she didn't know what certain Scottish phrases meant.

Finally, the background variable that appeared to be most associated with appreciation style was *age*. The aesthetic style of the 4 interviewees over 50, for example, had some significant commonalities. In particular, respondents were noticeably more conservative or 'naive', as Hannah put it. There was a general dislike for comedy that was considered shocking, cruel or crude and respondents objected to the 'incessant' and 'unnecessary' swearing that they believed marred much contemporary comedy.

Above all, though, the most recognisable age difference concerned respondent's perception of comedy's cultural significance. Echoing the distinction highlighted on Axis 2 (see Figure 4.2), older respondents appeared distinctly less interested and more sceptical about contemporary British comedy. Hannah, for example, noted that 'there was just a lot less comedy around in our generation'. This was also underlined by the way younger respondents talked about the 'safety' of their parents' comedy tastes. Graham, for instance, noted that there were topics his father, a lawyer, might enjoy being probed at the theatre, such as murder or violence, but noted THAT he was unlikely to enjoy these themes in a comic context. However intellectually framed, such topics 'he would not find acceptable to be funny.'

These findings again illustrate the shift that has taken place in the British comedy field since the Alternative Comedy Boom of the 1980s. While older generations with high cultural capital are ambivalent about comedy's artistic potential, younger

generations increasingly see it as an exciting field for cultivating new tastes and exercising new forms of distinction.

Conclusion

In a cultural field such as comedy, where many products are readily accessible through TV, DVD and the internet, it seems there is a great overlap in the 'objects' consumed by different social groups. As the survey revealed, those with vastly different cultural capital resources often shared tastes for many of the same comedians. However, this did not necessarily mean that these groups were consuming comedy in a similar manner.

On the contrary, this chapter has demonstrated that respondents with different resources of cultural capital read and decode comedy in very different ways. They employ distinct comic styles. Utilising their superior resources of embodied cultural capital, HCC respondents exercise a distinct aesthetic approach to comedy. This involves the valorisation of certain comic styles and the clear rejection of others. For example, comedy that is sophisticated, complex and original is appreciated whereas 'prosaic' observational comedy is discarded. Similarly, comedy that taps the entire emotional spectrum is considered valuable while comedy that aims for only laughter and pleasure is rejected. And finally, comedy that is satirical of those in positions of power is widely enjoyed but comedy that mocks the disenfranchised and vulnerable is deemed offensive.

What's significant about this HCC style of appreciation is that it contains a symbolic power. In particular, it enjoys a widespread legitimacy in the comedy field which indicates that it is being converted from cultural into symbolic capital. This legitimacy is derived from three main factors. First, it is validated, consecrated and disseminated by comedy critics and comedy television scouts (see Chapter 8 and 9 for further discussion of this). Second, it draws upon 'pure' theories of art (both modernist and postmodernist) that themselves have a historical and institutional legitimacy. But above all, the main source of legitimacy for the HCC aesthetic style

stems from other comedy audiences, and especially those with low cultural capital, who tend to (mis)recognise it as a 'widely shared status signal' (Lamont and Lareau, 1988). Whereas HCC respondents vociferously reject 'lower' comic styles, LCC respondents are much more uncertain, despondent and even deferent in the face of 'highbrow' comedy.

It is also important to note that the power of this embodied form of cultural capital is potentially far greater than any individual 'objects' of comedy taste. Objectified cultural capital relies on a diffuse and accepted notion of where a particular comedian stands in the field, which as I have demonstrated, is fundamentally uncertain. Moreover, in the case of comedy, the objects of cultural capital are often field-specific, with little recognition of particular comedians in wider cultural circles.

However, the (albeit tentative) evidence presented in this chapter indicates that the magnified power of the HCC style lies in the fact that it may be transposable to other fields of popular cultural consumption. Indeed, many HCC respondents report using the same aesthetic elements in their appreciation of comedy as they do for film and music. This embodied capital is thus particularly powerful because it returns the power of distinction back to the consumer. As Coulangeon (2005) notes, the new culturally privileged consumers of pop-culture may therefore be best characterized not as 'cultural omnivores' but as 'enlightened eclectics', employing a distinctly 'enlightened' aesthetic lens to all cultural consumption – high *and* low.

Part 2: The Cultural Currency of a 'Good' Sense of Humour

Chapter 6: Cultural Omnivores or Culturally Homeless? Exploring The Comedy Tastes of The Socially Mobile

Introduction

In July 2012, I interviewed the English standup Russell Kane at his flat in North London. Two years earlier Kane had won the coveted Edinburgh Comedy Award, and since then had carved out a successful niche straddling different ends of the cultural hierarchy. The critical-acclaim of his comedy had been augmented by the successful staging of his play, *Fakespeare*, at the RSC and the recent publication of his debut novel, *The Humourist*. But at the same time Kane had also established himself as an unashamed patron of pop culture, regularly presenting the distinctly less acclaimed reality-television shows *Big Brother's Big Mouth*, *I'm a Celebrity Get*

Me Out of Here and *Geordie Shore*. Glancing at the contents of Kane's flat, I was struck by the curious taste-adventure aesthetic of his home decor. A colossal flat-screen TV dominated the living room, and opposite sat a similarly flashy brown corner sofa. But jostling for place among the chrome and leather was also a substantial collection of vintage furniture, at least three bookcases stuffed full of classic literature, and a majestic copy of Pissarro's 'Hyde Park.' After Kane had finished giving me the grand tour, he led me outside to his "pièce de résistance" - a rather romantic wooden shed at the bottom of the garden where he was writing his most recent standup show. Lowering himself cross-legged into a battered armchair, he reflected on his omnivorous tastes. "I can walk into the hardest pub in Cheshunt, full of Gary's and Dave's, walk straight up to them, have a pint, and talk about anything. But the next day I might also go to the Iris Murdoch convention at St Anne's College and be in my absolute element. "In fact," he says grinning, "that sounds like the perfect weekend."

This ability to straddle the class divide is most likely the result of Kane's upward social trajectory. Brought up on a council estate in Essex, Kane went on to get a first-class degree in English before rising to become a hugely successful performer. Such long-range mobility has also had a lasting impact on his comedy. Kane has his own preferred definition of art, something that "elevates your perceptions, thoughts *and emotions*, so after you come out feeling different, more engaged with the world, even if just for a few hours." If we use this definition, he says, comedy should definitely be seen as art. "But then again so should *Eastenders*. And if you buzz off your tits from *The National Lottery Show*, so should that." Getting into his stride, he yelled excitedly into my dictaphone, "And who are the elitists who are able to put Ballet up there and *The National Lottery Show* down here. Who are they to downgrade someone else's artistic experience, because they don't have a masters degree in Modernism? How dare they."

What was particularly striking about Kane was the way in which his comedy, but also more importantly his *sense of humour* seemed to combine both HCC *and* LCC styles of comic appreciation. And although he clearly draws upon his higher education and extensive cultural knowledge in constructing certain aspects of his

comedy, it is interesting that he appears uninterested in using this as a means of communicating cultural distinction. Indeed, in contrast, he notes:

Maybe it's about coming from a council estate and then getting a First in English. I've got a pathetic need to be liked by everyone. So the thought that someone might not 'get' my comedy doesn't make me think 'yeah, you don't get it, leave'. I think, "that's sad, this person's given me £17.50, they *need* to get this. I want the big ideas to adumbrate the comedy without me saying, "Here's my thesis – laughter optional (Kane in Friedman, 2012).

The humour of Russell Kane poses important questions about the significance of the comedy taste divisions uncovered in the previous two chapters. Most pressingly, while the game of cultural distinction may be detectable from contrasting the comedy tastes and appreciation styles of those with high and low cultural capital resources, what about those who did not fit easily into these two groups? In the survey, 30% (n= 269) of respondents reported 'mixed' cultural capital resources (MCC). Some of these were intergenerationally stable members of the 'intermediate class'³⁵, but significantly the majority (81%) were better described as socially mobile. Typically, this mobility was upward – with respondents beginning life with relatively low cultural capital but then accumulating new capital by attending university and/or gaining professional or higher-managerial employment.

These respondents were significant not just because of their significant number, but also because, like Russell Kane, their mobile trajectories implied that they may not fit easily into HCC or LCC comedy taste cultures. Furthermore, the very existence of respondents whose cultural capital resources had changed – often quite dramatically - over the lifecourse arguably posed a wider challenge to the validity of Bourdieu's concept of the habitus, and the way I have so far deployed it in this book.

This chapter thus begins by explaining that, at first glance, the comedy tastes of MCC respondents resembled the image of the tolerant 'cultural omnivore' so

³⁵ The 'intermediate class', as defined by The National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification, includes occupational groups such as higher supervisory occupations, intermediate occupations, employers in small establishments and own account workers (Rose and Pevalin, 2003).

prevalent in the literature. However, closer qualitative examination revealed that upwardly mobile omnivorousness was less a purposeful choice and more the result of lifecourse trajectories that had left these respondents with affinities to both (rather than neither) traditional comedy taste cultures. Most significantly, though, it demonstrates that comedy omnivorousness yielded little by way of social rewards. Instead, it often left upwardly mobile respondents in precarious social positions, nostalgic but not wholly comfortable with the comedy of their upbringing but lacking the linguistic confidence to convert new, more legitimate, comedy tastes into embodied cultural capital. In other words, these respondents were less cultural omnivores and more *culturally homeless*.

Understanding The Socially Mobile

First, though, it is useful to sketch the various sociological arguments surrounding social mobility and cultural consumption, starting logically with the foundational contribution of Bourdieu (1984). Bourdieu argued that those located in neighbouring positions in social space are socialised with similar ‘conditions of existence’ (meaning stocks of capital and relative distance from material necessity), which in turn endow them with similar habituses, that is, a complex set of durable dispositions and schemes of perceptions that guide social practice and shape cultural taste (Bourdieu, 1990: 60)³⁶.

This process of habitus formation is therefore the pivotal stage in establishing what I refer to in this book as one’s cultural capital resources. However, significantly, Bourdieu argued that the dispositions established during socialisation were so durable that in the vast majority of the cases the habitus stayed unified through time, meaning that those with strong initial cultural capital resources are ‘statistically bound’ to accumulate further resources through achievement in the fields of education and occupation, whereas those with low initial resources were structurally less able to accumulate later resources (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 133).

³⁶ More specifically in terms of cultural socialisation, Bourdieu argued the privileged child ‘insensibly and unconsciously acquires the principles of an ‘art’ and an art of living’ (1990: 74), an ‘early immersion in a world of cultivated people, practices and objects’ (1984: 75).

However, this conception of habitus – as an enduring matrix of dispositions flowing from primary socialisation – appears antithetical to the notion of social mobility. It implies that movement through the social hierarchy is almost impossible, with the individual continually pushing against the constraints of their social positioning. Indeed, many have argued that mobility remained a rather undertheorised area of Bourdieu’s analysis (Lawler, 1997).

Yet it is important to reiterate that Bourdieu’s conception of social space in *Distinction* (1984) was constructed along *three* dimensions – volume of capital, composition of capital *and* “change in these properties over time” (Bourdieu, 1984: 114). Thus Bourdieu did have a theoretical conception of social mobility – albeit a somewhat limiting one – as a “band of more or less probable trajectories” based on one’s “volume of inherited capital”. Crucially, though, this notion of ‘trajectory’ does not imply a threat to habitus. Instead, with such gradational short-range mobility, the habitus is equipped with the resources to ‘improvise’ and adapt to new social fields (1990: 57).

In later works (1998; 1999; 2004), though, Bourdieu did (briefly) acknowledge that long-range social mobility could be more problematic. In *The State Nobility* (1998: 106-7), for example, he pondered the experience of working class students making their way through the upper echelons of the French education system. These class “transfuges” were caught in a “painful” position of social limbo, of “double isolation”, from both their origin and destination class. While they certainly attempted to adopt the cultural dispositions valued in their new elite milieu, they were never able to “erase their nostalgia for reintegration into their community of origin” (107). And finally Bourdieu further developed this portrait of mobility in terms of his own social trajectory, which he described in *A Sketch For a Self Analysis* (2004: 127). Raised by a rural postal worker and his wife, Bourdieu experienced extraordinary long-range upward mobility that eventually took him to the Chair of the prestigious College du France. However, the psychological price of this movement, he argued, was a fundamentally divided habitus – a habitus clivé – “torn by contradiction and internal division” (Bourdieu, 2004: 161).

While Bourdieu's notion of *habitus clivé* is forcefully invoked in his own self-analysis, it remains a concept only fleetingly explored in his empirical work. This was perhaps because he saw long-range social mobility as fundamentally rare, the 'exception that proved the rule' in terms of the immutability of *habitus*. Yet, ever since Goldthorpe's (1980) Nuffield mobility studies there has been a renewed acceptance among researchers that post-war *British* society is characterised by a much higher level of social mobility, and particularly upward mobility, than Bourdieu's theory implies (Marshall et al, 1997; Heath, 2000)³⁷. A key factor in this process has been credited to the transformative effect of the education system. Despite Bourdieu and Passeron's (1990) assertion that education largely reproduces social privilege, influential work carried out by Halsey (1980), Marshall et al (1997) and more recently Reay (2009) has indicated that the British education system can act as a significant vehicle for upward social mobility, with increasing numbers of working class children going to selective schools, obtaining a degree and moving onto professional employment. In such instances, Reay (2009: 1115) argues working class children defy the assumed unity of the *habitus* and instead develop a skilfully 'reflexive *habitus*' that successfully traverses the dual fields it inhabits.

Yet while there may be broad consensus on the existence of social mobility, there is much less agreement on the impact of this mobility on processes of identity-formation and cultural consumption. Outside of Britain, though, a number of studies have strongly refuted Bourdieu's portrait of mobility as culturally alienating. Following an initial suggestion by Peterson (1992: 255), Van Eijk (1999) found that the Dutch socially mobile are the most likely social group to exhibit 'cultural omnivorousness'. Similarly, examining French 'cultural practices, Lahire (2008: 174) argued that mobility tends to 'translate into a heterogeneity of cultural preferences'. These findings are significant because other work on the contemporary omnivore has argued that their 'open' and 'eclectic' nature can be connected to certain 'social benefits' (Lizardo, 2006: 801), such as increased social and political tolerance (Bryson, 1996). According to other studies (Van Eijk, 2001; Emmison,

³⁷ It is important to note, however, that social mobility in Britain has decreased rapidly in recent years (Cabinet office, 2011).

2003; Lizardo, 2006), cultural omnivores are also in an advantageous position because they are able to use (and convert) their diverse taste into forms of both ‘generalised’ and ‘restricted’ social capital. While their tastes for ‘highbrow’ culture may help to foster bonding connections in relatively high-status and exclusive interaction networks, taste for ‘lowbrow’ culture acts as a ‘bridging tool’, providing what Di Maggio (1987: 43) calls ‘fodder for least-common denominator talk’, and subsequently aiding their ability to make weak-tie social connections that transcend social class boundaries.

However, although the socially mobile may have been linked to such social ‘advantages’ in the US (Peterson, 1992) the Netherlands (Van Eijk, 1999) and France (Lahire, 2008), most work on British cultural consumption has paid little attention to the socially mobile. For example, Bennett et al’s (2009) recent mapping of British cultural taste identified an ‘intermediate class’ at least somewhat populated, one would presume, by the socially mobile. Yet the research went on to almost completely ignore this group in its analysis. In contrast, the aim of this chapter is to specifically hone in on the socially mobile. Drawing on interviews with eight long-range upwardly mobile MCC respondents, it attempts to understand how such steep social trajectories may have impacted these respondents’ comedy tastes and wider cultural identities.

Culture Switching

The comedy tastes of MCC respondents differed strongly from those with high or low cultural capital resources. Rather than registering a clear and consonant cluster of comedy ‘likes’ and ‘dislikes’, these respondents tended to have much more dissonant taste profiles. In particular, survey responses indicated that MCC respondents often combined preferences for comedy items so far identified as mutually exclusive to HCC or LCC taste cultures. For example, as Table 4.3 (see p.88) illustrates, MCC respondents tended to prefer critically-acclaimed comedy like Stewart Lee and *Brass Eye* much more than LCC respondents, but similarly many also liked less consecrated comedians like Benny Hill and Bernard Manning more than HCC respondents.

What was most striking from these survey findings was that by mixing tastes for comedy items considered to be at opposite ends of the cultural hierarchy, MCC respondents appeared to fit the profile of the socially mobile omnivore posited by Van Eijk (1999) and Lahire (2008). Indeed, this finding was initially corroborated in interviews with upwardly mobile MCC respondents. Not only did these respondents possess heterogeneous comedy tastes, but they also seemed to possess a style of comic appreciation that borrowed heavily from both HCC and LCC styles.

Harriet, a primary school teacher, displayed a typically omnivoric profile. Early in our interview she described 'loving' comedians such as Roy 'Chubby' Brown. She noted Brown is 'so offensive, so distasteful...I just think it's hilarious'. Asked to elaborate, she noted such comedy tastes reflected her broader style of appreciation, which eschews intellectual comedy in favour of laughter and pleasure:

You can tell from the fact I like Roy 'Chubby' Brown that I'm not bothered about comedy making me think or anything afterwards. If it's funny it's funny. If I go to a show I'm going to laugh. I'm not that deep (laughs).

Although such a style was strongly reminiscent of LCC appreciation, later in the interview Harriet's aesthetic orientation appeared to change dramatically. In particular, she began to talk about the comedy she's 'into at the moment', mentioning among others the TV comedy shows *Brass Eye* and *The Thick of It*. Here her style of appreciation seemed quite different, and she began to employ aesthetic terms associated more with HCC respondents. For example, she explained that she admired the 'dryness' and subtlety' of *The Thick of It* and the way *Brass Eye* 'sends up' people with 'stupid' views.

James, a mental health nurse, displayed a similarly mixed style of appreciation. On his survey script he reported liking 30 of the 32 comedy items and as his interview progressed it became clear he was passionate about many completely different types of comedy. For instance, he began by praising 'formal' innovation in comedy, and focused on comedians like Stewart Lee:

He's got a very unusual style; he gets a line and just repeats it. This probably sounds a wee bit wanky and fucking pretentious, but it's almost like poetry or something. He's just got this knack for disassembling things.

However, having gone on to further express admiration for the originality and critical lens of TV comedy items like *Brass Eye* and *Spaced*, James suddenly and deliberately changed tack:

It's not just about purely intellectual stuff, though. I mean I grew up with Bernard Manning, and y'know Frank Carson and all the mother-in-law jokes. I mean they were a wee bit racist, to be fair (laughs) but that doesn't mean they weren't funny. Bernard Manning had some great material, y'know the kind of classic 'my mother-in-law's too fat' (laughs). I like my comedy to be comedy, I don't want some sort of Andy Bennett thing where it's drama with a wee comedy edge. If it's comedy make it bloody funny.

The comic tastes and appreciation styles of Harriet and James aptly illustrate the omnivoric profiles that characterised MCC taste. However, it's important to note that such omnivorous MCC tastes did not seem to accord with Bryson's (1996) conception of the omnivore as consciously culturally tolerant. Indeed, unlike the culture consumers in Bennett et al's (2009: 186) recent study, MCC omnivores had not cultivated a new style of comic appreciation which celebrated their 'versatile' approach or presented their eclecticism as a 'badge of honour'. Instead, their appreciation styles appeared to combine *both* the HCC and LCC style of appreciation, with one style being employed to explain certain tastes and other somewhat contradictory styles to explain others.

Aesthetic Slopes and Trajectories

Although most MCC respondents could be accurately defined as comedy omnivores, such analysis assumed a synchronic view of comedy taste. In particular, it presumed that a respondent's taste could be fully understood from the moment they filled in the survey or took part in the interview. However, one of the main strengths of mixing survey methodology with qualitative interviews was that it allowed for a more diachronic examination of comedy taste. Significantly, this allowed for an

examination of respondents' biographies, and in particular identified when a certain taste or style was developed.

Such diachronic analysis only further problematised the initial picture of MCC respondents as conventional cultural omnivores. In particular, it indicated that the taste diversity of most MCC interviewees reflected the slope of their life trajectories, and in particular their evolving resources of cultural capital. For example Patrick, a 41-year-old physics teacher, was brought up in a working class neighbourhood of Salford, near Manchester. He recalled little art and culture in his background, but noted that his dad did introduce him to more lowbrow comedy like *Last of The Summer Wine* and Benny Hill, as well as what he calls the 'usual suspects' of the then Northern comedy circuit such as Bernard Manning and Frank Carson. However, Patrick recalls that when he moved away from home to go to university his style of comic appreciation changed dramatically. In particular, he responded favourably to what he calls 'intelligent satire' such as *Brass Eye*, *The Day Today* and Eddie Izzard that was emerging at the time:

I was exposed to that by friends that were living down in London so I suppose things started opening up for me during University, undergraduate days, in the early 1990s.

This process of aesthetic 'opening up' during university was also echoed by a number of other MCC interviewees. Pete, a theatre administrator, described being brought up in 'a very uncultured' working class family where, like Patrick, he was introduced to comedians like Roy Chubby Brown and Les Dawson:

Those were the comedians that were playing the [Working Men's] clubs on a Saturday night, and my parents used to go down quite a lot, so I suppose that's how we got into it. Maybe with 'Chubby' Brown it's also because he's from the North-East and so am I. Maybe I get the humour, the North-East humour... We call a spade a spade, sort of thing.

However, Pete moved to London when he was 18 to complete a drama degree. It was during this period, when he 'came across more 'highbrow' stuff', that he notes a significant shift in his aesthetic style:

But absolutely when I did come into that completely different environment, surrounded by people who were my own age, and also into acting, I sort of changed my whole outlook on things. Sounds a bit profound, doesn't it (laughs), what a load of wank! But I did, I suppose. I suddenly found myself in literally different surroundings but also culturally, as well, and I lapped it up really. I actively went out and looked for things, theatre and cinema, as well as comedy.

What these passages illustrate is that rather than making a conscious decision to become all-embracing comedy omnivores, Pete and Patrick's shifting taste had more to do with the slope and trajectory of their lives. Their working-class habitus may have first orientated them towards more LCC comedy tastes, but this habitus was arguably disrupted when they moved into the unfamiliar field of higher education. Here, echoing the findings of Halsey (1980) and Reay (2009), Pete and Patrick were able to create new cultural capital resources and successfully adapt their habitus to accommodate the academic dispositions demanded by university. In turn, both noted that this process of restructuring had had a profound impact on their cultural tastes, reorientating them towards new cultural products that reflected the dispositions and conditions of their new milieu. In terms of comedy, this manifested in a new style of appreciation for what Patrick calls 'intelligent satire' or what Pete called 'highbrow stuff'.

In the case of Pete, it was also notable that this process of reorientation did not necessarily start and finish with the education system. In particular, Pete's occupational involvement with the arts, first as an actor and now as a theatre administrator, seemed to have had a significant impact on his shifting comedy tastes. For instance, when explaining his interest in the more 'formal' aspects of comedy, he constantly prefaced taste statements with phrases like 'being in the business...' or 'From an actor's point of view...'. For Pete, then, cultural resources inculcated in the workplace had further contributed to the adaptation of his habitus:

I think because you're doing it all day everyday, y'know, acting and being aware of the arts, you just become more aware of having to be more aware of other influences. So that's probably the time when I started actively going out and looking for things, and at things, and examined more what I liked and didn't like. Yeh, probably my mid 20s.

These findings were significant as they qualitatively illustrate that fields like education and occupation do not just *reproduce* cultural capital resources, which following Bourdieu's assumptions about the 'practical unity' of the habitus (1984: 56; 173) I have so far broadly assumed in this book. Instead, in the case of many MCC respondents, including Pete and Patrick, these environments also *created* resources, even if the individuals hadn't been endowed with many cultural skills from their background. Indeed, as even Bourdieu noted in later work, habitus can be 'restructured, transformed in its makeup by the pressure of objective structures' (Bourdieu, 2005: 47). Furthermore, this restructuring of resources can have a significant impact on one's orientation to comedy, in this case acting as the catalyst in the development of new, more legitimate tastes and styles of appreciation.

However, it's also important not to present fields like education and occupation as 'objective structures' with inherent transformative potential. For instance, having examined the biographical testimony of MCC respondents in detail, and in particular their accounts of taste transformation, it became clear that the catalyst for change and adaptation rarely came directly from an institutional environment. Instead, moments of change were almost always attributed to the influence of other social actors operating in the respondent's 'lifeworld' (Atkinson, 2010).

Returning to the previous testimony of Patrick and Pete, for example, it's worth noting that Patrick's changing comedy taste at university had less to do with university and more to do with the 'friends' he met there, whereas Pete's transformation at drama school was credited more to the fact that he was 'surrounded by people' interested in acting rather than the course he was enrolled on.

This 'inter-subjective' influence was also evident in interviews with other MCC respondents. Although Sophie, a 44-year old teacher, went to university and now has a professional job, she credited the major shift in her taste to her school experience, and in particular the more middle class friends she met there:

I started junior school when alternative comedy and political correctness started getting really popular. I mean think I was about 15 when the Young Ones came out and I remember it was a real bonding thing with friends at the time, because we had a very similar sense of humour... I mean I've had the same friends for 20 years now and it's basically a constant torrent of abuse, really. So if you like comedy they don't, be prepared for some abuse (laughs). No, not really. You can have your different opinions...As long as you can back it up.'

What was significant about this passage is the way Sophie explains her orientation to 'alternative comedy' as something that is intimately connected to the development of certain enduring friendships. Moreover, she describes how the norms established in this group have inculcated a critical appreciation of comedy, whereby taste is only accepted if one can 'back it up' intellectually.

This and other MCC statements of inter-subjective influence are important because, in many ways, they undermine Bourdieu's (1990) conception of how habitus tends to be 'objectively harmonised' with those from similar backgrounds 'and mutually adjusted without direct interaction or explicit coordination' (Bourdieu, 1990: 58-59). Instead, MCC testimonies indicate that the development of comedy tastes and styles is often a fundamentally collective accomplishment, where agents 'must take into account and act in accord with the expectations of the people they encounter in social contexts' (Bottero, 2010: 13-15). Individual comic dispositions are therefore always adjusted in relation to 'calls to order' from the group they find themselves in, even if such groups have very different tastes to those from which the individual was socialised into, such as is the case for Sophie, Patrick and Pete (King, 2001).

The importance of trajectory in this section underlines the fact that the initial analysis of MCC respondents as orthodox cultural omnivores may be somewhat problematic. Rather than consciously seeking out a wide and open appreciation of comedy, the heterogeneous taste profiles of MCC respondents was more attributable to the cultural capital resources they gained from either certain institutional environments or the influence of social agents operating in these environments. This indicates that rather than breaking and challenging the traditional cultural hierarchy (between HCC and LCC taste cultures), MCC respondents were simply adapting themselves and their tastes to 'fit into' whichever taste culture was appropriate in a given social context.

Habitus Clivé and (The Lack Of) Embodied Cultural Capital

As noted, the vast majority of MCC respondents appeared to have an upwardly mobile trajectory, whereby early socialisation had inculcated LCC comedy tastes but then changes during the lifecourse had facilitated the development of more HCC tastes. However, although these respondents had successfully developed taste for more legitimate comedy, the expression of these tastes was often tinged with a sense of inferiority or anxiety about whether they were able to employ a ‘correct’ understanding.

A striking example of this came during my interview with Harriet. After I mentioned the comedy show *The Thick Of It* (which parodies the inner workings of British government), Harriet spoke in some detail about the fact that she loved the show, particularly the dry humour and wit of the writing. However, when I asked if she felt the programme was an accurate depiction of what goes on in British politics, she suddenly seemed to freeze and become quite uncomfortable. Her eventual answer seemed almost apologetic in tone:

If it’s something I’ve really got to think about, chances are I probably won’t get most of it (laughs). I suppose I wasn’t laughing at the political things in it [The Thick of it]. I’m not a massively well read person, I don’t read papers or watch the news much, I’m not a very deep person. I probably wouldn’t get anything that’s too complicated.

This sense of trepidation and insecurity was even more acute in other MCC respondents, such as Patrick. Even though Patrick had a PhD in physics and spoke with some authority about his taste for legitimate comedy like *Brass Eye* and Mark Thomas, his interview was littered with self-deprecating comments that exposed his insecurity about ‘intellectual’ forms of comedy. One particular conversation regarding the judgments of comedy reviewers illustrated this:

SF: Do you read comedy reviews?

Patrick: Yeah, I don't tend to go to live comedy much so when I do I like to hear what people have got to say. And I think often critics do seem to hit the nail on the head. I think they often sway me, actually.

SF: What do you mean by 'sway' you? Would you say they affect your opinion of a show?

Patrick: I would actually, yeah, It often makes me feel like I've missed the point with something, and this is where it comes to intellect or whatever. I might have got a PhD but it doesn't mean I'm getting it at the level they're wanting me to get it at. I often read them and think 'oh that's interesting. I never got that side of things, I didn't realise that was going on'. Particularly with wordy things because I tend to switch off. So I tend to miss a lot if it's wordy. So yeh often I read reviews and think oh yeh they might actually be right there. And on occasion I've actually gone back and watched a bit more from those same comedians and realised oh yeah I'm actually getting into this. One example is that guy from Mock the Week, Russell Howard, who I've changed my mind on completely.

SF: Why do you think you 'miss the point'?

Patrick: Possibly it might be to do with my background. I really like visual things. When I go and see a play I will often lose the plot completely because I'll get distracted. I think it's about having a very short span of attention.

This deference towards what Patrick calls 'intellect' or Harriet terms 'complicated' comedy is reminiscent of Bourdieu's (1984: 318-335) notion of 'cultural goodwill' among the upwardly mobile petit bourgeoisie. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu argued that the upwardly mobile are filled with an aspirational 'reverence for legitimate culture', but this is tempered with a lingering sense of unworthiness. In this study, such insecurity among MCC respondents seemed to greatly impede their ability to convert new cultural resources into meaningful forms of embodied cultural capital. Thus while Patrick and Harriet's upward social trajectory may have ensured the cultivation of legitimate comedy tastes, they lacked the confidence to publicly express this taste using the legitimate aesthetic style of the culturally privileged.

Furthermore, because MCC cultural capital resources had been 'learned' and accumulated rather than 'naturally' embodied, both Patrick and Harriet were left with a lingering but persistent sense that they were unable to 'correctly' employ the HCC style of comic appreciation.

However, although most MCC respondents displayed a certain insecurity about expressing HCC comedy tastes, they were not as straightforwardly aspirational as Bourdieu's imagining of the upwardly mobile petit bourgeois. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984: 336) argued that the 'collective social trajectory' of the upwardly mobile orientates their habitus towards a constant quest for embourgeoisement, as well as – crucially - a *renunciation of their taste culture of origin*. A variation of this theory, the 'status anxiety hypobook', has also been developed more recently by Goldthorpe and Chan (2007: 1106). These authors argue that the socially mobile are likely to be insecure about their newly acquired status, and are therefore even more concerned than those who are intergenerationally stable in high-status positions to shun the taste culture of their socialisation and embrace newly obtained HCC tastes.

Yet both these descriptions of the upwardly mobile jar strongly with the MCC experience I encountered in interviews. Far from renouncing the tastes developed in early socialisation, MCC respondents seemed to retain a strong affinity with the comedy they encountered in their upbringing. In many cases, this manifested in terms of a strong sense of nostalgia. For example, Sophie told me that now when she watches Roy 'Chubby' Brown it reminds her of happy memories in her childhood, where her and her friends would find their parent's 'Chubby' Brown videos and watch them while the parents were out of the house. Similarly, Patrick described an unshakeable preference for the more 'in-your-face comedians' he encountered as a boy. In particular, though, a discussion with Pete about his enduring tie to the humour of Roy 'Chubby' Brown demonstrated this connection between taste and upbringing:

Pete: I like what he does, I respect what he does. I just think he's quite upfront. I think that phrase 'he's only saying what we're all thinking' can sometimes be a little bit misused, and it's not that I'm saying that about him. Y'know his is the comedy where people will say something that even if you're not thinking 'that's what I'm thinking' you can at least acknowledge that 'yeh, I've kind of thought that in the past and laughed'. It's also quite down-to-earth, the humour. It's not pretentious. It's very much rooted in 'ok, this is who I am, take me or leave me' sort of thing. And that's what I love about humour in the North-East. We can find the humour in anything, really.'

SF: Do you feel connected to the humour you were brought up with?

Pete: Definitely. Certainly where I'm from, the people I was brought up around, and I'm probably speaking for the whole North in general, humour is a big part of people's lives. I don't know why that is. You can go out with a group of people, whether you know them or not, and there's that thing where if you go into a pub and just sit at the bar and get chatting to someone in five minutes because people are just more open up there, up for meeting people and up for having a good laugh. I think it's just an inbuilt desire to have a good time rather than be miserable, or think seriously about things, or analyse things. You're just out for a laugh, out for a good time. I don't know if that's how we are naturally, or if it's a way of dealing with how shitty it can be up there sometimes (laughs). Especially in recent history with the miners and the shipyards all being shut down on the Tyne and Wear. It's just a way of dealing with life, I suppose. You've got to laugh because otherwise you'll cry, sort of thing (laughs).

Pete's discussion of 'Chubby' Brown and his connection to wider values of working class culture in the North of England was significant for a number of reasons. Like most MCC respondents, it demonstrated Pete's strong bond to the taste culture of his background. Rather than rejecting LCC appreciation, there was a tangible pride in the sociable nature of the comedy inculcated in his youth. Moreover, Pete saw a wider connection between this comedy and a Northern 'sense of humour', which he argued acted as an important vehicle for social solidarity.

This kind of data is also important as it points to the enduring strength of primary socialisation in the establishment of habitus. While MCC respondents may have demonstrated a significant level of agency in the accumulation of new cultural capital resources (and the subsequent establishment of new tastes and styles), this has only led to partial transformations of the habitus. There was little evidence of 'disappearing into a new world' or 'wholesale escaping of the habitus' that is discussed by Friedmann (2005: 318) in relation to upward mobility. Indeed, even when MCC respondents had pursued the most determined of cultural accumulation strategies, they were still inextricably linked to the comedy tastes of their upbringing. Echoing the findings of Reay (2009: 1111), there was a 'determination to hold on to former aspects of self even as new ones were gained.'

One Foot in Two Different Taste Cultures

Rather than exhibiting only 'status anxiety', then, the data presented so far seemed to suggest that mobile respondents were more accurately described by Erickson's (1996)

‘culture-switching hypothesis’. Erickson noted that the upwardly mobile both retain and acquire tastes, but significantly they are skilled and successful in switching between these different cultural modes, and this itself constitutes a meaningful social resource.

However, again, looking more closely at the data, it became clear that the ‘culture switching hypothesis’ also provided a too simplistic theoretical lens on MCC comedy taste. While MCC respondents certainly retained tastes from their past and acquired tastes from an upward social trajectory, it was much less apparent whether this constituted a ‘successful’ unity. Indeed, such omnivorous taste seemed to suggest less a ‘skilfully flexible habitus’ (Reay, 2009) and more an uncertain ontological position between two (mutually exclusive) taste cultures. One way this was detected was through the uncertain manner with which MCC respondents described the comedy tastes retained from their youth. These statements were striking in that they tended to oscillate between pride and uneasiness. For example Harriet described her preference for Roy ‘Chubby’ Brown:

Harriet: It’s so distasteful but it’s quite funny that he thinks it’s ok to make all those jokes. And I just find that funny. I know I shouldn’t laugh at it but the fact that he’s just come right out and said something like that I find funny. I mean I know it’s not acceptable, and I don’t agree with what he makes jokes about. But the fact that he doesn’t give a shit that anyone thinks about it. And he’s got the brass neck to say it, I just think is hilarious.

SF: What do you mean when you say you know it’s not acceptable?

Harriet: Like I would never sit around in the staff room cracking Roy Chubby Brown jokes (laughs). You would only in certain circles. Like if I met you for the first time I wouldn’t tell you all about a new Roy Chubby Brown DVD I just bought!

Although Harriet clearly still enjoyed the humour of Roy ‘Chubby’ Brown, she obviously felt a certain sense of guilt or uneasiness about expressing this pleasure. She continually qualified her taste statements by saying ‘I know I shouldn’t laugh’, or ‘I know it’s not acceptable’ and seemed acutely aware of the incompatibility between such taste and her professional identity as a primary school teacher. Some of this uneasiness may have had something to do with her perception of my taste judgments,

as an SF, but nonetheless there also seemed to be a clear tension between the comedy she inclined towards and her awareness of its low cultural value. A similar type of contradiction could be detected in James's discussion of Benny Hill:

I mean I was watching some of my Dad's old Benny Hill videos recently and there's just some brilliant one-liners. There's one where this Chinese guy is coming through immigration and he's got thick Chinese glasses on and he's like 'he-looo' (imitates Chinese accent). I mean it's a borderline racist Chinese accent and then the joke is that the immigration guy is Pakistani and he's like 'oh goodness gracious me' (imitates Pakistani accent) (laughs) and now you're thinking 'hold on are you sure about this?' But at the same time the actual jokes are hilarious. He says 'have you just come back from overseas' 'yes I've just come back from the Isle of Man' and the immigration guys says 'that's not overseas' and the guy says 'you try walking there' (laughs loudly). I mean that's just brilliant...If something's funny it's funny.

Again, it was clear from this quote that James both found this joke funny but was acutely aware of its low cultural value as 'borderline racist'. He clearly didn't find the racist element acceptable, but at the same time was willing to temporarily suspend this issue in the interests of enjoying the joke. While earlier in the interview James described his Dad as 'more than a wee bit racist', it's clear from this passage that there was a tension between his own anti-racist values and the fact that he clearly still found the traditional one-liner-style jokes of his youth very funny.

As well as this tension in the internal taste judgments of MCC respondents, there was also a sense that communicating such omnivoric comedy taste often caused social problems. For instance, staying with James for a moment, he described how he often disagreed with his girlfriend about political correctness in comedy, arguing that 'that there's nothing wrong with observing stereotypes, they're generally there for a reason.' Significantly, however, James described how he was forced to admit that his girlfriend was 'actually right' after he had gone to see another of his favourite comedians, the more 'highbrow' Stewart Lee:

I remember last year I was ranting to my girlfriend about political correctness and I just gave this clichéd, derivative nonsense that political correctness is rubbish blah blah blah and we went to see Stewart Lee on the same night and he

just ripped my argument to shreds. He did this routine about Richard Littlejohn, y'know, and I came out humiliated. He just poked holes in my flimsy argument.

This passage was significant for two reasons. Not only does it reiterate the tension between James's different comic tastes, and his awareness of the contradictions of holding both HCC and LCC aesthetic styles, but it also demonstrates the disruptive effect such omnivorous taste can have on important social relationships such as James and his girlfriend. This sentiment was also echoed by Pete, who described how 'awkward' it is in his current social milieu when he discusses his preferences for 'un-PC' comedians with friends who he described as 'much more middle class':

Pete: I wouldn't go and see one of his [Chubby Brown] shows anymore but that comedy was very popular at the time and I mean, it's just jokes...

SF: Do you still find the un-PC jokes funny?

Pete: Some I do, some I don't. But I wouldn't find it not funny because it was a racist joke. That doesn't come in to it for me. I'm not easily offended. I mean even if (feigns a middle class accent) 'one should be seen to be offended by something in polite company' then I will deliberately not be.

In contrast, James described the difficulty of expressing new comedy tastes when he returned to his family home:

The number of times I've said to my mum you need to watch this, it's really funny, and she's like 'nah, it's not funny'. So when I go home I more slip back into their kind of humour rather than bother to try and introduce them to the stuff I like.

What Pete and James's comments illustrated was that although their comic style may defiantly traverse the cultural hierarchy, the styles of high and low comedy were not necessarily happily united within them. Indeed, far from proudly parading their omnivorous openness, their mixture of tastes often placed them in uneasy social situations. Surrounded by those with 'highbrow' comic styles, Pete was acutely aware of the negative cultural capital communicated by his 'lowbrow' tastes. He may cross the cultural hierarchy but he still felt the pressure it exerted, the institutional power it wielded, and therefore found himself defending (rather than celebrating) his diverse comic style. Similarly, rather than introduce his parents to his new legitimate

interests and tastes, James suppressed this part of his identity. Instead, when he returned home, he found himself ‘slipping back’ to the tastes he inherited from his parents, even though he believed the aesthetic basis of this comedy was flawed.

This data is particularly striking as it seems to problematise much of the existing literature on the cultural omnivore. For example, while the comedy omnivorousness of these respondents may, in a strict sense, have aided their ability to communicate with diverse social groups (Erickson, 1996), any potential social capital was undermined by the anxiety and ‘mental conflict’ (Lahire, 2011) that such culture switching seemed to induce. Moreover, there was even less evidence of MCC comedy eclecticism acting as a marker of cultural distinction or ‘cool’ (Bellevance, 2008; Van Eijk and Bergeman, 2004; Warde et al, 1999;). Thus while HCC respondents seamlessly employed their embodied capital to even the less legitimate of their comedy tastes, MCC respondents lacked the ability (and often the desire) to utilise this highbrow comic style.

Rather than the omnivores presented in the literature, then, these upwardly mobile respondents were more accurately characterised as *culturally homeless* – dislocated from a recognisable cultural habitat, permanently caught with one foot in two different taste cultures. Maintaining an affinity with both LCC and HCC comedy styles, most simultaneously resembled ontological outsiders in both cultures. As Savage (2005) has noted, these upwardly mobile persons occupied a ‘liminal’ space in social space, characterised by an uncertain relationship with those above and below them. While their life trajectory had allowed them to bridge artistic boundaries, mobile respondents seemed nonetheless acutely aware of the cultural hierarchy and their slightly precarious position within it. In a manner reminiscent of the way Bourdieu (2004: 127) described himself, mobile respondents displayed a fundamentally divided habitus.

Of course, the main conceptual difference with Bourdieu’s formulation is that far from being ‘exceptions to the rule’, the destabilised habitus clive of upwardly mobile respondents constituted a significant minority of this study’s overall sample. Rather

than isolated ‘blips’ in the otherwise durable notion of habitus, then, these findings suggest that the habitus of many contemporary Britons may be more flexible than Bourdieu envisaged. In particular, he may have underestimated the sheer numbers of the working-class that would, like himself, ‘experience social and cultural dislocation as the price of educational and occupational achievement’ (Bennett, 2007: 201).

Exposing the Rules of the Game

While the discordances of the upwardly mobile may have generated a destabilised habitus, this precarious position also seemed to paradoxically engender a privileged lens on the workings of field of cultural production. For example, it was notable that it was only among MCC respondents that I encountered any real opposition to the *validity* of the cultural hierarchy. Sophie, for instance, seemed particularly sceptical of the pressure exerted by ‘bandwagons’ in assigning value to some comedians:

I’m always wary of Bandwagons. A world where I’m told what I can laugh at and what I can’t...when what I can and can’t do is controlled, that’s the day I get a bit worried. There’s something quite wrong there for me.

Similarly, in a telling discussion of the value of certain critically consecrated comedians, Harriet displayed a cynicism for the fickleness of the cultural hierarchy:

Harriet: People like to think they’re the only people who have discovered this band, or this comedian and ‘oh yeh I saw this comedian at the festival and you should see them because they’re going to get big’. And then as soon as they’re like on *Mock The Week*, they change their mind and go onto something else.

SF: Are you cynical of that?

Harriet: Yeh, I think it makes people feel like they’re more intelligent if they....And I suppose if they’re giving acts a chance before they’re big then that’s good but you can’t then change your mind about them when they’re big, you must still like them because their comedy is the same, it’s just that loads of others people like them as well. And I suppose when the masses start liking people, then it’s not cool to like them, because automatically those people think they’re going to be classed in the same league as all the new people that like that comedian or band. And that’s nonsense. With me I won’t stop liking something just because it’s not cool to like them.

These passages were important because they demonstrated the unique vantage point possessed by MCC respondents. Emerging from the troubling experience of social dislocation, these individuals appeared to have acquired a certain reflexivity that allowed them to see, and be cynical of, what Bourdieu termed ‘the rules of the game’. This is not, as Sweetman (2003) argued, an inherently ‘reflexive habitus’, but instead an emerging sense of reflection borne out of the ‘crisis’ experienced by these respondents in their social trajectory (Bottero, 2010). Possessing insight into the dynamics of both HCC and LCC taste cultures, respondents like Sophie are better placed to question the authority of those that ‘tell’ people what comedy to like, whereas respondents like Harriet are able to deconstruct the logic that if a comedian is rare or unknown, they are somehow more valuable. As Bourdieu (2000: 161) noted, ‘occupants of precarious positions’ are best positioned to observe the process of symbolic violence, of ‘ordinary suffering’. They are ‘extraordinary practical agents...constrained, in order to live or to survive, to practice a kind of self-analysis, which often gives them access to the objective contradictions which have them in their grasp, and the objective structures expressed in and by these contradictions’ (Bourdieu et al, 1999: 511).

Conclusion

The tastes of the socially mobile have so far been largely ignored in British sociology. This chapter has begun the process of bridging this gap by examining the comedy tastes and appreciation styles of socially mobile respondents with mixed resources of cultural capital. It reveals that mobile respondents appear to have much less consonant taste profiles than HCC or LCC respondents, often displaying omnivorous preferences that span the cultural hierarchy. However, contrary to work that presumes that omnivorousness reflects a conscious cultural openness, my findings indicate that diverse comedy taste is more likely to reflect the trajectory of one’s cultural capital resources. This is a potentially telling distinction, as it also problematises the widely held notion that omnivorousness constitutes a form of cultural capital or yields social benefits.

Instead, my data indicates that traversing the taste hierarchy may often have more negative than positive social implications. Certainly possessing a working knowledge of all comedy may be useful for forging weak bonds in settings like the workplace, but the significance of this may be superseded by the harmful effects that combining such tastes can have on the *individual* and their personal relationships. Thus while my socially mobile respondents lacked the ‘natural’ confidence to communicate new, more legitimate, tastes as embodied cultural capital, their upwardly mobile trajectory also meant they were acutely aware that the lowbrow tastes of their youth were largely socially unacceptable and aesthetically inferior. Omnivorous taste, then, often brought with it distinct social hurdles as well as a troubling suggestion of ontological uneasiness.

Finally, the findings of the chapter also have ramifications beyond the realm of comedy. In particular, they somewhat puncture the celebratory air of research that has equated omnivorousness with the breakdown of symbolic boundaries. Rather than assume from statistical analysis that omnivorous taste is socially beneficial, this chapter illustrates the importance of interrogating further using qualitative analysis. This may reveal, like the findings reported here, that many so-called ‘middle class’ omnivores are not elites reflexively and wilfully dismantling symbolic hierarchies, but are in fact socially mobile individuals whose diverse taste simply reflects their lifecourse trajectories.

Part 3: Comic Cultural Capital: Strength and Legitimacy

Chapter 7: Comedy Snobs and Symbolic Boundaries

Introduction

‘Culture attracts snobs’, argued the *Daily Telegraph*’s Guy Stagg in August 2011. ‘But the worst snobs are found in comedy...an entire room can collapse in laughter but a comedy snob will insist the joke wasn’t funny’. The principal ‘cheerleader’ for comedy snobs, Stagg continued, is the stand-up Stewart Lee, who combines a ‘mixture of cynicism, vanity and unbearable snobbery’ (Stagg, 2011). A number of other journalists were quick to agree with Stagg’s thesis (Moir, 2011; Milward, 2011). Indeed, Lee’s ‘unbearable snobbery’ was most clearly evidenced, according to these commentators, by his mockery of Britain’s most popular contemporary comedian; Michael McIntyre. Lifting a quote out-of-context from Lee’s 2009 standup show *If you Prefer A Milder Comedian Please Ask For One* these journalists pounced on a skit where Lee describes McIntyre’s comedy as akin to ‘spoonfeeding audiences warm diarrhea’.

Now as Lee himself pointed out (Lee, 2011) such comments were made ‘in character’ and any apparent hostility was clearly ‘overstated for comic effect’. Yet he *did* admit that he ‘can’t pretend to like’ McIntyre’s work. It’s important that people are reminded there is ‘more than one way of doing’ stand-up, he argued, and alternative comedians should use the ‘safe middle ground’ represented by McIntyre as a ‘clearly definable mainstream’ from which to define themselves against (Lee, 2010). For Stagg, though, this aesthetic boundary-drawing masked deeper prejudices. ‘McIntyre is not the real object of [Lee’s] scorn. It is the *people who find him funny*. The people who are so unsophisticated that they laugh at observational comedy. Because comedy is just a vehicle for other, more poisonous forms of snobbery’ (Stagg, 2011, emphasis added).

This audacious claim is clearly unsubstantiated. While Stewart Lee may see comedy existing within an aesthetic hierarchy - and one in which McIntyre’s work inhabits a fairly low position - there is no indication that his artistic snobbery necessarily extends to judgments about comedy audiences. Yet, regardless of the validity of Stagg’s argument, he does raise an important point about the wider social significance of comedy snobbery. Indeed, while Stewart Lee may have no explicit *intention* of aiming his comedy solely at the upper middle-classes rich in cultural capital, Chapter 4 revealed that his audiences – and those of other similarly acclaimed comics - *are* disproportionately drawn from such privileged backgrounds. And again while Lee may not *intend* his aesthetic boundary-drawing to imply wider social prejudice, this does not mean that his audiences do not inadvertently read such snobbery through his work.

Homing in on this highly sensitive topic, this chapter aims to empirically examine the symbolic boundaries separating British comedy tastes. While Chapter 4 and 5 may have identified strong taste divisions, this chapter goes a step further. In particular it asks - what is the sociological significance of these taste differences? Drawing on Bourdieu, it is possible to argue that such taste distinctions are significant in and of themselves because they represent *de facto* markers of social

position. In other words, the cultural hierarchy ensures that different tastes and styles necessarily negate one another and therefore HCC and LCC comedy tastes are inherently separated by an implicit but powerful symbolic boundary (Bourdieu, 1984: 223).

However, since the publication of *Distinction* many have questioned whether the contemporary cultural field resembles such a zero-sum Bourdieusian hierarchy (Halle, 1992; Bryson, 1996; Erickson, 1996). Lamont (1992), for example, has argued that the process by which taste differences can be said to contribute to processes of distinction and symbolic violence is more complex than Bourdieu implied. She noted that taste boundaries can only be said to generate inequality and exclusion when notions of cultural legitimacy are ‘widely agreed upon’ (Lamont and Lareau, 1988: 152). Following Lamont’s lead, many cultural sociologists have supported this critique of Bourdieu, arguing that symbolic hierarchies have been replaced by more open, tolerant and *omnivorous* cultural orientations (Peterson and Kern, 1996; Featherstone, 1996). Some even argue that contemporary markers of distinction or ‘cool’ actually involve *refraining* from drawing boundaries, and embracing cultural diversity (Warde et al., 1999; Eijck & Knulst, 2005; Van Eijck & Lievens, 2008; Bellevance, 2008). In Britain, this shift in thought has been bolstered by the recent work of Bennett et al (2009: 194), who argue that cultural boundary-claiming among the British middle classes has all but disappeared. They claim there has been a ‘more or less total elimination of hints of snobbishness towards other social classes’. Moreover, echoing omnivore theorists, they posit that it has now become a ‘badge of honour’ to embrace a ‘spirit of openness’ in one’s cultural preferences (189) and actually ‘de rigueur to refrain from disparaging the tastes of other social groups’.

Despite the empirical weight of such large-scale studies, there is not complete sociological consensus concerning symbolic boundaries. For example, a number of more focused British studies have uncovered signs that class-inflected taste boundaries persist (Lawler, 2005; Harwood & Yar, 2006). Looking at discussions of the working-class in British media, Lawler (2005) argues that many such narratives are characterised by a distinct middle-class ‘disgust’ at working-class existence.

However, ‘objective’ economic or occupational class markers are rarely invoked in these expressions of disapproval. Instead, disdainful traits are presented as the outcome of pathological or aesthetically deficient cultural tastes.

Considering these developments in the literature and keeping in mind Lamont’s appeal for symbolic boundaries to be explicitly interrogated rather than implicitly assumed, this chapter aims to home in on the boundaries that separate comedy tastes. Drawing both on the major taste cleavages already identified and specific interview data on comedy *dislikes*, the chapter demonstrates that HCC respondents draw remarkably strong symbolic boundaries on the basis of comedy taste. These boundaries are primarily aesthetic, drawing on the perceived inability of certain audiences to recognise ‘higher’ forms of comedy. However, there are also signs that HCC respondents construct boundaries on the basis of moral and political judgments, and often identify comedy taste as a potent marker of individual personhood. In contrast, LCC respondents have a much more laissez faire approach to comedy taste, combining both a moral commitment to openness and a hesitancy toward judging others.

HCC Boundary Construction

Aesthetic Boundaries

Considering the recent literature on eroding symbolic boundaries, HCC boundary-making on the basis of comedy taste was surprisingly strong. Indeed, for many HCC respondents, the drawing of aesthetic boundaries was inextricably linked to the way they explained their comic styles. For example, the desire for comic ‘difficulty’ expressed in Chapter 5 often seemed to be bound up with the knowledge that this style of appreciation set HCC respondents apart from other comedy consumers. Dale, for example, explained the appeal of Stewart Lee:

To be perfectly honest he makes me feel like I’m in an in-crowd of comedy nerds. You need to see the pull back and reveal (laughs). You’ve got to see him delay the punchline...the repetition. He’s got all the tricks there. It is almost like

sitting an exam. You go in and you know you're going to be challenged, you know a few people in the audience won't get him. Overall It makes you feel a bit smug, and it's an awful thing to say, but it makes you look down on the people who don't get him.

For Dale, then, there seemed to be something knowingly exclusive about his appreciation of Stewart Lee. He felt he was able to successfully 'sit' the comedic exam set by Lee, and therefore profited from the 'smugness' of recognising the formal conventions of his comedy – the 'delay of the punchline', the constant 'comedy through repetition'.

The ability to understand comedy often relies on 'humour-specific knowledge' (Kuipers 2009). Without this knowledge, audiences lack the tools to 'decode' the humour and are excluded from appreciation. Sometimes, this exclusion is a side-effect of humour, but in other cases it is purposively sought out. For Dale, this sense of exclusivity seemed central to his enjoyment. His smugness appeared to be heightened precisely by the awareness that his knowledge was not evenly distributed. Dale knew Lee's comedy has a certain rarity, and he enjoyed the fact that 'some people' simply 'won't get him'. The exclusive nature of appreciation seemed to create a 'conspiratorial pleasure' between the joker and the informed audience member. Safe in the knowledge that his appreciation contained a certain scarcity, Dale was able to look down on those that 'don't get' the humour of Stewart Lee.

HCC respondents also frequently drew aesthetic boundaries on the basis of recognising and appreciating transgression in comedy. Many expressed preferences for 'dark' or 'black' comedy, where disturbing subjects are probed for humorous effect. By deliberately suppressing initial emotional reactions to black comedy, such as disgust and offence, these respondents claimed to reach a higher plain of appreciation, beyond the direct visceral pleasure of 'just funny'. Moreover, many seemed to suggest that an inability to appreciate 'dark' or 'black' comedy implied a somehow less sophisticated or nuanced understanding of the world.

Again, this was a boundary predicated on knowledge, but here more specifically the *knowledge to recognise* a particular joke or sketch as deliberately and humorously

transgressive. Steve, for instance, mentioned a particularly dark part of Jonny Sweet's 2008 Edinburgh Fringe Show (which won the Edinburgh Comedy Award for 'Best Newcomer'), where he was dismayed to see a number of audience members leave because 'they just didn't understand'. Another example mentioned repeatedly was the 'paedophilia' episode of *Brass Eye*, which large amounts of the population 'simply couldn't handle', according to Sarah. A conversation with Frank highlighted the pivotal role this 'black' style of comedy played in delineating aesthetic boundaries:

Frank: If you sat a *Daily Mail* reader or a *Sun* reader in front of *Brass Eye*...well certainly I think there's something in people that is so scared of the badness that they can't come on the journey of, ok, there is a terrible, hideous thing called paedophilia but the way we're treating it, the way we're defining it, it's a complex thing.

SF: Why do you think some people can't 'come on the journey' to the humour in *Brass Eye*?

Frank: We have a brittle, animal reaction to stuff and to take us from there to a place where we think philosophically, and in a civilised way, as part of a civilisation about these things is a hard journey. So It's not a simple thing to view a complex and difficult issue with sensitivity and with a desire to get on top of all the complexities, to steer the best course through a very difficult issue. It's much fucking easier to say (puts on a faux Cockney accent) 'These paedos, they're getting our children, watch out, name and shame 'em, could be in the park, could be next door'.

What is striking about these comments is the way HCC respondents implied that audiences who do not perceive 'black' comedy as funny were somehow aesthetically deficient. Such a difference was not considered a neutral quirk of perception but instead immediately ordered as inferior. Moreover, the main way HCC respondents explained such reactions was not through a lack of knowledge but more presumptuously via an implied lack of intelligence. Such audiences, according to Frank, were confined to first-degree 'animal' reactions to black comedy that 'can't come on the journey' to the 'complexity' of *Brass Eye*'s comedy, or as Sarah noted, 'simply can't handle it'. These damning judgments illustrated the stark and sometimes aggressive aesthetic boundaries drawn by HCC respondents. They also showed how HCC respondents tended to envision such audiences as 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1984), with comedy taste straightforwardly connected to

characteristics with strong class connotations such as newspaper readership, regional accent and linguistic choice.

Although aesthetic boundaries were often implied in the way HCC respondents explained comedy *preferences*, they were even more marked in discussions of comedy they *disliked*. As I explained in Chapters 4 and 5, HCC rejection of certain comedians or certain comic styles constituted an implicit but significant marker of symbolic distancing. Indeed, it is worth reiterating that for Bourdieu (1984:223) the ‘expression of one’s own [taste] certainties...implies condemnation of all other ways of being and doing’. While Lamont (1992: 187) has argued convincingly that this presupposition is ‘unjustified’ - because it ignores the varying strength of symbolic boundaries – it is important to note that in my HCC interviews such boundary-making rarely remained implicit. Instead, symbolic divides were frequently unabashedly explicit. For example, most HCC respondents appeared very comfortable passing judgment on the aesthetic deficiencies of audiences that consumed the comedy they disliked. A conversation with Andrew concerning the Australian comedian Kevin ‘Bloody’ Wilson illustrated this:

I had this old school friend, Colin, and when we were about 14 me and Colin went to see Kevin ‘Bloody’ Wilson. It’s an embarrassing thing to admit now (laughs), because he’s sort of...well he’s a kind of Australian Roy Chubby Brown character. But anyway I met back up with Colin a few months ago, having not seen each other in years, and halfway through our conversation he mentioned he’d actually just been to see Kevin Wilson again. So he’s got the same comedy taste as he did when he was 14! I mean if you have the same taste now as you do when you were 14 then something’s seriously wrong, you know? (laughs). Arrested development...And I thought very badly of him. That was really the cherry on the top for me of knowing we didn’t have anything in common. But the interesting is that if he had said he’d seen Kevin Wilson at the beginning of the conversation then nothing else he would have said would have come as a shock to me, because him liking that one act of cultural awfulness, just made me think I know exactly what you’ve done with your life, what you’re doing with your life...nothing (laughs).

What is particularly striking here is the significance one comedian held for Andrew in his assessment of Colin. Taste for this ‘one act of cultural awfulness’ acted as a proxy

for all the important information Andrew required to judge the personality of his 'old school friend'. A similar example emerged when talking to Dale:

People who love that kind of comedy, like Karen Dunbar and Michael McIntyre, I would probably think they were fucking idiots to be perfectly honest with you. And it would certainly colour what I would think of them. It's about a lack of ambition to find anything for yourself.

In both these cases, comedy and sense of humour appeared to mark a potent symbolic boundary not just in terms of aesthetics, but concerning personhood. HCC respondents appeared to consider LCC comedy tastes as powerful indicators of pathological identities, expressing a tangible sense of horror, contempt and even disgust. Such expressions of disdain also arguably acted to bolster HCC identities, linguistically policing the symbolic boundary between 'us and them'. As Kuipers notes (2009: 220), 'by expressing your sense of humour, you show what you find important in yourself, in others, and in social life'. I will return to this connection between comedy taste and personhood shortly.

Political and Moral Boundaries

What was clear from analysing HCC dislikes was that comedy taste did not just denote aesthetic boundaries, but also political and moral borders. This was particularly evident in relation to 'trad' comedians such as Bernard Manning, Roy 'Chubby' Brown and Jim Davidson. However, in contrast to the data presented in the previous chapter, moral concerns with this kind of comedy were often directed at audiences rather than the comedians themselves. Indeed, even though most respondents admitted having no personal connections to those who consumed this kind of comedy, this did not prevent them from making remarkably confident judgments about the political orientations of these individuals:

It's definitely that feeling where you would recoil from that person being able to laugh at those [Bernard Manning] jokes. Because to laugh at those jokes they've got to kind of share his point of view, haven't you? (Trevor)

Well if someone went to see Roy 'Chubby' Brown and said they liked it...well that would make me think they had views similar to his. And that is the opposite

of my own views so I would think 'I probably won't get on very with you' (laughs) (Kira).

I mean obviously Roy 'Chubby' Brown and Bernard Manning are absolutely vile...I just can't understand why anyone would find that funny. I mean Roy 'Chubby' Brown was at the [Edinburgh] Playhouse not long ago. That's 3,000 people! I mean it's just alien to me. I mean I think the fact that it's sexist obviously annoys me, but it also seems very cheap and lazy and lacking in any original thought. But I suppose that's the kind of audiences they're going for. Y'know if they're doing the Working Men's clubs, maybe that's what goes down well (Sarah).

What was notable about these passages was the way HCC respondents like Kira and Trever confidently equated 'trad' comedy tastes with certain 'views' or 'points of view'. Moreover, the coupling of such political opinions with certain social groups was also implicated in many of these statements. For example, Sarah derided the 'sexist' nature of 'trad' comedy and then noted 'But I suppose that's the kind of audiences they're going for...if they're doing the working men's clubs'. In this context the term 'working men's clubs' is key. Although as Sarah conceded, 'trad' comedians often play in large and prestigious theatres such as the Edinburgh Playhouse, her mention of 'working men's clubs' implicitly connected them with a working class audience.

Sarah's comment about the 'sexist' nature of 'Chubby' Brown's audiences also illustrated the importance of moral distancing in HCC boundary-making. When talking about 'trad' comedians, for example, the first weapon of denigration tended to be the morally transgressive elements of their comedy, which was considered 'aggressive', 'hostile' and 'bullying'. In particular, there was a strong sense that comedy targeted at traditionally marginalised groups, such as women, ethnic minorities and homosexuals was morally wrong. Of course, historically, humour has often been associated with transgression and ridicule, with the classic theory of Hobbes regarding humour as an expression of superiority (i.e. laughing *at* someone as a form of hostility) (Stott, 2005). Yet, as explained in the previous chapter, the HCC aesthetic incorporated a strong sense that 'good' ridicule had a political and moral obligation to kick upwards - in terms of mocking the privileged and powerful - rather

than downwards. Indeed, moral judgments of those that enjoyed such ‘politically incorrect’ comedy was often fervent:

Certainly, If I found out someone I knew liked Roy Chubby Brown I would think twice about them. I’d be thinking bloody hell I think you’re probably a bit of a racist. Honestly, I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone who’s liked Roy ‘Chubby’ Brown. It might be a bit scary, to be honest (Andrew).

All I would need to hear is ‘I went to see Roy Chubby Brown last week, it was magic’ and I would want to glass them. I wouldn’t. I would probably have a short conversation and then get the fuck out of their company. But the fact that they didn’t have the wits, that they don’t have the sensitivity, empathy and wit to see that that kind of bullying is disgusting tells me that they are a pathetic race and they need to crawl back into...(Frank)

These findings are significant because again they seem to challenge Bourdieu’s understanding of the role played by morality in marking symbolic boundaries. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu downplays the moral boundary-drawing of the culturally privileged, arguing that more disinterested judgments hold greater cultural currency in the field. Bourdieu therefore locates morality as an attribute wielded most prominently by the petit bourgeois, for whom moral purity is a main resource. Those with access to more effective resources - such as economic capital or aesthetic prowess - draw boundaries on the basis of these more valuable and seemingly more ‘neutral’ criteria. However, echoing the observations of Sayer (2005) in the UK, Lamont (1992) in the US and Hanquinet et al (2013) in Belgium, my findings indicated that HCC respondents frequently drew hierarchical taste boundaries on the basis of politically-informed morality.

Yet, as Lamont (1992: 178-179) has noted, such moral boundaries may not have the same sociological significance as aesthetic boundaries. Aesthetic boundaries are particularly important in terms of social inequality because they reflect a cultural hierarchy widely agreed upon by all social groups. However, moral boundaries are ‘less conducive to hierarchalisation’ (Lamont, 1992: 184) because there is less consensus on the notion of moral value or purity. Thus, while HCC respondents drew moral boundaries on the basis of comedy taste, their moral norms were rarely accepted by LCC respondents. Indeed, as I outline shortly, LCC respondents were

often defiant about the value of moral norms expressed through their sense of humour.

Comedy, Personhood and Symbolic Violence

Returning to Frank and Andrew's comments above (and those of Frank and Dale), what was notable was not just the strength of their moral judgments, but also the charged emotion that accompanied them. For these respondents, comedy taste did not just mark boundaries but often indicated an unbridgeable social divide. People with LCC comedy taste were not just rejected but explicitly shunned. Disparaging terms like 'disgusting', 'pathetic' and 'fucking idiots' illustrated the potency of this sentiment, which in the case of Frank even manifested in the potentially violent threat of 'glassing'. For these HCC respondents, the symbolic divide was marked by what they saw as a set of pathological and aesthetically impoverished comedy tastes.

Moreover, the quotes also reiterated the sense of personhood HCC respondents felt could be ascertained from comedy taste and aesthetic appreciation. As Lawler (2005: 797-800) has pointed out, taste can be a crucial axis by which the middle classes judge the 'worth' of others. Thus 'working class people are not primarily marked as lacking and disgusting through their [economic] poverty, but through their assumed lack of knowledge and taste'. Indeed, in many ways HCC judgments of comedy taste echo recent media discourses of denigration towards 'chavs' and 'chav culture', whereby stigmatisation of sections of the contemporary British working class is justified on the basis that their consumption choices are 'vulgar' and 'aesthetically impoverished' (Hayward, 2006: 14-21). These respondents thus appear to believe that a sense of personal worth can be ascertained from comedy taste. Significantly, though, such personal expressions of disgust do not extend to other areas of culture. Instead, comedy seems to have a unique boundary-drawing power, rooted in its connection to the social properties of humour:

I definitely make judgments about people. It's about liking comedy that's in your realm. And I'm probably not going to be friends with someone who has different interests, where different things make them laugh (Marilyn).

Trever: I mean when you're meeting people you're analysing these things all the time. And it fits into a whole load of things that you're using when you're meeting new people. You're assessing them, can I be friends with you? Do we share the same views? And this can come out in a number of ways. And it could come out in a conversation about comedy.

SF: Why do you think comedy taste might affect whether you could be friends with someone?

Trever: Because I think there's something really personal about what makes you laugh. And unique about it. So maybe it goes deeper. If someone says something made them laugh, I think you can make quite a deep judgment about that person whereas I think theatre and film is more interpretative. There's something fundamental about what makes you laugh.

These informants point to the importance of comedy – as distinct from other cultural realms – in drawing boundaries. In particular, Trever suggested that comedy's abilities to mark such symbolic divides was somewhat unique. Whereas he noted that film and theatre 'are more interpretative', comedy taste implied more 'fundamental' and 'personal' elements of a person's personality – namely what 'makes you laugh'. Reaching beyond the judgments of certain comedians or comic styles, then, these quotes suggested that comedy's potency has more to do with the pivotal role played by humour and laughter in everyday life. In particular, they illustrated the importance of shared humour in shaping possibilities of friendship and other social interactions³⁸.

As Collins (2004, cf. Kuipers 2009) has noted, humour and laughter play a crucial role in everyday 'interaction rituals'. In everyday life people gravitate towards, and form durable bonds with, others with whom they can create positive and energising emotional energy. Often, the successful exchange of laughter is central to this. One only has to think of the enduring popularity of the abbreviation GSOH (good sense of humour) in lonely hearts columns, for example, to see humour's importance as a tool for building closeness and intimacy. Yet, paradoxically, for this same reason many scholars have also remarked on the exclusionary effect of laughter (cf. Bergson 1900). The discovery of shared taste in humour may be taken as a sign of similarity;

³⁸ This has been illustrated recently at the Edinburgh Fringe by the launch of a dating website, festafriend.com, which aims to bring people together - either romantically or via friendship - through shared comedy taste. The website matches people with similar taste and then sends people to see Festival comedy together – the premise being that shared cultural experiences can spark more meaningful relationships.

and similarity breeds emotional closeness, solidarity and trust. But, inversely, failure to share humour and laughter is often taken as a sign of not being ‘on the same wavelength’.

It may be precisely because comedy has this ability to create social bonds, through the proxy of humour and laughter, then, that it also has a heightened capacity to build and reveal strong symbolic boundaries. Thus, comedy taste is indeed ‘something fundamental’: via the connection with everyday humour and laughter, it is directly related to personhood. Moreover, this connection between comedy, everyday humour, and personhood also suggests that comedy taste may act as a powerful form of symbolic violence – ‘the process whereby power relations are perceived not for what they objectively are but in a form which renders them legitimate in the eyes of the beholder’ (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979: Xiii). Therefore, I now want turn to informants with less cultural capital. To what extent were these people, whose comedy tastes were so strongly disparaged, excluded or hurt by this rejection? And did people with low cultural capital also draw symbolic boundaries on the basis of comedy taste?

LCC Boundary-Drawing?

As detailed in Chapters 4 and 5, respondents from LCC backgrounds had much fewer comedy dislikes than HCC respondents. There was also far more comedians and comedy shows that they did not know. Following rather predictably from this, LCC respondents were also less likely to draw boundaries on the basis of comedy taste. In general, these respondents were much more accepting of differences in comedy taste, and much less likely to see their own comedy taste as superior. Echoing Bennett et al’s (2009: 196-213) findings about the British working classes, there was an overriding sense that taste was personal, random almost, and certainly inadequate grounds for judging others:

It’s like you might like yellow and I might like green. Y’know, it’s your taste, you can like what you like, you do what you like. You’re entitled to that opinion. If you like him and I don’t, that’s my opinion. Somebody says I like such and

such, I say that's fine. It doesn't bother me either way. Just don't make me go to a gig with you (laugh).

No, I wouldn't judge at all. Not at all. If it makes you laugh, then good on you. Y'know. Go and enjoy it. Try and tell me what it is that makes you laugh about it and see if I can understand it. But if I don't I'm not going to try and sway you away from it - I'm glad it's making somebody laugh (Duncan).

What was significant about these passages was that issues of morality were not necessarily absent. However, notably, Laura and Duncan's statements did not imply there was a higher morality in preferring one type of comedy over another. Instead, theirs was a morality premised on intentionally refraining from drawing boundaries. Consequently, their attitudes to other comedy audiences was therefore largely characterised by a sense of openness and laissez faire tolerance.

Another reason why such boundaries may have been absent was that, in general, LCC respondents attached much less significance to comedy taste. In direct contrast to HCC respondents, most noted that comedy taste, and indeed taste in general, explained very little about a person's true character. It was, after all, 'just an opinion' (Sophie):

It's nothing major like. Like if someone absolutely loved Stewart Lee, thought he is the best thing since sliced bread, I would say ok fair enough, because I haven't really seen enough of him. It wouldn't really change anything anyway. It's only really a very small part. You would wait until you got to know somebody and then you might think 'oh you like the same things as me...(Dan)

This passage was interesting because it suggested that, as well as comedy taste describing 'nothing major' about a person, the root of Dan's unwillingness to draw boundaries also had something to do with a lack of confidence or even a sense of cultural inferiority. Although earlier in his interview Dan told me he really disliked Stewart Lee ('he is just very patronising'), he still didn't draw any boundary between himself and those who liked Lee. Instead, he admitted he would reserve judgment because he hasn't 'really seen enough' of Lee's comedy. This indicated a clear tension between seeing taste as trivial preference and a self-awareness of occupying a lower position in an externally powerful cultural order. The passage also represented

a stark contrast from the interviews with HCC respondents, who often made strong judgments about comedy audiences even when they hadn't even seen the comedian in question. This echoed one of Bourdieu's main points in *Distinction* (1984: 397-465), namely that there is a critical difference between the culturally privileged, who feel they have 'the right to speak' and pass judgment on others, and those with less cultural capital, who don't. The open and tolerant attitude of LCC informants, therefore, may be more a result of necessity, rather than ideology.

It is important to note that some LCC respondents did admit that comedy tastes affected their judgments of others. Yet, on the whole, this boundary drawing tended to be relatively weak and hesitant:

I think what I would be more likely to do is think 'hmm' that will be an area that I will steer clear of in conversation. I'm quite non-confrontational, but I would store it in the back of my mind. It would be one layer of their persona. But it wouldn't make me dislike them (Sophie).

Y'know sometimes I'll get a client in my [hairdressing] chair who has a really educated sense of humour and it'll just be completely beyond me. And I'll be like 'ha ha ha' (feigns bewildered laughter), I'll just get on with your fringe, then...' (Ivan).

However, a few LCC respondents did draw meaningful symbolic boundaries. These were often framed in terms of morality, with respondents objecting to a certain smugness they perceived in HCC comedy audiences. After seeing Stewart Lee's show on TV, Dave, for example, was particularly critical of what he saw as the self-congratulatory attitude of Lee's audiences:

I have to say I found him [Stewart Lee] utterly unfunny. Completely turned me off. He was in an environment where people come to see him because he is Stewart Lee, he was feeding off that, they were feeding off him, y'know I hate this sense of feeling good inside with an audience. It just became an experience I would have detested to have been a part of...If I met a group of people who really liked Stewart Lee I would think they were complete cunts, to be honest (laughs).

There was also one *aesthetic* repertoire that enabled several LCC informants to express their cultural superiority over the educated middle classes. This repertoire

was again rooted in the belief that the working classes, or the ‘normal people’ simply have more fun, a better time, and a better sense of humour. For instance, Finn argued that the middle classes are less emotionally ‘open’ and this prevents them from enjoying the instinctive sensual pleasures of comedy:

I just think the defences are up, and maybe there’s an intellectual thing, I don’t know and maybe it’s the manner you’ve been brought up in, I suppose. Much more open. Much more able to laugh. At themselves and at each other. And many more affluent people seem less able to do that.

Other LCC informants also spoke in rather pitying tones about people with more cultural capital, whom they felt to be too ‘stiff’, too ‘serious’, and were ‘not able to let go and have fun.’ Indeed, through this reasoning, the restrained ‘highbrow’ ethos was confronted with an ‘aesthetic of everyday life’: a sense of humour grounded in everyday experiences, an openness to sensory pleasures, and a firm conviction that humour and comedy was first and foremost about sociability. Thus, while LCC respondents often seemed lost and uneasy when prompted to speak about comedy taste, and taste in general; they were much more at ease when discussing humour in everyday life. Like HCC informants, they easily made connections between everyday humour, social relations, and possibilities for friendship. Moreover, they often made harsh judgments about HCC respondents who they felt lacked ‘a sense of humour’. Drawing perhaps on the traditional strength and importance of humour in British working class culture [see Chapter 2] these respondents intimated that comedy and humour were largely the privileged domain of the working classes.

What is less clear, however, is whether such LCC boundary-drawing contained the same symbolic power as that expressed by HCC respondents. Similar to earlier discussions about the ‘value’ of LCC comic styles, the problem here is that the aesthetic judgments of LCC respondents arguably only convey power and status within their sub-cultural social group. As Lawler (2005: 443) notes, ‘working class disgust or contempt simply does not count: they lack the social authority to make their judgments stick’.

Conclusion

To be understood fully, the findings in this chapter are best read alongside those outlined in Chapters 4 and 5. In the previous chapters, I established that there were salient differences in both the comedy taste and styles of appreciation of those with different cultural capital resources. However, the sociological significance of this boundary can only be fully understood when the detail contained in this chapter is added. This is because the aim of this chapter has been to hone in on the *boundary itself*, examining in particular respondents' perception of the symbolic strength of comedy taste as a marker of social position.

Significantly, the chapter has highlighted that for HCC respondents, comedy taste acts a key tool in the claiming of social distance. In particular, a sense of aesthetic superiority underpins these claims, with HCC respondents explicitly judging as inferior those who do not have the knowledge to decode, or cannot recognise, certain forms of 'highbrow' comedy. Furthermore, the strength of this boundary is underlined by the manner in which aesthetic judgments also meld into moral, political and most notably of all, personal verdicts on the worth of those with 'lowbrow' comedy taste. HCC respondents police their taste boundaries with a striking vigilance, punishing those that stray with remarkably charged expressions of disgust and disparagement.

Finally, the chapter has suggested that the unusually divisive power of comedy taste may be explained by its connection to humour, and the subsequent relationship that exists between humour and everyday social relationships. Drawing on the illuminating work of Kuipers (2010), I argue that one's comedy taste and style of comic appreciation is likely to significantly inform and reflect one's 'sense of humour'. This sense of humour, in turn, is not just socially significant in terms of taste but as a personality trait that is formational in the 'interactional rituals' (Collins, 2004) that establish and maintain one's social relationships. Shared humour and the experience of mutual laughter, for instance, tends to greatly lubricate social interaction and breed a sense of solidarity and trust. In contrast, a lack of shared humour and the absence of laughter can have disastrous social implications, stiling

and preventing the development of social bonds. It is perhaps this fundamental connection between humour and personhood, then, which may explain why the symbolic boundaries drawn by HCC respondents on the basis of comedy taste are often so vehement, so strong and so vicious.

Part 3: Comic Cultural Capital: Strength and Legitimacy

Chapter 8: The Tastemakers: Comedy Critics and The Legitimation of Cultural Capital

Introduction

It's clear that strong symbolic boundaries separate different comedy tastes. However, the power of these boundaries is not just determined by their strength but also by the *legitimacy* of the tastes on both sides of the divide. After all, to comprise a meaningful form of cultural capital, tastes and aesthetic styles must constitute what Lareau and Lamont (1988: 152-159) term 'widely shared status signals'.

Traditionally, such cultural consecration has come from two main channels; via the state and from the authority of certain cultural intermediaries (see Chapter 3 for more detail). In the case of British comedy, the first of these agents of legitimation - the state - remains aloof, assigning no public funding and largely omitting comedy from school and university curriculum's. But the influence of cultural intermediaries is arguably much stronger.

In the comedy industry, a wide range of cultural intermediaries operate, including producers, critics, venue owners, promoters, managers and publicists. However two groups, comedy critics and comedy scouts (explored in Chapter 9), stand out as

particularly influential. At present, all broadsheet newspapers in the UK employ at least one professional comedy critic and many also employ a range of TV critics and columnists who frequently pass aesthetic judgment on comedy. Critical discourse is therefore not only mass-mediated and widely visible, but critics themselves are key gatekeepers in the communication of comedy to the public. In the context of this book, critics are also important because they act as brokers in the process of cultural capital formation. They have the potential to legitimate both comedians as objects of cultural capital (through the consecration of specific comedians) and embodied cultural capital (through embedding aesthetic standards in the public discourse on comedy).

This chapter aims to interrogate this suggestion by examining the role, impact and influence of contemporary comedy critics. It has two main objectives. First, it aims to examine whether comedy critics play a significant mediatory role in the consumption of British comedy and more specifically whether their judgments of particular comedians can be said to represent ‘widely-shared status signals’. Second, it proceeds to analyse whether critics have the power to affect not just which comedians are valued, but also the currency of specific *aesthetic standards*. In this way it examines, in particular, whether critics have successfully developed an aesthetic language for comedy, a distinct ‘repertoire of evaluation’ (Lamont, 1992), which may be being incorporated by HCC respondents and re-articulated as an expression of their embodied cultural capital.

The Role of the Cultural Critic

The critic occupies a very different position in the mediation process than more market-orientated cultural intermediaries. Whereas most intermediaries occupy strategic positions concerning the promotion of particular artists, the critic is the only professional invested with the ‘authority and legitimacy to *assess* artistic works’ (Bourdieu, 1993: 229). Of course the general public, as ‘fans’, also possess some power to judge artistic quality, but their ‘authority’ is largely limited to small social networks. In contrast, the critic is widely accepted as an independent ‘expert’, and

expected to use their discriminatory skill to explain art to the public (Frith, 2002: 64-65) and endow certain works with special value (Lindberg et al, 2005:11).

Historically, the communication of this discriminatory skill has taken a number of forms in Britain. Criticism has its conceptual roots in the classical pursuit of 'commentary', where scholars interrogated cultural texts considered to be foundational and produced commentary devoted to their clarification and explanation. However, such commentary did not seek to criticise these texts. It explained only *how* a text was profound rather than judging whether it deserved this status in the first place. Thus it was from an evaluative starting point, inextricably linked to the ideology of the Enlightenment, that the modern activity of artistic criticism began to develop in the 18th century. In these earliest forms, criticism was not a professional activity but instead the product of 'men of letters', such as David Hume, Samuel Johnson and the Third Earl of Shaftsbury, who helped establish the emerging bourgeois public sphere. These theorists wrote lengthy reflective texts about culture and attempted to establish it as an autonomous field deserved of special value in society (Eagleton, 1990). Indeed, such early figures are perhaps better understood as 'aestheticians' rather than critics. Less concerned with the evaluation of artistic works, they instead developed aesthetic meta-theories that would later be applied to individual works (Becker, 1982: 132-137).

However, from the late 18th century onwards, cultural criticism began to evolve in two very different directions. While the spirit of the early aestheticians developed into more specialist academic disciplines such as art history, literary criticism and aesthetics, in the performing arts the role of the critic migrated more towards the journalistic realm (Tadday, 1993). This brought with it a shift in the type of texts produced about cultural objects. Today's dominant mode of performing arts criticism, for instance, has evolved from the essay into the 'review', a brief written reaction that attempts to describe, classify and analyse an art work (Lindberg et al, 2005: 13).

Significantly, the move to critic as reviewer also profoundly affected the audience for cultural criticism. Whereas traditional criticism was received by an elite audience, the

modern review is conventionally published in a national newspaper and aimed at a national or international public. In this way, the critic has shifted from elite to mass ‘tastemaker’, mediating the way diffuse audiences receive artistic works (Gans, 1974). It also means that today’s cultural critics possess the unique ability to influence the *public* discourse on art (Bourdieu, 1993: 66; English, 2005). Through the deployment of reviews and the distribution of cultural prizes, they are able to exercise significant power over the distribution of cultural value in a particular field.

Critics and Cultural Capital

As one of the key arbiters of cultural value, critics play a central role in the formation of cultural capital. The most apparent power of the critic is that of consecration. By using their various discursive strands to endorse a particular artist, critics invest their own reputation and symbolic capital into that artist. In turn, since audiences often defer to this ‘expert’ symbolic capital, critical endorsements act to elevate artists in the cultural hierarchy (Bourdieu, 1993: 55-60). Good reviews and awards become bankable assets in the cultural economy, constructing certain artists as objects of rarity and cultural capital. Shrum (1996: 34-36) describes this process as a ‘status bargain’ whereby audiences ‘give up their right’ to independent aesthetic judgment in exchange for the objectified cultural capital they gain from consuming, and being seen to like, the most consecrated artists. It is a ‘symbolic exchange of prestige for opinion rights’ (ibid).

However, although audiences may be somewhat dependent on the judgments of critics, such dependence is rarely complete. Cultural consumers seldom mimic the judgments of critics completely. Instead, the power of critical discourse lies more in the fact that most audiences at least agree to take their judgments *into account*. Therefore, although consumers may not agree with critics, they *do* actively respond to their evaluations and by doing so implicitly agree to value art in a way that grants legitimacy to critical discourse (Shrum, 1996: 38-41).

Critics are therefore not only important in placing individual artists in the cultural hierarchy, they are also pivotal generators of the discourse that surrounds art forms.

In particular, they have the power to decide which aesthetic criteria are considered legitimate, and go on to act as ‘gatekeepers’ for the prestige of this aesthetic canon. As Frith (2002: 67) notes, critics are able to construct the accepted truths about an art form and define the ‘ideal experience’ of how it should be produced and consumed.

Furthermore, critical discourse not only affects aesthetic judgments, it also spreads beyond the printed word into everyday conversations about art. According to Shrum, reviews are a ‘conversational resource’ that often make up the discursive backbone of word-of-mouth judgments. Therefore, what consumers may present as their personal ‘recommendation’ for a particular artist, and the words they may use to describe that artist, are often heavily mediated by the reviews they’ve read. Indeed, this function arguably demonstrates the extended power of Shrum’s ‘status bargain’. Relinquishing one’s power of autonomous judgment does not just yield profits from liking the ‘right’ art, it also give audiences the lexical means to talk about the right art ‘competently’. In other words, critics may create and legitimate an influential aesthetic lexicon, but this only becomes sociologically powerful when it is subsequently adopted by consumers to communicate a ‘naturally embodied’ cultural capital.

However, it’s important to acknowledge a number of qualifications to the powers credited to critics so far. First, although the mediating influence of critics may be well documented in the literature, it is important to note that this is not necessarily a linear process. Consumers read critical texts through the same ‘horizon of expectations’ (Jauss, 1982) that mediates their reaction to cultural objects themselves. This ‘horizon’ may incorporate demographic characteristics such as age, class, gender and race, as well as contextual factors such as mood and concentration level (Lahire, 2008: 170-174). Indeed, even if we do assume that consumers directly imbibe the judgments of critics, their subsequent expressions of taste are rarely articulated in the same clear and consistent manner. As Frith (2002: 71) notes of music audiences:

Consumer’s everyday judgments (as against critics ‘considered views’) tend to take place in noisy situations, in free-wheeling conversations...and their terms and judgments are inevitably less consistent, less coherent, and less self-

conscious. In conversational terms we certainly use terms which draw on articulated discourses...but we also equally confuse them.

It's also important to note that the ability of critics to legitimate cultural capital depends on two somewhat unrealistic presumptions. First, the notion that all critics are united on what constitutes aesthetic value, and second, that critics all hold similar powers of legitimation. In reality, not only is complete critical consensus rare but critics themselves exist within a tightly hierarchical field, possessing varying levels of legitimacy. Often the perceived authority of the critic depends on the institutional legitimacy of their publication, with audiences more strongly recognising the cultural authority of critics from larger, more reputable and more established newspapers rather than local or web-based publications³⁹ (Shrum, 1996: 125-143).

Finally, the authority invested in critics also varies according to what artistic field he or she is writing about. Whereas traditionally a critic operating in the 'high' arts may have had considerable powers of consecration, a number of sociologists have argued that the influence of those writing about popular arts, such as comedy, is much weaker (Bourdieu, 1993; Gans, 1974; Shrum; 1996).

The Role of Critics in Comedy

Among the sociologists who have argued that critical power is confined to the 'high' arts', Bourdieu (1993) is perhaps the most influential. According to Bourdieu, the aesthetic doctrine that dominates in 'high' art derives from Kant's notion of disinterestedness, whereby effective judgment rests upon an understanding of aesthetic rules, principles and standards rather than an individual's subjective

³⁹ In recent years, a number of other developments have further threatened the authority of critics. In particular, many have argued that creeping commercial interests in the media may be inhibiting critical integrity. Negus (1992: 122), for example, has demonstrated how publicists routinely use free gifts, tickets and other perks to influence critics in the music industry and similarly Jones (1993: 88) documents how publications reliant on advertising revenue will often 'perceive advertiser needs and shape content to meet them'. Another disruption has emerged from the proliferation of web-based user-generated modes of criticism, such as blogging and the posting of 'lay' reviews alongside professional arts criticism. According to Jennings (2007), this diffusion of critical voices is diluting the authority of professional critics, with audiences broadening their conception of expertise to include these new 'bottom-up' critical voices. However, it's worth noting that, as Logan (2007) argues, online comedy criticism has yet to impact the field in the same way as theatre or film.

response. The critic is seen as pivotal in realising this ideal of the ‘pure gaze’, acting both as the communicator and guardian of aesthetic standards.

In contrast, among artists and audiences in the ‘low’ arts, Bourdieu (1984) argues there is a distinct lack of interest in aesthetic standards. In these art forms, the emphasis has traditionally been on ‘entertainment’ and subjective individual enjoyment rather than objective ‘quality’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 35-52). Therefore, without an explicit emphasis on a ‘correct’ aesthetic response, Gans (1974) argues the primary role of the critic is rendered irrelevant in popular arts like comedy. Audiences serve as their own critics, relying on their own experience to guide understanding and appreciation.

Examining this thesis empirically at the 1987 Edinburgh Festival Fringe, Shrum (1996) compared the influence of positive reviews on attendance for two different art forms – theatre (coded ‘high’ art) and comedy (coded ‘low’ art). His results indicated that ‘good reviews’ significantly increased attendance for theatre shows, but had little effect in comedy. Instead, for comedians, any review good or bad, appeared to boost audience numbers. Shrum therefore concluded that popular arts like comedy require no authoritative aesthetic voice to legitimate their worth. Reviews in comedy function less as judgment guides and more as a pseudo form of advertising or publicity.

However, the work of scholars such as Bourdieu, Gans and Shrum offer only limited explanatory potential in the contemporary era. In particular, many commentators have noted that the lines between high and ‘low’ art are now increasingly blurred, with a number of ‘autonomous hierarchies of legitimacy’ emerging alongside the enduring ‘centres’ of traditional legitimate culture (Laermans, 1992: 256). Previously popular art forms like comedy have thus developed their own internal hierarchies and canons for consecrating ‘‘highbrow’’ artists and genres. Indeed, critics have arguably been the catalytic agent in this process. In an attempt to preserve the rarity ‘that is the essence of their social power’, Wright (2005: 111) argues critics have actively sought to open up new fields of legitimisation. For example, writing about the successful struggle to raise the artistic prestige of rock music, Regev (1997: 94) notes the central

contribution of critics as ‘producers of meaning’. Rather than consciously disavowing aesthetic standards, Regev notes how rock critics operating in the 1960s and 70s ‘claimed artistic status’ for rock music precisely by defining and consecrating an ‘aesthetic language’ for the art form.

More recently, Frith (2002) has also highlighted the significance of critical mediation in the popular arts. However, significantly, Frith notes that there are some subtle but important differences in the way criticism functions in popular art. In particular, he notes that the ‘expertise’ of the popular critic comes as much from their knowledge of the audience as it does from their knowledge of the artist. The critic in popular art is therefore accountable to the audience not the other way around, and must be responsive not just to aesthetic standards but also to the subjective standards of the audience.

In sum, recent scholarship seems to contradict the assertions of theorists such as Bourdieu, Gans and Shrum. Instead, it suggests that criticism does play an important role in mediating how audiences receive pop culture. In relation to comedy, it is also possible to suggest that findings such as those reported by Shrum may be severely outdated. Although Shrum is accurate in describing British comedy as traditionally ‘lowbrow’, this book has already demonstrated how the cultural position of comic production has altered significantly since he conducted his research in the mid 1980s (see Chapter 2). Shrum also had a rather narrow means of assessing the impact of criticism. By only examining the impact of reviews on attendance, he ignored other implications of critical discourse, such as its impact on the judgments and aesthetic styles of *audiences*. It is with an explicit emphasis on these elements of critical discourse that this chapter therefore proceeds to re-examine the contemporary role of British comedy critics.

Researching British Comedy Critics

This chapter draws upon a range of empirical sources. First, it analyses survey responses concerning whether or not respondents read comedy reviews. These findings are then supplemented with interview data examining in more detail what impact reviews have on comedy consumers, and whether they affect aesthetic

judgments. Second, the chapter uses linguistic textual analysis to compare the content of comedy reviews with the styles of HCC comic appreciation articulated in Chapter 5. In doing so, it draws upon reviews of five different comedians at the 2009 Edinburgh Festival Fringe, all of whom were included in the original survey; Stewart Lee, Hans Teeuwen, Simon Amstell, Michael McIntyre and Jim Bowen. Reviews of each comedian are examined in five different publications; *The Guardian*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Daily Mirror*, *Chortle*, and *Fest Magazine* (see Methodological Appendix for more detail).

The Role and Impact of Comedy Reviews

Shrum's assertion that critical discourse has little effect on comedy consumption appears to be undermined by the findings of this research. In the survey, 79% of respondents reported that 'good' reviews from critics were either 'very important' or 'relatively important' in their decision-making on what comedy to consume. This is also substantiated by research carried out by The Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society which found that for the majority of comedy audiences (53%) 'good reviews' were the most important factor in deciding what comedy to go and see (Fringe Society, 2007).

However, while these findings certainly indicate that comedy criticism is 'important' to consumers, it didn't explain the influence of criticism on audience judgment. It couldn't elucidate the *impact* of comedy reviews. In order to tap this pivotal issue of critical 'authority', the value of reviews was discussed in depth during interviews. Significantly, the impact of reviews varied greatly between HCC respondents and MCC and LCC respondents.

Among HCC respondents, a strong awareness of critical judgments was evident throughout interviews. For example, when comedians were discussed, the judgments of reviewers were often incorporated into the respondent's discourse. This was rarely done explicitly, but formed a subtle background to aesthetic judgments. For example, when explaining why he liked experimental comedian Kim Noble, Dale continually reiterated the comedian's 'critical acclaim'. Similarly, Frank explained his thoughts

on Hans Teeuwen with the proviso 'Well he's really become the critics' darling in the last few years, but...'. Statements like these illustrated how the judgments of comedy critics were unconsciously incorporated into the discourses of HCC respondents. Not only was the authority of critics implicitly accepted but, as Shrum (1997) notes, critical assessments of comedians formed an important frame around which HCC respondents posited their own judgements and taste.

Significantly, however, respondents' own judgments often deviated from the critical consensus. Indeed, when the topic of reviews was introduced explicitly, many HCC respondents were quick to express that critics failed to affect their judgment:

If I read a review and it kind of made me think about some things I hadn't thought of at the time I might think 'ok fair enough' but I don't think it would ever change my view completely. I think I'm quite confident about what I think (Sarah).

You can often get a critical mass where you've got a comedian who's touching all the bases and everyone across the board thinks 'this is great' but I often find myself quite at odds with reviews (Trever).

These quotes illustrated how Shrum's 'status bargain' did not always function in HCC appreciation. Many respondents, like Sarah and Trever, were not willing to accept (or perhaps admit) that their comedy tastes were dependent on the aesthetic judgments of critics. Instead, many were quick to assert their autonomy. This was significant as it somewhat undermined the suggestion that comedy critics were able to legitimise objectified cultural capital. If those with HCC did not follow the taste recommendations of 'experts' then this not only destabilised the legitimacy of critics but it also weakened the rarity of the comedians they consecrated.

In other cases, divergences in HCC judgment stemmed from the varying levels of legitimacy assigned to comedy critics:

I used to think they [reviewers] were important, and then I became a journalist and met the guys who write them and realised, no, they're not that important because they don't know much about comedy. I think Kate Copstick, I would certainly trust her, I think she knows a lot about comedy, but pretty much

everyone else at *The Scotsman* does it for four weeks of the year. Steve Bennett, I think he is very good but then Brian Logan at *The Guardian*, frankly I think he looks down on the art form (Dale).

Yeah I do read quite a few [reviews], but you do tend to take them with a pinch of salt. If you look at the broadsheet newspapers, they sometimes talk up people they shouldn't. *Chortle* and Steve Bennett is definitely the one I tend to look out for, I respect his opinion (Steve).

These accounts demonstrated how the perceived cultural authority of comedy critics was often unevenly distributed. For instance, respondents like Dale seemed suspicious about the 'expert' knowledge of many comedy critics - who actually 'don't know that much about comedy' - whereas other critics, such as *Chortle*'s Steve Bennett and *The Scotsman*'s Kate Copstick, were singled out as important critical authorities.

It is important to note, however, that although HCC respondents often questioned the authority of certain critics, they did not question the legitimacy of comedy criticism in general. Indeed, the frequent mention of critics and critical judgments, whether supportive or otherwise, only further illustrated that HCC respondents recognised the contribution of criticism to the public discourse on comedy. Above all, they were willing to take critical judgments *into account* (Shrum, 1996).

In contrast, critical discourse rarely underpinned MCC and LCC aesthetic judgments. Indeed, the judgments of critics were only discussed when the subject was broached explicitly and, in these instances, most respondents appeared to accept the authority of critics without challenge. For example, while HCC respondents used critical judgments as a frame for explaining their own aesthetic style, MCC and LCC respondents tended to defer to critical discourse, even questioning their own tastes when they didn't align with those consecrated by critics:

Hannah: If I went to something, and this has happened before, and saw something I didn't particularly like and then read a review where somebody has written a very positive review...it does make me think twice.

SF: Why does it make you think twice?

Hannah: Suppose because my thought at the time would be ‘hello, am I being rather simple, what am I missing?’

In instances where personal judgments didn’t match that of reviewers, then, the responses of HCC respondents differed greatly from those with MCC or LCC. Whereas HCC respondents were inclined to believe their personal opinion was more valid than the critic, those with MCC and LCC tend to question their own aesthetic abilities. In many cases, this stemmed from a belief that the critic not only had a superior intellectual understanding, but could always ‘get’ comedy on the level intended by the artist. As MCC respondent Patrick explained, ‘I often read them [reviews] and think ‘oh that’s interesting. I never got that side of things, I didn’t realise that was going on’.

Yet although most LCC and MCC respondents accepted the authority of critics, it is worth noting that two MCC interviewees, James and Harriet, rejected critical legitimacy. Indeed, James even seemed to question the whole existence of an aesthetic hierarchy:

I don’t read reviews. It’s been an ongoing debate between myself and a friend for about 20 years, actually, about why one person’s opinion is more valid than somebody else’s. My friend would say they’ve thought more about it and they’ve got a wider base of knowledge. But If I laugh and I find it funny and you don’t laugh then surely your review is pointless for me.

Harriet’s rejection of critics was more implicit, focusing on the fickle nature of those swayed by critical authority:

I mean people loved the Arctic Monkeys when they were an unsigned band and then when they started getting played on Radio 1, all the critics and cool people decided they were shit. Which is bollocks, because they were still a really good band. And it works a bit like that in comedy.

These passages are important not only because they represented personal rejections of critical legitimacy, but also as more generalised critiques of the role of critics in cultural production. While James questioned the reasoning upon which society

assigns cultural authority to ‘one person’s opinion over someone else’s’, Harriet went further to argue that critics are anything but aesthetically ‘disinterested’ and instead act simply to reject comedy that is popular, regardless of its aesthetic merits.

Although it’s worth reiterating that such subversive sentiment was only articulated by two respondents, it’s nonetheless important to note that both James and Harriet came from mixed cultural capital backgrounds. As respondents who have ‘one foot in two different taste cultures’ (see Chapter 6), these respondents were perhaps predictably sceptical about the validity of intermediaries who attempt to definitively assign value to some forms of comedy over others. Indeed, as individuals with insight into the social dynamics of both HCC and LCC taste cultures, it was perhaps not surprising that Harriet and James attempted to deconstruct the basis of the Bourdieusian ‘game’ of cultural production.

Critics, The Comic Aesthetic and Embodied Cultural Capital

So far this chapter has illustrated that, on the whole, comedy audiences *do* read and recognise the legitimacy of comedy critics. Among HCC respondents, critical judgments also appeared to act as an important frame around which consumers constructed their own comedy taste and style. In this section, I aim to briefly explore this further by examining the discourse of comedy critics. In particular, I wanted to understand the ‘repertoires of evaluation’ (Lamont, 2000) employed by comedy critics and understand whether there is any any association between this and the aesthetic language used by HCC respondents.

Playing With Form

Among nearly all comedy reviews I examined, the central narrative underpinning positive critical appraisals was the notion of form. Indeed, evidence of a comedian playing with comic form, or pushing the boundaries of comedy, was generally rewarded as ‘brave’, ‘creative’ or ‘imaginative’. For example, comedian Hans Teeuwen was widely praised for his innovative use of avant-garde ‘absurdism’:

This is absurdism in the best tradition of Lewis Carroll or Edward Lear. It turns the world on its head, shakes it up and watches the pieces fall out; and in the process, it throws into sharp relief some of the many absurd ideas that we live with and often blithely tolerate everyday (Tom Hackett, *Fest Magazine*).

Sometimes Teeuwen seems to be failing – but there is always the suspicion that that is intentional. After all, he is happy to turn away from our laughter to play a wholly uncomical waltz on the piano, or recite a tender love poem to a woman in the front row. That is not funny per se, but it stokes the atmosphere of dizzy uncertainty (Brian Logan, *The Guardian*).

It is possible to see here how experiments with comic form were so highly regarded by critics that they often seemed to transcend any assessment of quality. Thus Hackett and Logan largely ignored the success of Teeuwen's forays into surrealism and instead rewarded him simply for his willingness to experiment. His experimentation may therefore not be 'funny per se', according to Logan, but was nonetheless admired for creating an 'atmosphere of dizzy uncertainty'.

Even when assessing the merits of comedians that were not consecrated, such as Michael McIntyre, critical appraisals tended to come back to the notion of comic form. For example, although Steve Bennett from *Chortle* largely criticised McIntyre, he praised the comedian's skill in realising the full potential of his approach to comic form: 'He's a technically faultless craftsmen, there's not an inch of fat on this ruthlessly honed set.'

Another aesthetic theme integral to the discursive schema of comedy critics was the level of 'complexity' in a comedian's material. A crucial axis of judgment was therefore the 'depth' of a particular piece of comedy, how many ideas it was able to communicate and how intellectual or profound these ideas were. For example in her glowing review of Simon Amstell, Becca Pottinger from *Fest Magazine* explained that Amstell's quality lay primarily in his ability to 'mine the human condition for all it is worth' and therefore 'produce brilliantly nuanced comedy out of the most tragic of existential quandaries'. Kate Copstick from *The Scotsman* similarly noted Amstell's ability to 'pull laughter from pain in the turn of a sentence.'

Although adapted to the specificities of comedy, it is possible to argue that this critical discourse draws heavily on traditional high-art discourse. Underpinning a stress on complexity and form, for instance, is arguably the Romantic notion of the ‘autonomous authorial subject’ (Bauman, 2001) and the Kantian stress on disinterestedness. Moreover, a strong association can also be detected between the aesthetic criteria communicated in these passages and the appreciation styles of those with high cultural capital resources. Although judgments of particular comedians were not always the same, it was possible to discern a common ‘aesthetic language’ (Regev, 1997) between the two groups. In particular, certain lexical terms such as ‘challenging’, ‘cerebral’, ‘thoughtful’ and ‘dark’ seemed to be firmly embedded in both discourses. Responses to Stewart Lee, for example, provided a particularly illuminating comparison. Consider these two sets of assessments of Lee:

This year’s show is something of a masterclass in comedy technique. All the Lee party tricks are there, the pauses, the deconstruction, the repetition (Kate Copstick, *The Scotsman*).

I think having the rug taken from underneath my feet is a big thing for me. Stewart Lee is a really good example - intelligent as fuck, but his performance is often just about the repetition of a single word until I’m crying with laughter. His tone, his timing, it’s incredibly skilful. (Frank).

This is brave stuff, and that Lee carries it off so well is due largely to his gift for rhetoric, whether talking about his ma, Only Fools and Horses, or sex-crazed mallards, there’s a subtle and skilful metre to his delivery, which manages to be at once bleakly and drolly deadpan but also brimming with moral conviction (Mark Monahan, *The Daily Telegraph*).

He’s just intelligent and not afraid to deal with topics that might offend people. He’s not bothered about getting into religion and other pretty dark subject matter. I think the real beauty is the way he just deconstructs everything (Steve).

What is striking about these passages is the shared aesthetic themes communicated by both critics and respondents. In the first comparison, it is possible to see the shared importance of Lee’s experiments with form, which constituted a ‘masterclass’ for Copstick and which Frank labels ‘intelligent as fuck’. Similarly, in the second comparison, there is a common appreciation of Lee’s ability to communicate complex

ideas. According to Steve he is just able to ‘deconstruct everything’, or as Monahan puts it ‘at once drolly deadpan but also brimming with moral conviction.’⁴⁰

Another interesting association between the discourse of critics and HCC respondents was the often ambiguous relationship with laughter. It was clear, for instance, that many critics did not necessarily consider the audience’s laughter, or indeed their own, as a sign of a comedian’s quality. For instance, in reviews of comedian Jim Bowen, a number of critics noted the laughter elicited by Bowen’s live comedy but then proceeded to question the validity of this audience reaction. For instance, Steve Bennett from *Chortle* noted:

There’s so much goodwill towards [Bowen] that he can’t really lose...But there’s really no fun to be had with shaggy-dog stories when you know, line-for-line, how they are going to pan out from the very moment they start.

Similarly, an absence of laughter was not necessarily seen as a negative. Indeed, comedians that were not ‘crowd-pleasers’ in terms of laughter such as Stewart Lee and Hans Teeuwen were generally considered ‘brave’, ‘subversive’ and ‘original’. For example, Brian Logan gave Hans Teeuwen a glowing 5 star review, while noting that much of his material was ‘not remotely funny at all’:

His stand-up is like a form of music, albeit atonal, arrhythmic music, whose conductor is forever subverting the tempo. The effect is duly unsettling, as Teeuwen gallivants several steps ahead, or behind, our expectations. Crowd-pleasing isn’t in his lexicon. The last thing you expect to come next, probably will – even if that means something not remotely funny at all.

⁴⁰ However, it’s important to note that not all HCC judgments of Stewart Lee were as articulate and aesthetically coherent as that posited by Frank and Steve. For example, Kira struggled for a few seconds to explain why she liked Stewart Lee, finally explaining: ‘you think he’s going down one route and then he flips it over’. Similarly, Graham found it hard to articulate precisely his admiration for Lee, ‘ I imagine if you were going to see him you just know he’s probably going to... challenge what you believe in or...what people believe in society. Thus while it’s possible to detect aesthetic judgments in these passages, respondents (albeit using the spoken rather than the written word) struggled to articulate themselves in the same clear and confident manner as critics. Even among the culturally privileged, then, there was evidence that aesthetic judgments did not always confidently replicate critical discourse, and in some cases even seemed to even confuse it (Frith, 2002: 72).

Again, these aesthetic preferences seem to echo the HCC styles of appreciation outlined in Chapter 5. As Andrew summed up: ‘something can be funny without you needing to laugh.’

Rejecting The Comically ‘Pedestrian’

Significantly, the aesthetic schema of comedy critics was not just revealed via notions of the ideal comic aesthetic, but also from consensus on what constituted flawed comedy. For example, most critics criticised comedians who failed to innovate, who were seen to only ‘repeat well-worn comic subject-matter’ or who offered only ‘mundane observational comedy’. This aesthetic doctrine was particularly clear in Brian Logan’s review of Stewart Lee where, after praising the comedian’s experimental material, he wrote: ‘But [Lee’s] observational stuff about being middle-aged and staying in Travel Lodges is amusing but pedestrian.’ The use of the word ‘pedestrian’ here was telling, implying that Lee’s observational material, which deals with more everyday themes, was aesthetically inferior to more challenging material where he deliberately played with comic form.

Embedded in many negative critical judgments was also a general distrust of comedy constructed as ‘popular’ or having ‘popular appeal’. This was particularly evident in judgments concerning Michael McIntyre and Simon Amstell, where critics seemed to negatively assess comic material that had contributed to their mainstream television success. In relation to Amstell, live reviews tended to celebrate the differences between his stand-up and his more ‘one-dimensional’ TV persona:

The on-stage Amstell couldn’t be more different from his Bitch Princess onstage persona on *Never Mind The Buzzcocks*... While the TV persona is all snap, crackle and pop, as a stand-up he is one of the most elegant, articulate, sensitive and endearing proponents of what I would call ‘soul comedy’ (Kate Copstick, *The Scotsman*).

Forget the screaming girls, this is intelligent, grown-up comedy that’s as funny as it is perceptive (Steve Bennett, *Chortle*).

Critical appraisals of Michael McIntyre were similar. In particular, critics seemed to resent the nature of his observational style, which they widely derided as ‘unchallenging’. For instance, Dominic Cavendish in *The Telegraph* noted:

The only question that bugs even his most ardent admirers is – is there more of substance waiting to be revealed, or is this it? The lurking sting in the tail of the McIntyre success-story - which has seen him hurtle from playing tiny rooms to major arenas - may be that his fans start demanding something tougher and riskier than his inoffensive, big-tent shtick allows.

Aesthetic preferences were also indirectly revealed in the rare positive appraisals of McIntyre, where he was mainly rewarded for going beyond his characteristic observational style:

The starting points for his routines are, necessarily broad. Sometimes even he can’t take it beyond restating the shared observation, such as the barber’s pointless back-of-the-head mirror or the over made-up girls on a department store cosmetics counter. But when he does mine deeper, he frequently finds gold...especially when the inspiration is slightly offbeat (Steve Bennett, *Chortle*).

Elsewhere, he puts an unexpected spin on the comedy of recognition; in one set piece, the neglected herbs and spices that gather at the back of kitchen cupboards are anthropomorphised in a manner reminiscent of Eddie Izzard: ‘How about you, Sage? Have you ever been out of this cupboard?’ (Stephanie Merritt, *The Guardian*).

Examining the various passages criticising ‘accessible’, ‘inoffensive’ comedy, it is possible to see how such lexical choices summed up an inherent suspicion of the ‘popular’. Again, this seemed to draw upon a well-worn high-art discourse, described by Ang (1985) as the ‘ideology of mass culture’ (Ang, 1985), which revolves around the distinction between ‘bad’ cultural production, which aims to meet a market, and ‘good’ production driven only by individual intention. This aesthetic doctrine can be traced back through the Romantic theories of Kant (1987) and later the Marxist writings of Adorno (1991), but has arguably been distilled into an accessible public discourse by generations of cultural critics. As Frith (2002) notes, the distinction between the ‘select and the mainstream’ has become the key opposition in popular cultural fields.

Again, it was also possible to see striking similarities between this critical discourse and HCC styles of appreciation, particularly in the aesthetic language used by both groups. Lexical choices such as ‘digestible’, ‘accessible’ and ‘inoffensive’ were used frequently and acted as bywords for summing up aesthetic weakness. There was also a sense that many HCC respondents implicitly understood and supported many of the assumptions of the ideology of mass culture. A conversation with Dale concerning Michael McIntyre demonstrated some of these commonalities with critical discourse:

Dale: In comedy, I put it [McIntyre] down as the ‘remember this’ thing. It’s all about trying to get to some sort of group experience by almost false memories of some time where we all remember Playstation 1’s or whatever else.

SF: But why do you think it’s so popular?

Dale: Because it is very easily digestible. Finding things which chime with the largest percentage of the population. And I just don’t understand why people like it so much, just like I don’t understand why people like some pop music or certain blockbuster films. There’s very few things that are both very popular and good. I think to reach that Michael McIntyre stratosphere you’ve really got to sell-out.

SF: What do you mean by Sell-out?

Dale: You’ve got to keep on making people feel comfortable. You’ll go to a gig knowing exactly what to expect, it’s like slipping into a very comfortable armchair, y’know. I mean you may as well go and see any other throwaway form of art. And I understand there’s a place for it. But I don’t like him for doing it.

There is a clear association between Dale’s criticisms of McIntyre and the judgments articulated by critics. In particular, they share a clear and overarching aesthetic narrative, whereby ideal comic experience is defined in opposition to the ‘mainstream’ of commercial comedy taste.

This association between critical discourse and HCC appreciation echoes similar findings by Frith (2000: 63-68) in rock music. Frith argues that the significance of such a homology lies in its ability to both create and maintain symbolic boundaries. For Frith, the main power of music or comedy criticism lies in the fact that it is largely incomprehensible to audiences who lack ‘linguistic capital’ (Bourdieu, 1991).

The critic is therefore able to create a ‘knowing community’ between them self and those who can use language in a socially valued way, namely HCC respondents. Both these groups subsequently share linguistic terms and strategies for ascribing meaning to comedy and can subsequently draw boundaries between themselves and the ordinary, indiscriminating comedy consumer.

Answering To Audiences

Although there was a clear set of aesthetic criteria underpinning the judgments of most comedy critics, there was also some evidence of contradiction in the discourse schema of critics. For example, in line with the work of Frith (2002), some comedy critics appeared to mix ‘disinterested’ aesthetic judgments with a distinct emphasis on representing the *live reactions* of comedy audiences. Thus, in the earlier example of Stephanie Meritt [p.218], she first signalled her approval for the more ‘unexpected’ and surreal moments in Michael McIntyre’s set, but then later in the review attempted to show support for his accessible style:

That first time I saw him, in that tiny room in Edinburgh, what impressed me was how thoroughly he engaged with the audience, talking to individuals, riffing off their responses and remembering them for later, so that people felt they had been included in a conversation rather than picked on. That he has found the magic formula is confirmed by the diversity of his audience – there are teenage boys in hoodies, grey-haired couples and plenty of variety in between.

Similarly, in the following quote, Steve Bennett first seemed to acknowledge the aesthetic weaknesses of McIntyre, but then implied that his popular appeal trumped these aesthetic concerns:

He’s a smug, unchallenging comedian, his detractors say, who just states the obvious and relies on exaggerated theatrics to falsely emphasise his punchlines. All this is, indeed, true, but fails to take into account one crucial mitigating factor – he’s damn funny...and stating the obvious is also much, much harder than it looks.

Both these examples demonstrated that critical discourse was not always as aesthetically coherent and consistent as I have so far implied. In Bennett’s review, for example, we see how he jumps mid-review between conflicting evaluative principles.

Thus Michael McIntyre is first appraised in terms of his comic form but then ultimately judged on his 'funniness', a distinctly anaesthetic attribute. To some extent, then, even critics confused their evaluations, often varying their responses according to the same contextual factors as normal consumers⁴¹ (Lahire, 2008). Significantly, this also provides a pertinent reminder that comedy criticism constituted a hybrid or heteroglot discourse. In a manner similar to how Lindberg et al (2005) describe the field of rock criticism, the dominant aesthetic discourse in comedy appeared to combine elements of 'high' art theory with much more 'involved' evaluation.

Challenging The Dominant Critical Voice

As well as inconsistencies and hybridity in what I might tentatively term the dominant critical discourse on comedy, there was also one critical voice, *The Mirror*, that departed strongly from the thematic structure, lexical choice and aesthetic judgments of other comedy criticism. Indeed, in many instances, reviews in *The Mirror* appeared to directly contradict the judgments of other critics. Thus instead of an emphasis on form and complexity, comedy reviews in *The Mirror* tended to focus on the personal charm of the comedian and the amount of laughter they were able to yield. For instance, John Nicholson wrote of Hans Teeuwen:

'So here's a Dutch bloke. Is he supposed to be this annoying? If so, he's very good at his job. As the hour wears on the whole affair becomes more and more charmless and ends with the - ha ha, you'll never guess what this crazschy guys does, ha ha, he gets the males in audience to sing 'I love my c*nt' and the women to sing - ha 'I love my co*k.' to the amusement of literally some people. After ten minutes, in my mind, I was already gone (John Nicholson, *Mirror*).

Similarly, Jane Simon described Stewart Lee:

Stewart Lee is 40 now. A difficult age when, if he's not careful, stand-up patter starts to sound like a one-man edition of Grumpy Old Men - or just plain envy. Reading between the lines, Lee might just be really peeved that his own debut novel didn't match the dizzying sales figures enjoyed by the likes of Chris Moyles or Jeremy Clarkson. 'I've read the complete works of the romantic poet and visionary William Blake!' he blurts out at one point. You half-expect him to

⁴¹ Such inconsistencies may also be the result of other professional challenges more unique to criticism, such as the expectations and biases of editors and the pressure of deadlines (Sullivan, 2005).

grab the cameraman by the lapels and scream: 'I went to Oxford!!' (Jane Simon, *Mirror*).

What is particularly significant in these passages is the aesthetic criteria employed. Whereas other critics focused on Teeuwen's experimentation with form or Lee's complex material, these critics instead focused their evaluation on the comics' personalities, which were clearly disliked. Teeuwen was therefore labelled 'annoying' and 'charmless', Lee 'grumpy' and 'envious'.

The *Mirror's* evaluative emphasis on personality and charm was also aptly illustrated in John Nicholson's review of Michael McIntyre:

Michael McIntyre skipped onto the stage like a shortish, chubby pixie and for an hour gave an energetic performance that left the Pleasance 1 [theatre] rocking in the aisles. He has a warm infectious joy to his comedy and manages the tricky task of joking about the largely Scottish crowd without actually offending them. This was the first time I'd seen him live and he was a surprisingly physical comedian, dancing around the stage and waving his arms around wildly. With his star now firmly in the ascendancy, this could be last chance you get to see him up close...tickets are selling fast.

Again, it's clear from this review that much of Nicholson's aesthetic evaluation focuses on McIntyre's personality, which he describes as 'energetic' and having a 'warm, infectious joy'. It is also in *Mirror* reviews such as this that Frith's (2000) work appears to be most relevant. For example, Nicholson writes with a clear sense of responsibility towards representing his audience and actively involves them in his reviews. In particular, his judgment appears to rest on the amount of laughter comics like McIntyre and Teeuwen generate from their audience. So while Teeuwen is sarcastically derided for 'amusing literally some people', McIntyre's glowing review is justified with the opening observation that he leaves his audience 'rocking in the aisles'.

Finally, it's worth noting the difference in tone between *The Mirror* reviews and those examined earlier in the chapter. Whereas there was a tangible distance between critic and performance in other reviews, *Mirror* critics tended to be more personally involved in their reviews. They often used the first person to signal their own

enjoyment and in the case of Nicholson even seemed to personally urge his readers to buy tickets ('tickets are selling fast').

Although an isolated voice (Other tabloid newspapers do not have dedicated comedy critics), The *Mirror* critics nonetheless demonstrated that critical discourse on comedy is not completely unified and coherent. Indeed in the case of The *Mirror*, the aesthetic standards communicated to the public are more in line with Bourdieu's (1984) notion of the popular aesthetic.

Conclusion

Despite previous research indicating that comedy critics possess little cultural influence, the results outlined in this chapter demonstrate that the legitimacy of such intermediaries has grown considerably in recent years. Not only do the vast majority of contemporary comedy consumers read reviews, but qualitative data indicates that they also value the judgments of critics. In the case of respondents with low or mixed cultural capital resources, this relationship is largely characterised by deference, with consumers accepting that critics have the authority to discern which 'objects' of comedy should be valued and which should not.

However, the ability of critics to define which comedy tastes carry objectified cultural capital is disrupted somewhat by the judgments of those with high cultural capital resources. These respondents often take pride in contradicting the judgments of comedy critics - particularly those from less established publications.

Yet while HCC respondents may not always *accept* the judgments of critics, close analysis of their appreciation styles demonstrated that they *do* accept the validity of critical discourse in general. Even if they didn't always agree with critics, HCC respondents generally integrated critical judgments, or at least referenced them, in their expressions of comic taste. Moreover, having uncovered this, this chapter attempted to go further, examining whether the specific aesthetic standards communicated by critics are being incorporated by HCC respondents and then re-articulated in public as an expression of their embodied cultural capital. In the main,

comparisons between the way (most) critics and HCC respondents assessed the same comedy suggest that this process may be taking place. In particular, close parallels exist in their 'aesthetic language'. This common language exists not only in terms of common disinterested aesthetic themes, such as formal innovation and complexity, but also in terms of specific aesthetic terms used by both groups.

It must be noted that although this chapter has shown an informal association between the aesthetic principles valued by comedy critics and HCC respondents, it is beyond the scope of this research to ascertain whether this constitutes any kind of causal relationship. Instead, it suggests simply that comedy critics play an important role in the *mediation of cultural value*, and *may* be instrumental in legitimising certain objects of comedy and aesthetic styles. However, it is important to note that there are many other important intermediaries in the comedy field that also play a mediating role. Often these intermediaries use, and build upon, the judgments expressed by critics but also carry out other significant brokerage and tastemaking functions. It is to one of the most influential but also the most unseen of these intermediaries, the comedy scout, that I now turn.

Chapter 9

The Hidden Tastemakers: Comedy Scouts as Cultural Brokers

Introduction

In August 2010 a little-known comedy magic duo were spotted by an enthusiastic BBC TV producer at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. Within months the duo were hosting a BBC 1 primetime show and within a year had sold out a national tour. The story is a familiar one at the Edinburgh Fringe, where scores of comedians are ‘discovered’ every year by talent scouts and launched into lucrative and high-profile careers. Although such breakthroughs are invariably constructed as the romantic triumph of raw talent, the reality is more calculated. As the magician’s agent, Kerry⁴², explained to me, the duo’s ‘discovery’ had been carefully orchestrated. She had spotted the pair a few

⁴² All respondents real names have been replaced with pseudonyms

years earlier and immediately saw that their brand of comedy magic could fill a conspicuous gap in the market. Earmarking the Fringe as the obvious launchpad, she embarked on a three-year plan. In 2008 the duo played a tiny 60-seater festival venue and, after a string of good reviews, started to sell out. The following August they moved to a 120-seater theatre and sold out the whole run. And in 2010 they moved to an even bigger venue, sold out again, and were duly ‘discovered’ by a television comedy scout. Kerry summed up the strategy:

There were TV execs that I could have pitched till I was blue-in-the-face in London. But if they turn up in Edinburgh and a show’s been selling out for three weeks, you generate the interest anyway. I hate telling that story because it makes it sound contrived. But it is.

In many ways such manufactured success is nothing new. The Edinburgh Festival Fringe has long been a training ground for the performing arts (Shrum, 1996). Held every August for three weeks, the Fringe is the largest arts festival in the world, attracting 24, 107 performers and selling over 1.85 million tickets (The Fringe Society, 2012). Yet in recent years the Fringe has changed considerably. In particular, comedy has come to dominate the programme. While in 1981 there were just 16 comedy shows, by 2012 this number had risen to 970 (The Fringe Society, 2012). The Fringe has thus emerged as the centerpiece of the British comedy industry, a vast tradefair in which the majority of Britain’s comedians (and many from abroad) perform for 26 days straight with the aim of attracting audiences, critics and – most crucially – industry professionals⁴³. To help mediate these ambitions the Fringe has arguably generated a new type of comedy worker, the ‘temporary’ talent scout, who leave behind normal occupational duties - as agents, producers, TV commissioners or venue bookers - for one month of the year and decamp to Edinburgh to scour the Fringe for comedians to fill the ever-

⁴³ The promise of ‘discovery’ comes at a substantial price, however, with the average comic losing £7,349 a year promoting and staging a show at the Fringe (Logan, 2008).

increasing comedy slots on British TV, radio and in live venues. These scouts represent pivotal brokers in the comedy field, selecting which new artists are brought to public attention and forming a critical link between comedy producers and comedy audiences.

Yet despite the theoretically critical role of comedy scouts, little is known about what they really *do*. Unlike the critics explored in Chapter 8, who act as highly visible *public tastemakers*, the professional practices of scouts are hidden from public view and *how* and *why* they select fledging performers remains shrouded in an air of mystery. The aim of this chapter is thus to demystify the work of talent scouts, exploring the veiled link-in-the-chain they enact between comedy production and consumption. Drawing on ethnographic observation and interviews with 9 comedy scouts, I first examine the different positions scouts occupy in the comedy field and, in turn, how this positioning affects which comedians they propel. I then interrogate the brokerage enacted by scouts. Centrally I argue that while some broker between artists and management, *all* scouts are implicated in mediating between artists and audiences. In particular, they act to intensify comedy taste boundaries, making scouting judgments based on assumptions about imagined audiences and directing more legitimate comedians to audiences with higher cultural capital and vice versa. In this way, scouts act as hidden tastemakers, intensifying the scarcity of certain tastes, and strengthening the ability of privileged audiences to use comedy in the claiming of cultural distinction.

2. Talent Scouts as Cultural Brokers

Contemporary cultural production invariably requires a complex process of mediation between producers and consumers. Fringe comedy scouts enact a particular form of this specialized mediation. Occupying various roles within the comedy industry for most of the year, every August they assume a temporary but common status as a talent scout. In this way, they are different from professional scouts in other fields such as fashion (Mears, 2011) and publishing (Franssen and Kuipers, 2013) who scout for a living. Nonetheless, by assuming this fleeting role they occupy a pivotal

‘boundary spanning position’ (Hirsch, 1972) in the British comedy field. In particular, they perform *two* important brokering or mediating functions. First, they straddle the border between fledgling comedy producers, largely starting out in the comedy world, and a potentially national public of comedy consumers accessed through television, radio and national tours. Second, they also broker relations between comedy producers and the more managerial branches of broadcasting and comedy management companies.

In cultural sociology, the notion of brokerage is rooted in the production of culture perspective, and more specifically neo-institutional theory (DiMaggio, 1987; Peterson and Anand, 2004). This work focuses on the organizational practices of cultural mediators, explaining the ways in which their decision-making is influenced by particular institutional logics. In particular, neo-institutionalists argue that organizational practices tend to emerge as solutions to particular challenges. Perhaps the most pressing challenge, they argue, is addressing the *uncertainty* that characterizes production in popular cultural fields (Bielby and Bielby, 1994). The potential success and value of a new comedian, for example, is hard to foretell, because most of the industry’s final ‘products’ (i.e. radio sketch shows, TV sitcoms, national stand-up tours) evolve as a collective process that unfolds well before eventual audience consumption. Gatekeeping professionals such as talent scouts are therefore employed to address and (ultimately reduce) this uncertainty by assessing comedians’ worth and potential, and by deciding which to select and promote for further development. In making these selections, scouts must inevitably broker between the ‘aspirations of artists for creative expression’ and the goal of their ‘management’ who want to be able to ‘predict and control’ economic success (DiMaggio, 1977: 442).

Theoretical work on cultural gatekeeping is not just confined to neo-institutional theory, however. The work of Bourdieu (1984; 1993), for example, also addressed this area of cultural work, albeit conceptualizing such boundary-spanners less as brokers and more as ‘cultural intermediaries’. Compared with neo-institutional theory, the decision-making practices of Bourdieu’s intermediaries are rooted in

social processes that stretch far beyond market structure or institutional brokerage. For Bourdieu, the actions of intermediaries are not shaped by a desire to reduce uncertainty, but by individual *habitus* and one's corresponding position within the field of cultural production. Thus Bourdieu (1993: 53) argued that the strategies of intermediaries in popular cultural fields such as comedy are determined by the fact that they are firmly positioned within the 'mass' sub-field of cultural production. Here intermediaries help to produce cultural goods for the largest possible audience and greatest economic profit, whereas intermediaries in the 'restricted sub-field' mediate the production of autonomous 'high' culture (see Chapter 2 for more detail on Bourdieu's sub-fields of cultural production).

For Bourdieu, then, the scouting selections of intermediaries like comedy scouts are not shaped by value-uncertainty but by the aesthetic disposition inscribed within their *habitus*, which subsequently compels them towards selecting artists that objectively align with their position in the field – making, in Bourdieu's terms, 'a virtue of necessity' (Bourdieu, 1990: 54). In this way, they invariably act as personal 'guarantors' of the products they select, firmly believing in the value of what they sell (Bourdieu, 1984: 365).

Habitus is also important in the context of this chapter because it also helps to unpack the second brokering or mediating function of comedy scouts. DiMaggio (1977) fundamentally sees brokers as mediating relationships between artists and management. However, by choosing to select which artists are propelled to larger publics, comedy scouts also mediate between artists and audiences. In particular, they decide what types of artists are suitable for certain distribution channels – channels that are likely to already have well-established audiences. In this way, they become key 'tastemakers' (Mears, 2011) that play a pivotal role in 'framing' the field of cultural consumption and shaping what forms of culture are available to certain audiences (Maguire, 2011). An important aspect of their job, to paraphrase Entwistle (2006), is therefore to 'matchmake' artists with the tastes of appropriate audiences. Yet as many have previously noted, brokers rarely have completely reliable knowledge about audiences (Havens 2006; Bielby and Harrington, 2004). Indeed,

most must make brokering selections based on ‘imagined audiences’, on ‘gut’ instincts about the fit between types of culture and types of audiences (Blaszczyk, 2008; Kuipers, 2012). In this regard, neo-institutional theory offers only limited insight. While successfully managing the ‘fit’ between producers and consumers certainly reduces the value-uncertainty of cultural production, it also carries other salient sociological implications. In particular, a neo-institutional lens does not explain how and why scouts come to associate certain *types of audience* with certain *types of artist*, and, most importantly, what implications this matchmaking role may have in framing fields of cultural consumption. I argue here that to answer these questions it is Bourdieu’s concept of habitus that proves most useful, explaining how comedy scouts ‘instinctively’ match certain comedy with classed audiences and, in so doing, act to intensify taste boundaries in the field of British comedy.

‘Go-Along’ Ethnography with Comedy Scouts

This chapter draws upon participant observation, followed by interviews, with 9 cultural intermediaries (comedy agents, venue bookers, producers and TV and radio commissioners) working as temporary ‘talent scouts’ at the 2012 Fringe. I chose to employ the ‘go-along’ approach to ethnographic research (Kusenbach, 2003), which allowed me to observe the occupational practices of comedy scouts *in situ*. I shadowed each scout for approximately 4-6 hours and in total went to 22 comedy shows with scouts. During the shadowing process, I observed a range of processes involved in scouting; show selection, scouting at live comedy, approaching comedians, negotiating deals, and the multitude of informal ‘networking’ interactions that occur as scouts traverse the festival landscape. Immediately after shadowing I conducted an interview with each scout, lasting approximately 1-1.5 hours (see Methodological Appendix for more detail).

5. Positioning Scouts in the Contemporary Field of British Comedy

As noted in Chapter 2, there is no clear separation between mass and restricted production in contemporary British comedy. While the field retains a strong ‘alternative’ arm devoted to more autonomous production, there is no public funding for comedy and even those operating in the restricted domain must generate enough

money to earn a living. Thus, in comedy, all actors straddle the divide between culture and economy in some way. It was difficult to know the 'true' population of Fringe comedy scouts because only some were officially registered. In 2012, for example, there were 295 registered comedy industry professionals eligible for 'scouting' tickets through the Fringe Society (The Fringe Society, 2012). However, my respondents – none of whom were registered - all agreed that the real number was much higher. Most speculated a figure around 1,000.

Again, without extensive employment histories, it was also hard to know how this entire field of scouts was distributed in terms of their relation to mass and restricted production. Yet considering the historical development of British comedy outlined in Chapter 2, it is reasonable to assume that more scouts were allied to mass production, and that an increasing amount may now be straddling the sub-fields. My scouting respondents were therefore sampled theoretically to broadly reflect these contours in the wider field.

Three of the scouts were thus clearly positioned in the sub-field of mass production. These were Hugh, 47, a comedy agent with a large comedy talent agency, who represents a number of high-profile TV comedians; June, 51, Comedy Commissioner for a national commercial TV broadcaster; and Kerry, 31, a comedy producer for a medium-sized commercial production company specializing in TV comic magicians and variety artists. In contrast, two scouts were easily identified as belonging to the sub-field of restricted production - Tim, 57, owner of five comedy clubs which specialize in 'alternative' comedy, and Sam, 30, owner of a small but successful production company focusing on live comedy.

The four other scouts were more difficult to position. Most traversed the two sub-fields, maintaining connections and affinities to both. For example, Cathy, 56, Comedy Commissioner for a public radio broadcaster, arguably had more autonomy than market-orientated scouts, but at the same time was aiming output at large audiences of a million plus. Similarly, Linda, 27, worked as a comedy agent with a medium-sized management company specializing in 'emerging talent'. This stress on

‘emerging’ meant that Linda’s company often recruited experimental artists, but then ultimately sought to find them mass-market work. Richard, 36, perhaps straddled the sub-fields most acutely. He was both a TV producer for a public broadcaster but also ran a monthly ‘alternative’ comedy night in London. Finally, Stan, 34, was the comedy booker for a London theatre with an extensive and diverse comedy programme. The positions of all my respondents in the field are sketched in Figure 9.1.

Figure 9.1 HERE - Comedy Scouts within the contemporary field of British comic production (Adapted from Bourdieu, 1996)

These scouts not only occupied different field positions, but they also spanned a number of discrete occupational groups. This meant some wielded more professional authority than others. Agents generally had the least influence. Although they scouted to recruit ‘clients’, they were dependent on venue bookers and TV and radio producers to secure work for these clients. TV and radio commissioners generally had the most influence. They presided over a team of scouting producers, but always had the final say over which comedians were commissioned. A scout’s influence also depended on their standing within their own occupational group. For example, experienced agents such as Hugh arguably carried more power than younger entrepreneurs like Sam. Indeed, it is worth noting that 4 of the scouts – Hugh, Tim, Cathy and June - were recently included in a list of the 100 most influential people in British comedy (Clarke, 2012).

Another striking aspect of the sample was the shared ‘conditions of existence’ – or *habitus* - of the scouts sampled. In line with cultural intermediaries in other fields (Negus, 2004; Kuipers, 2012), eight of my nine respondents were from privileged backgrounds, with at least one parent who was, or had been, in professional or managerial employment. All nine scouts were also graduates, with six holding humanities degrees in aesthetic subjects such as English literature, theatre studies, history of art and film studies. And eight of the nine lived in London. This shared *habitus* also manifested in the way scouts presented themselves. They assessed comedians with a striking level of self-assurance and their bodily *hexis* – posture,

voice, use of eye contact - exuded a disarmingly 'natural' confidence. Moreover, as I will outline shortly, all scouts shared very similar personal tastes for comedy - although this didn't necessarily inform their professional practice.

6. Selection and Recruitment: Common Mechanics of Discovery

The Fringe brings together almost every professional British comedian in one bounded setting, with only the most commercially successful opting out. It also showcases a comedian's most recent work, with the vast majority writing a brand new show for each festival which is then packaged into a standardized 50-minute set. This concentration of artists and new work meant that the Fringe was considered the apex of the industry calendar among comedy scouts. While four noted that they did sometimes scout in an informal, ad-hoc manner during the rest of the year, the vast majority of scouting decisions were made at the Fringe. Indeed, the importance of the Fringe was so embedded that Stan noted that comedy workers 'don't even call the month 'August' anymore. They just call it 'Edinburgh''. As Cathy noted:

For people like me this is a gift. I can't go out [and see comedians] every night back in London. For me it's like being a squirrel, filling the cupboard for the year ahead.

However, while the Fringe may be the dominant arena for scouting, one of the major challenges facing all scouts arriving in Edinburgh is the daunting abundance of comedy shows. Of the 970 shows offered in 2012, my respondents scouted on average approximately 60 comedy shows. This varied according to what each scout was looking for. For example, venue programmer Stan said he sees about 70-80 shows and usually recruits about 25. In contrast, public radio commissioner Cathy will see over a 100 comedians but only offers 8-10 pilots and only 4-5 will be commissioned.

In order to navigate this oversupply of scouting possibilities and the inevitable competition with other scouts, my respondents enacted three common strategies to

reduce uncertainty. First, each relied heavily on tips from non-competitive ‘informal networks’ within the industry to help decide which shows to scout (Coser et al, 1982). Such contacts were located within the industry – critics, PR agents, even comedians – but, significantly, were not in direct scouting competition. Sometimes these ‘friends’ were contacted in advance of arriving in Edinburgh, but invariably scouting decisions were made last-minute and based on word-of-mouth recommendations from industry colleagues. These interactions invariably took place in private-members bars between shows, where scouts ‘did the rounds’, as Kerry described, chatting to colleagues and picking up on ‘gossip’. Here, I observed, scouts were highly selective about the recommendations they acted on, talking to countless contacts but afterwards acknowledging to me that they only ‘trusted’ the judgments of a few. As Stan noted after noting the recommendation of one PR, ‘I’ve been working with Dan for ages, he’s not like most PRs, he doesn’t bullshit you. He knows what I’m looking for’. For scouts, then, a key way to reduce uncertainty was to surround themselves with a network of trusted colleagues, who knew and shared their taste (Franssen and Kuipers, 2013).

Secondly, and related to this, scouts relied heavily on the Fringe’s extensive and established critical infrastructure. The Fringe brings together over 250 registered comedy critics from over 60 publications and hundreds of reviews (using a widely accepted 1-5 star rating system) are published every day (The Fringe Society, 2012). In addition, the Fringe also has 7 comedy awards. By far the most influential of these prizes is The Edinburgh Comedy Award (formerly the ‘Perrier’ Award), which has acted as a springboard for many of Britain’s most successful comedians⁴⁴. Together this critical apparatus acts as a key arbiter of cultural value, constructing certain comedians as objects of rarity and imbuing them with legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1993; English, 2005). In turn, scouts drew heavily on this architecture of incipient prestige, using reviews, awards and corresponding ‘industry gossip’ to inform scouting selections (Coser et al, 1982).

⁴⁴ Past winners include Steve Coogan, Stephen Fry, Lee Evans, Daniel Kitson and Russell Kane.

Thirdly, scouts drew on scouting requests from comedians or their agents. This was a more problematic strategy, and less used, because each scout was inundated with requests and sorting through this ever-expanding pool was highly sensitive. Indeed, one reason my scouts did not register with the Fringe Society was that they preferred to maintain a low profile. Schedules were therefore kept strictly confidential and scouts deliberately bought their own tickets so comedians and agents could not determine who they had seen. Significantly, though, scouts were much more conspicuous than they hoped. In the process of our fieldwork, they were constantly approached by comedians and agents keen to grab their attention, initiate conversation and subtly extract information about their judgments and plans. These were often visibly awkward exchanges for the scout, as they struggled to maintain a neutral response amid what was normally a barrage of superficial charm. On one notable occasion, Stan and I made our way into a venue to see an aspiring Australian comedian. As we entered, Stan was spotted by a woman sitting at the entrance who rushed forward to greet him. We had only two minutes before the show started and after exchanging initial pleasantries, the woman hurriedly began outlining the comedian's credentials. 'You're going to love her', she said finally as the lights began to dim. Stan seemed annoyed that the woman, the artist's agent, had found out that he was scouting and at the end we made a very quick exit to avoid talking to her.

I witnessed many similar exchanges. Most had a casual, informal artifice, but this belied what were often desperate attempts to affect scouts' decision-making. One technique mentioned by several scouts, for example, was for an agent to invite a scout to a gig and then casually but deliberately sit next to them, proceeding to laugh manically at their client's entire set. Such practices illustrated the assumed power wielded by scouts at the Fringe. It also demonstrated that amid the freewheeling, hedonistic atmosphere of the festival, others were willing to put considerable time and resources into courting scouts. While it's difficult to ascertain quite how successful these strategies were, I was struck by the willingness of scouts to engage in such interactions, even under the potentially compromising influence of alcohol. In this way, ethnographic observation helped to illustrate the potential gap between the conscious decision-making strategies of scouts and the way in which they were

unwittingly affected by agents and others within the industry that sought to influence their decision-making.

7. Selection and Recruitment: Talent in the ‘eye’ of the beholder

While the scouting selections of scouts were underlined by a common desire to reduce uncertainty, this didn’t mean scouts chose similar shows to scout. Indeed, there was a striking diversity in the comedian’s different scouts selected and even more variety in whom they chose to recruit. Initially, insight into the question of selection seemed to elude scouts themselves, even when I asked about their judgments immediately after we’d seen a comedian they liked. Most struggled to express exactly how they came to their aesthetic assessments. In the end, nearly all settled on the idea that scouting demanded ‘an eye for talent’, an ineffable professional expertise that largely manifested as an instinctive, intuitive or ‘gut’ reaction. Indeed, the notion of ‘talent’ was repeated time and again as scouts explained their judgments. As June exclaimed in exasperation after dismissing a third comedian in a row: ‘we’re looking for talent, it’s as simple as that’.

However, delving deeper into scouts’ preferences, it became clear that the notion of ‘talent’ wasn’t simple at all. Indeed, to understand this disparity in *why* scouts chose performers, it is necessary to move beyond a neo-institutional emphasis on value-uncertainty and focus more on Bourdieu’s notion of habitus. This is because perceptions of talent varied widely *between* scouts occupying different positions in the field. In particular, the meaning of talent was fiercely contested between those working at either pole of the restricted and mass sub-fields. For those working in the restricted sector, talent was very much defined in terms of their *own* judgments of aesthetic quality. Tim, for instance, explained that he was looking for ‘experimental’ comedians:

We still see ourselves as very much as having a brief to put on challenging, controversial, or provocative comedy. Jokes that have a point to them are more attractive to me than ones that don’t. Essentially, I suppose I’m trying to

provide comedy for people like me (laughs). And if I can make that work then I'm happy doing it. If I couldn't...well I think I'd probably stop.

Similarly, Sam constantly used the somewhat ambiguous term 'ambition' to describe the comedians he recruited. Only when I pressed him on what this meant did he explain that he saw ambition in terms of playing with the form of comedy:

I guess it's about trying to push things in some respect, that's a particularly attractive quality. Someone who's using all the tools available, who's got a technique you haven't seen before.

'Talent' for scouts like Tim and Sam, then, was based largely upon a comedian's aesthetic approach. Moreover, these scouts were particularly sensitive to a comedian's critical reception and self-consciously sought out critically acclaimed performers. Significantly, Tim and Sam also talked frequently about finding comedians that 'suited' their small live venues. While this was couched in terms of the 'demands' of 'intimate' performance spaces, it also reflected their more general search for culturally legitimate comedy. According to Bourdieu (1993: 114), cultural tastes are categorized hierarchically in terms of their rarity. Thus legitimate comedians 'tend to lose their distinctive value as the number of consumers both inclined and able to appropriate them grows.' In other words, by scouting already-acclaimed comedians and directing them toward restricted channels for live performance, these scouts were both able to profit from this legitimacy and further contribute to the comedian's assumed scarcity.

In this way, these scouts were similar to the television buyers Kuipers (2012) identifies as 'aesthetes', or the music industry scouts identified by Negus (2002). While they were worked under similar economic constraints to other scouts, financial success was always constructed as secondary to a comedian's artistic integrity, to indulging the myth of their 'creative genius' (Becker,

1982). They were thus concerned with using their own taste to ‘frame’ a distinct form of *cultural value*, with the generation of symbolic rather than economic profit.

Significantly, though, notions of talent among mass sector scouts involved the construction of a very different form of value. While they shared similar personal comedy tastes to restricted scouts and often spoke glowingly about comedians I had scouted with restricted scouts, such consecrated comedy did not represent strong scouting potential. Indeed, these scouts unapologetically put aside their own taste when scouting. For example, Cathy noted that over the years she’s ‘bought’ lots of shows for radio that didn’t make her laugh. Hugh elucidated the point:

I often think ‘this isn’t great but hang on, the whole room is loving this - I need to be aware of that’. It’s like saying ‘I wouldn’t buy that house but I know a fuck of a lot of people who would.’

Unlike Bourdieu’s (1984) cultural intermediaries, then, these scouts did not necessarily personally ‘believe’ in what they scouted – their decisions were not guided so instinctively by habitus. Instead, they acted more as instrumental ‘mercenaries’ (Kuipers, 2012), interested largely in gauging a comedian’s ‘market potential’ or ‘commercial viability’. In this way, neo-institutional theory can be usefully re-inserted here to help unpack the recruitment decision-making of mass sector scouts. These respondents were led not by their own aesthetic preferences but by a deeply embedded occupational imperative to reduce economic uncertainty – to find comedians for whom there was an already existing market or that they were confident ‘other’ consumers will like. As June admitted, ‘At the end of the day they [comedians] *are* commodities’.

This emphasis on commercial potential also meant that mass sector scouts operationalised a very different definition of talent. Steering away from

aesthetics, they used talent to describe a comedian's *character* – their 'stage presence', 'charisma', 'star quality', or level of professional 'polish'. Kerry, for example, mostly scouted at a raucous late-night gig that she co-organised. Here she invited young comedians to perform short ten-minute sets. On the night I shadowed she had invited six budding acts, all of which were unsigned. After the show she was most excited about a young African-Caribbean stand-up who, curiously, was the least successful in terms of laughs. However, she explained, 'there is currently a huge gap in the market for a young and charismatic black male voice', particularly on the many British TV comedy panel shows. For Kerry, talent was not about aesthetic difference. Instead, it revolved around finding a range of charismatic 'voices' that will appeal to different markets but which will, ultimately, fit into existing, formulaic, and profitable aesthetic frameworks.

Moreover, in most instances, mass sector scouts seemed to be looking for precisely the opposite of aesthetic 'difference'. Rather, recruitment was often orientated towards copying what Hirsch (1971) calls cultural 'fads'. For example, a number of scouts mentioned the recent success of a clutch of what they called 't-shirt comics' - young, white, attractive, male comics such as Jack Whitehall and Russell Howard, who were described as 'safe' and 'inoffensive'. While explicitly trying to recruit an imitation 't-shirt comic' was never directly endorsed, a number of scouts admitted being influenced by the fad:

You have to be aware of what's commercially viable; so you can definitely say, well, *Russell Howards Good News* is going to run for another 3,000 shows so if I take on a relatively attractive t-shirt comic in his early twenties, will they book him? Yes, they probably will. And you can play that game (Hugh).

It is possible to see again here how, in a further attempt to reduce value-uncertainty, these respondents embraced 'institutional isomorphism'

(DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) in their decision-making, allowing themselves to be led by the tried-and-tested past successes of other scouts in the field.

While these ‘ways of seeing’ at either end of the comedy field were contested yet relatively coherent, scouts occupying the middle ground had more difficulty articulating what they were looking for. For these respondents, there was a strong disconnect between their own definitions of talent, rooted in habitus and expressed through ‘highbrow’ personal tastes, and more commercially strategic concerns orientated around reducing uncertainty. These scouts thus employed what Childress (2012) calls a ‘garbage can’ model of decision-making in which personal taste intermingles with other concerns, such as performer reputation, commercial viability and – especially for those working in public broadcasting – policy imperatives around diversity and variety. Linda was a case in point. For the last three years Linda had worked for one of Britain’s largest comedy agencies that specialize in promoting big-name commercial artists. However, she recently moved to a smaller agency noted for ‘bringing through new talent’. After we had seen a brash, young stand-up from Newcastle, who Linda had disliked from start to finish, she explained how her perception of a stand-up like this would have varied under her previous employer:

Mark [previous employer] used to go and find all sorts of shit like that on the Free Fringe. So if I’d been in last year, I would be thinking that’s not really my thing, there’s no theme, nothing new, but [pauses]...but I could see that it could be financially worthwhile. Those were the decisions I least liked making, though, the ones purely motivated for money.

What’s notable here is the tension between Linda’s own notion of (aesthetically informed) talent and her professional imperative to reduce commercial uncertainty and recruit ‘financially worthwhile’ comedians. Profit vs. prestige – this was the constant conflict that Linda and other similarly liminal scouts had to resolve in their work. In this way, they revealed the

complex dynamic between the different forms of value produced in the comedy industry. While all scouts espoused a relatively joined up notion of aesthetic quality – rooted in a common and relatively privileged class habitus - this personal comedy taste didn't necessarily inform one's professional practice. Instead the scout's notion of talent was fundamentally shaped by their position in the field and the model of value that flowed from it, be this economic, cultural or a complex combination of both. As Mears (2011) notes, the 'eye for talent' was revealed as a 'social illusion', a learned and fundamentally *relational* skill.

8. Brokering Between Artists and Management

Contestations around notions of 'talent' were also strongly connected to the forms of brokerage enacted by different scouts. As noted, mass scouts were more interested in the individual comedian than their comic material. But this stress on persona also reflected the fact that these scouts were scouting on behalf of large television and radio companies, where the production of comic products involved large production teams and where Fringe-style live standup was rarely directly transposed into broadcastable material. In this way, mass sector scouts were members of more 'centralised brokerage systems' (DiMaggio, 1977) whereby they must mediate between the creative aspirations of comedians and the more powerful interests of their employers at broadcasters or comedy management companies. In this relationship it was clear that scouts saw their function more as representing the interests of management. Thus when we spoke about prospective comedians, or when they recruited comedian's themselves, the performer's Fringe show was never discussed as a direct avenue for future projects. Instead it was viewed as raw material, a creative stimulus from which the scout, the management and the comedian could then collaborate to generate new ideas - many of which weren't even comedic. For example, after seeing a young intellectual standup, Cathy seemed excited about working with him on public radio. Yet the ideas she excitedly brainstormed all involved fitting the standup into existing programme formats. She explained that he would be an ideal guest on panel

shows and could ‘perhaps even make a documentary about contemporary philosophy’. Moreover, when mass scouts actually decided to approach and recruit comedians, I was struck by the way they controlled and directed exchanges. After one show, Hugh made a point of waiting in the auditorium until the comedian appeared. He outlined who he was, explained that he had really enjoyed the show, and then handed the comedian his card. He didn’t promise anything, but said pointedly that *he* had ‘lots of ideas’ of how they might work together. Thus, while mass scouts were always complementary about comedian’s they wanted to recruit, they led with an assumption that future work would be dictated by themselves or management rather than the artist.

Notably, scouts operating in the restricted sub-field had a strikingly different focus. As small-scale entrepreneurs, Tim and Sam represented both the scouts and the management in their organizations and therefore did not need to broker between artists and any other outside agencies. This gave them more autonomy over decision-making and more control over how much creative freedom they granted to the comedians they scouted. Indeed, both Sam and Tim were very keen to distance themselves from any implication that they might ‘interfere’ or ‘meddle’ with the creative autonomy of comedians. Instead, they simply provided a live performance ‘space’ for performers to ‘do what they want’. Significantly, both strongly resisted even being categorised as ‘talent scouts’. Sam, for example, initially refused to let me shadow him because he said he ‘didn’t scout’. Instead, he continually reiterated that he ‘just wandered around’, seeing anything he thought ‘sounded interesting’ and talking to people he admired. In reality, as he admitted in his interview, Sam had actually recruited most of his acts at the Fringe. But, as his reflections in the following passage illustrate, there was obviously something about the assumed function of a scout – as someone calculatedly commercial – that violated Sam’s disinterested aesthetic principles:

So when I say I don't go out and stalk – sorry I mean scout (laughs) – it's because the relationships I've forged with my acts feels more organic. And I suppose scouting kind of debunks those myths that it's all happened in a haphazard way.

In this way, restricted scouts were closer to the 'entrepreneurial brokers' described by DiMaggio (1977: 443) – 'abdicating control over production decisions to creative workers themselves'. Yet this organizational analysis doesn't adequately explain why they played such a passive role in mediating the creative work of comedians. To explain this, it is again important to return to field positioning and what is specifically at-stake in the different sub-fields of comedy. For restricted scouts reputation was not built on the basis of discovering commercially marketable comedians but instead by demonstrating one's aesthetic capacity to identify and propel culturally legitimate comedy. In this way, these scouts functioned less as brokers and more as *tastemakers*. Much like critics (Shrum, 1996), they saw themselves as expert comedy connoisseurs, able to sift through a huge field of new comedians and reliably guide audiences towards the most exciting and cutting-edge tastes. In short, they made their 'personal taste into a professional asset' (Kuipers, 2012: 595). Sam, for example, had an explicit tastemaking ethos that underpinned his production company. While most companies promote comedians rather than their own brand, Sam explained:

I wanted to be slightly more present in people's minds so that we could make the link between acts. So we're working with Tim [a comedy poet], and Tim's doing really well now. If we could take some of that audience and go 'yeah yeah yeah, so you like Tim...well maybe you'll like this guy as well'. So I was keen on people being a fan of the brand because it had a consistent tonality, which I guess is borne out of the fact that it's got consistent taste driving it. Which I guess is the fact that it's not really driven by what the audience wants, which would make it quite refracted.

Scouts straddling the sub-fields were harder to categorise through this binary between centralized and entrepreneurial brokerage. Instead, they most closely resembled ‘pure brokers’ (DiMaggio, 1977), serving and advocating the interests of both comedians *and* management. Yet while DiMaggio (1977) sees pure brokers as a healthy indication of a ‘pluralistic’ cultural system, these scouts appeared more conflicted by their dual allegiance. Most agreed, for example, that in an ideal world they would not ‘tamper’ with the creative autonomy of the comedians they scouted. However, this ideal was tempered by a reluctant awareness that their ultimate loyalty lay with the commercial interests of their employer. For example, Richard noted that he is constantly frustrated by the way his ‘bosses’ treat new comedians that he scouts:

Richard: [comedians] come in and they soon realize these people are talking out their arse. It’s just a lot of dick waving and jumping on bandwagons. And I get it, it’s business, that’s the name of the game. But I just find it insincere. Like there’s a few people who will listen to someone and go ‘yeah, yeah I really like that idea – but how about you put a monkey in it (laughs)’.

SF: What’s your own approach to the comedians you scout?

Richard: I just try and leave people to it. I might say, that could be funnier, or that didn’t work. But it’s not my job to be funny.

It was clear to see here how Richard was exasperated with the way comedy ‘talent’ was interfered with by ‘dick-waving’ broadcasting management, and how this conflicted with his own aesthetic conviction – embedded within his habitus – that creativity should be ‘left to’ the artist. Indeed, Richard’s expression of this anger had even led to threats from his line manager that he may lose his job. Linda expressed a similar conflict, although her concern was more about the growing influence of corporate sponsors, and how they were influencing the aesthetic agenda of her employers:

We went to this Fosters [beer company] Comedy thing. And there was a quiz where they gave cash prizes. And I looked around at one point, at this free corporate lunch, and all this branded stuff, with everyone walking around with wads of cash and I thought, 'this is Stewart Lee's nightmare'. This is literally promoters slapping each other on the back and eating money.

For Linda the 'brave' way to avoid such corporate interference would be to go freelance. But, as a relatively inexperienced agent in her late 20s, she seemed reticent about how this might affect her career:

I'd be too scared. I like working in this wider network because I feel like I'm learning. Yeah it's braver to go freelance but you've got to have such vision, you've got to fight so hard.

The testimonies of Richard and Linda illustrated the 'multiple regimes of mediation' (Cronin, 2004) enacted by comedy scouts at the Fringe and how these regimes were intimately connected to the constraints and opportunities afforded by particular occupational contexts. Again, the major tension revolved around the opposition between restricted and mass production, individual aesthetic disposition and occupational imperative. Although all scouts had to traverse this divide in some way, the conflict was most acute for scouts straddling the sub-fields. These respondents constantly oscillated between contradictory mindsets, often making initial scouting judgments based on their own 'highbrow' aesthetic principles but then having to compromise these aesthetic interests in order to build their reputations as successful commercial brokers.

9. Brokering Between Production and Consumption

One aspect of scouting practice so far ignored but central to decision-making was the influence of audiences. As noted, comedy scouts did not just broker between comedians and management but they also mediated between artists and audiences, *matchmaking* comedy producers with comedy consumers.

Indeed, when talking about recruitment, the intended consumer was always in the background. This was generally expressed in terms of ‘fit’ - how well an artist may align with the tastes and expectations of a particular audience. The source of knowledge about these audiences varied greatly, but all scouts seemed to have some formal instrument for collating information, ranging from broadcast ratings to customer addresses to large-scale pieces of audience research. Scouts also used the Fringe as an audience laboratory, studying in real time how audiences reacted to live comedy, and then referencing these reactions in their judgments. Indeed, respondents often spent more time examining the live audience, and their reactions, than the actual comedian they were scouting. Live Fringe audiences thus provided scouts with a virtual ‘interface’ through which they could understand what they imagined to be their intended audience (Entwistle, 2006).

Drawing on this formal and informal audience research, most scouts were remarkably confident when describing the socio-demographics of their intended consumers. For example, when asked to describe the audiences at his comedy clubs, Tim noted:

The core of what we do is 30 plus couples and groups of friends who want to listen to what’s on stage. So yes I’m aiming at a middle class, middle aged, educated audience who want to listen to something that will make them laugh but make them think at the same time.

What was striking here was not just how precisely Tim was able to describe his ideal-type audience - in terms of age, cultural capital and social class - but also how he connected them to a particular aesthetic disposition for comedy. The reality was that Tim – like all my respondents – did not actually have much *empirical* understanding of his audiences’ comedy tastes. Yet, in a similar way to the publishing cultural intermediaries described by Napoli (2010) and Childress (2012), he and other comedy scouts were very comfortable making speculative assumptions about their audiences. Here

again scouts described working on ‘gut’ instinct, implying the importance of habitus in shaping such judgments. In particular, comedy tastes were often described in terms of social class or cultural capital. For example, Sam noted that the connection between the middle classes and the comedy he produces is so strong he admits he just takes it as a ‘given’. In contrast, Cathy deliberately avoided using class labels, but still arguably smuggled in subtly snobbish assumptions about the cultural capital of public radio listeners:

They expect good language, and cleverness. So with our comedians it’s not about people talking like me – god forbid – but I find there’s a sing-song element to regional accents that doesn’t translate well on radio, the microphone is kind of relentless in seeking it out.

Notably, however, scouts were much more tentative when talking about audiences at the lower end of the social hierarchy. They seemed to have a strong awareness of which tastes were associated with these audiences, but seemed to lack an appropriate vocabulary to describe them and often ended up looking awkward and uncomfortable. This was perhaps because there was a hierarchical undertone to such descriptions. Thus when these audiences were associated with comedy, it was invariably in terms of less legitimate tastes and styles. This was particularly noticeable among mass sector scouts like Hugh, June and Kerry, who all acknowledged a connection between certain audiences and the comedians they commissioned who were more ‘mainstream’, ‘safe’, ‘straightforward’, and ‘formulaic’. The discussion of class or cultural capital here was subtle and indirect, and often hidden behind hierarchically loaded linguistic euphemisms (Skeggs, 2004). For example, after giving me a list of sitcoms she might pitch one comedian we had just scouted, Linda summed up the intended audience demographic - ‘I suppose, essentially, it’s white van man comedy’. A conversation with Kerry about one of her clients illustrated the point even more directly:

He's Northern, he's from Middleborough, and people like that. It's the kind of cheeky chappy thing. So he has that same straightforward Northern thing that Jason Manford has. So I think he appeals to (pause) - I hate to say working class but you know what I mean.

This conflation of what Kerry terms 'cheeky' or 'straightforward' comedy with audiences from lower social positions was also a common practice among scouts in the restricted sector. Indeed, for these scouts, such judgments tended to represent more naked attempts at symbolic boundary drawing (Lamont, 2000). In particular, Tim, Sam and Richard positioned the comedy they produce, and the middle class audiences that consume it, against the comedy presented at Jongleurs, a national chain of comedy clubs. Jongleurs was repeatedly denigrated as 'not a real comedy venue', 'full of Chavs' and 'lary stag do's. As Stan summed up, 'It's catering for a different kind of person, isn't it? Tim made a similarly opaque reference to class and taste in terms of a new club he had recently opened in Newcastle. Unlike his middle class audience in Edinburgh, he noted that he expected a more 'local' audience in Newcastle. He explained that he has certain strategies to accommodate the 'inevitable' differences in taste. For example, he always programs a Geordie (Newcastle-native) comic to MC gigs:

It's important to have, it puts the audience at ease. There's someone who speaks like them and it relaxes them. And then into that mix you can drop different, more challenging voices.

This awareness of class and taste was even stronger among scouts who straddled the industry. Working across different sectors had made these respondents acutely aware of different comedy audiences. For example, Richard explained that he was recently asked to put on a large-scale stand-up show at the Fringe for a public broadcaster. He explained that he instinctively booked acts he normally works with at live gigs, and therefore 'the bill was full of exciting, experimental stuff'. But the show was a disaster:

Richard: I had all these people fucking complaining! I was presented with this one guy, and he said (whiney voice) ‘I’ve stuck with it and it’s the [public broadcaster] and I want my money back.’ And I’ve noticed that a lot with the [public broadcaster], y’know, if it’s not mass appeal.

SF: What do you mean mass appeal?

Richard: Y’know, John Bishop, working men’s club, I’ve had six pints, I’m here to laugh my fucking face off. Bosh. And that’s fine. But I’m not looking for that.

What was striking about this passage, and the way *all* scouts connected comedy tastes to class-based audiences, was that such assumptions were invariably based on ‘gut’ instinct, or hurried observations of small-scale Fringe audiences, rather than empirical audience research. Despite the scouts professed certitude, then, these judgments were largely based on *imagined audiences*. This is a significant point. While a number of studies (Blaszczyk, R. 2008; Havens, 2006; Kuipers, 2012) have noted how gatekeepers make decisions based on imagined audiences, they have failed to address the full sociological implications of such taste-matchmaking.

Arguably the most valuable function of a comedy scout was to matchmake demand with supply and provide audiences with comedians that represent their taste. However, as I’ve outlined, the process of selection was often based on speculative assumptions about audience age, gender, location, and most significantly, class and level of cultural capital. Indeed, scouts connected classed audiences to comedy in a largely hierarchical manner, with more ‘highbrow’ comedy appealing to middle and upper-middle class audiences and more ‘lowbrow’ comedy associated with lower-middle and working class audiences. While these assumptions were often based on years of experience – and indeed chime strongly with the divisions already uncovered in this book –

they nonetheless illustrate how scouts were responsible for *constructing*, *reproducing* and *intensifying* these comedy taste divisions. Rather than just passively reflecting taste already ‘out there’ in the social world, scouts were much more active brokers, directing certain comedy to distribution channels that they believed to have certain (strongly classed) audiences.

Conclusion: Comedy Scouts and New Forms of Distinction

This chapter has sought to examine the mediation carried out by comedy scouts operating at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. In particular, I have argued that to do so it is useful to combine insights from both neo-institutional and Bourdieusian theory. Neo-institutional theory was most useful in unraveling the practices of comedy scouts operating in the mass sub-field of comedy. Here scouts were guided not by aesthetic preferences but by an instrumental occupational imperative to reduce economic uncertainty. This compelled them toward the safe and inoffensive, the ‘t-shirt comic’, who fits into existing markets or repeats a successful formula. In contrast, the practices of scouts operating in the restricted sub-field were better understood through the prism of habitus. For these scouts decision-making revolved almost completely around personal taste, with scouting an exercise in ‘instinctive’ aesthetic judgment and the promise of amassing cultural rather than economic capital. Yet, while Bourdieu’s theoretical conception of field aptly describes the contested terrain occupied by scouts occupying strongly polarized positions, his separation of restricted and mass production seems increasingly outdated. Instead, in previously discredited fields such as comedy, where the restricted pole of production has emerged relatively recently and is not buttressed by public funding, there is a constant and tense overlap between these sub-fields. This is aptly illustrated by the conflicted and contradictory testimonies of comedy scouts that straddled the mass and restricted sub-fields of comedy. For these individuals, scouting involved a continual compromise between the personal and professional, negotiating on one hand instinctively ‘highbrow’ scouting preferences and hands-off artist management, and on the other the occupational imperative to reduce economic uncertainty.

Finally, the chapter demonstrates how all Fringe scouts were *equally* implicated in brokering between artists and audiences. Indeed, underpinning scouting judgments I found very strong preconceptions about the tastes of comedy audiences. In particular, there seemed to be a shared belief that culturally legitimate comedy was ‘naturally meant for’ those at the top of the social hierarchy and less legitimate tastes for those toward the bottom. As these assumptions were rarely based on any empirical understanding of comedy taste, it is plausible to assume that they were rooted in the largely homogenous class habitus of comedy scouts themselves. Here, deeply embedded dispositions not only orientated scouts *personally* toward more legitimate comedy tastes, but led them to *professionally* direct such tastes toward people similar to themselves and vice versa. Thus, while Tim summed up his promotion of restricted production as ‘providing comedy for people like me’, Stan distanced himself from mass sector Jongleurs, where they ‘cater for a different kind of person’⁴⁵.

Of course taste assumptions made by scouts *were* based on genuine attempts to matchmake supply and demand. However, by operationalizing such striking preconceptions in the act of matchmaking, these intermediaries indirectly acted to *heighten* existing taste divisions. They play a fundamental role in ‘framing’ how audiences consume comedy (Maguire and Matthews, 2012), filtering which comedians go where in the industry and, by implication, which audiences are exposed to them. In this way, it is possible to illustrate how Fringe scouts play a pivotal role in reproducing what Savage et al (2005) call the ‘circuit of cultural capital’. In the case of comedy, this circuit starts with the critics explored in Chapter 8, who consecrate certain comedians as ‘special’ cultural objects - entities that communicate a form of cultural currency and infer a certain cultural aptitude on the part of the consumer. However, as this chapter has shown, scouts then build on and augment this consecration. They become pivotal generators of meaning in what Bourdieu

⁴⁵ Had these scouts themselves come from more diverse social backgrounds, it is possible that that they might have been more inclined to direct their own ‘expert’ taste toward more diverse imagined audiences.

(1996: 229) called the ‘science of cultural works’ – using their professional expertise to place newly legitimated comedy in restricted distribution channels such as small live venues or niche TV slots (and less legitimate comedy in mass channels), which further imbues the comedy, or the comedian, with rarity. They thus act as *hidden tastemakers*, intensifying the scarcity of certain comic tastes, helping to categorise them as ‘objects’ of cultural capital, and ultimately strengthening the ability of audiences to use comedy as an instrument of cultural distinction.

Chapter 10: Conclusion

There's something fundamental about what makes you laugh (Trever)

As the first ever large-scale study of British comedy taste, this book has filled a conspicuous gap in the literature on cultural consumption. Using the innovative methodological instrument of MCA, it has demonstrated that strong and systematic differences exist in the patterning of British comedy taste. By far the most powerful of these taste distinctions – ordered along Axis 1 – separates those with high cultural

capital resources, who prefer ‘highbrow’ comedy and reject ‘lowbrow’ comedy, from those with low resources, who prefer ‘lowbrow’ comedy and have not heard of most ‘highbrow’ comedy. This finding is important because it suggests that despite comedy’s traditionally discredited position, it *is* now being mobilised by the culturally privileged as an instrument of distinction. More specifically, it indicates that those that have assembled high cultural capital resources via socialisation, education and occupation, are activating these assets, at least in part, through the careful consumption and rejection of certain British comedy. In other words, liking the ‘right’ kind of comedy *does* act as a partial status marker in contemporary British society.

In addition, it is also clear that this primary taste division both contributes to, and reflects, the construction of certain comedians and comedy TV shows as ‘special’ cultural objects - entities that communicate an intrinsic form of cultural currency. Thus my survey data identified the comedians Stewart Lee, Andy Zaltzman, Mark Thomas and Hans Teeuwen as well as comedy TV shows *Brass Eye*, *The Thick Of It* and *Stewart Lee’s Comedy Vehicle* as items that all carry some degree of *objectified cultural capital*.

The main source of this capital was the perceived rarity of these comic items. For example, in Chapter 8, I explained how each of these comedians has been extensively legitimated by comedy critics, and in Chapter 9 I went on to explain how this process is augmented by comedy scouts who intensify the scarcity by directing these comedians toward restricted distribution channels. Moreover, respondents themselves also reproduced the rarity of this comedy. Those from *all* backgrounds seemed to accept the assumption that these items were somehow ‘difficult’ to consume, that their enjoyment inferred a certain cultural aptitude on the part of the consumer. Dale’s discussion of Stewart Lee neatly summed up this presumption. Dale described how attending a Stewart Lee gig is akin to ‘sitting an exam’, whereby one must possess extensive reserves of humour-specific knowledge in order to decode the comedy. One must recognise the way Lee plays with form or uses specific comic techniques, and without this knowledge it is difficult, even impossible, to ‘get’ Lee’s humour. This

analogy of comic appreciation functioning as an ‘exam’ neatly rendered visible the process through which respondents came to see objects of comedy as carrying social stratificatory power. Whereas Dale and other HCC respondents reported enjoying the comedy of Stewart Lee, and even admitted a smugness about doing so, many LCC respondents admitted puzzlement and even failure in the face of Lee’s comedy, reporting that the humour ‘went over their head’, that they simply couldn’t ‘get it’⁴⁶. Thus Stewart Lee was revealed as an object of cultural capital, a rare taste, a comedian whose (perceived) interpretative ‘difficulty’ bestowed special status on any ‘successful’ consumer.

It is important to note, however, that the power of certain comedians as objects of cultural capital was significantly conditioned by age, cohort and generation. Both Axis 1 and 2 (Figure 4.2) indicated that there was a strong divide between those aged 44 and under, who tended to be more avid consumers of all comedy, including ‘highbrow’ items, and those 45 plus who tended to prefer less, and more ‘lowbrow’ comedy. Significantly, this finding was also substantiated by qualitative data. In particular, interviews with HCC respondents revealed the recency of comedy’s legitimacy in the eyes of the culturally privileged. Whereas younger HCC respondents saw comedy as a valid aesthetic pursuit, older generations were more ambivalent about comedy’s artistic potential. As Graham noted of his otherwise ‘highbrow’ parents, ‘with comedy, they’re just a bit safe’.

This age effect also accorded strongly with developments in the recent history of British comic *production*, as sketched in Chapter 2. Indeed, considering comedy’s traditionally discredited position in the British cultural field, it is perhaps not surprising that older generations refused to grant status to those who claimed ‘highbrow’ comedy taste. For these respondents, brought up in an era when comedy was largely ‘mass’ entertainment, it is perhaps hard to disconnect from nostalgic recollections of British comedy ‘as it used to be’ and suddenly accept its recent cultural elevation (Mills, 2005: 123). In contrast, the voracity of comedy taste among

⁴⁶ This does not mean that Stewart Lee’s comedy cannot be decoded in other ways. However, as such readings are unlikely to mirror the comic intentions of the artist; it is unclear whether they will yield the same level of humorous pleasure.

those 44 and under arguably mirrored the large-scale expansion of the British comedy industry initiated from the 1980s onwards. In particular, the importance of ‘highbrow’ comedy taste to this generation arguably reflected the cultural elevation of comedy instigated by the Alternative Comedy Movement. While such rehabilitation has not fully propelled comedy to the status of ‘legitimate culture’, it has at least facilitated the development of a highly diverse space of production, whereby contemporary audiences can engage with multiple forms of both ‘highbrow’ and ‘lowbrow’ comedy. Socialised in this more diverse era, there is a distinct sense that younger HCC generations now see comedy as an exciting and, crucially, legitimate site for the cultivation of new tastes and the pursuit of distinction.

However, at this point it is worth noting that unlike many studies of cultural consumption, I am conscious not to overstate the significance of survey findings. In particular, my analysis warns of the dangers of being dazzled by the visual attractiveness of MCA and accepting, uncritically, its geometric representation of comedy taste. While this method is certainly innovative and useful, it is not without its drawbacks. On a conceptual level, for example, it should be remembered that MCA can only offer a synchronic lens of the currency held by certain comedians. Yet in a constantly changing field like comedy, it is very difficult to definitively categorise artists as invariantly ‘highbrow’ or ‘lowbrow’. Not only does reputation and legitimacy fluctuate continually, but artists themselves often purposively mix different comic styles to suit different audiences or to cater for different performance mediums. Thus while MCA may have revealed that certain comedians carry cultural capital, this status is only really valid as a snapshot of comedy taste in 2009. Beyond this, the position of individual comedy items is inherently unstable.

Moreover, although geometric analysis demonstrated that several comedy items were associated with cultural capital groups, what it failed to document was that preferences for the majority of British comedy was relatively evenly distributed across those with high, mixed and low cultural capital resources (see Table 4.3). This was an important finding, as it problematised earlier survey analysis. While seven British comedy items may have been recognisable as *objects* of cultural capital (and

seven others as low on legitimacy), the majority of the 32 comedy items appeared to unite respondents rather than polarise them. Indeed, at this point in the analysis it became clear that the explanatory potential offered by quantitative data had run its course. While the survey certainly demonstrated important cleavages and continuities in comedy taste, it could only analyse this in terms of individual comedy items. Yet throughout this book I have reiterated that I understand comedy taste not just as objective consumption, but also as fundamentally concerning the *way* objects are consumed. Therefore in Chapter 5 I set out to explicitly examine *how* respondents consumed comedy and what this revealed about their style of appreciation and sense of humour.

In fact, this stress on qualitatively investigating the *practice* of comedy taste arguably yielded the most revealing data. It demonstrated, in particular, that respondents with different resources of cultural capital read and decode comedy in very different ways; they employed distinct comic styles. However, not all comic styles are valued equally in British society. Strikingly, I found that the appreciation style of HCC respondents foregrounded strongly their superior reserves of *embodied cultural capital*. Again the key mechanism in converting this comic style into capital was (perceived) rarity. HCC respondents, for instance, employed a knowingly scarce aesthetic disposition that in most cases seemed rooted in their privileged cultural socialisation⁴⁷ and was thus inaccessible to those with less cultural capital resources. Such scarcity was also augmented by comedy critics, who foregrounded similar aesthetic standards and used similar aesthetic language in comedy criticism.

Significantly, the principles of the HCC comic style were underwritten, at least to some extent, by the ‘disinterested’ aesthetic ideals outlined by Kant (1987). This involved the valorisation of certain comic themes and the clear rejection of others. For example, comedy that was sophisticated, complex and original was appreciated whereas the ‘prosaic’ comedy of the everyday was discarded. Similarly, comedy that

⁴⁷ Interviews with HCC respondents revealed that their styles of appreciation were often strongly informed by the generalised aesthetic disposition inculcated during their upbringing. Most were not brought up with ‘highbrow’ humour per se, but were taught to value certain aesthetic principles which were then related to their appreciation of comedy [see p.94-96].

tapped the entire emotional spectrum was considered valuable while comedy that aimed for only laughter and pleasure was rejected⁴⁸. Significantly, though, it was not wholly disinterested. Indeed, the HCC aesthetic also incorporated a clear valorisation of comedy that was socially critical and that articulated a political and moral commitment to prick the pomposity of the privileged and powerful.

It is perhaps possible to sum up this embodied style in the following way. For HCC respondents, comedy should never be *just funny*, it should never centre purely around the creation of laughter, or probe only what Frank referred to as ‘first-degree’ emotional reactions. Instead, ‘good’ comedy should have meaning – whether this be a political message *or* an experiment with form. Either way, the consumer should have to ‘work’ for his or her laughter, and through carrying out this aesthetic labour he or she will glean more enjoyment and reach a higher plain of comic appreciation.

What was most important about this aesthetic, this embodied expression of cultural capital, was that its symbolic power was arguably far greater than objectified cultural capital. Comedy as objectified cultural capital, for instance, relies on a diffuse and accepted notion of where a particular comedian stood in the field, which is uncertain. In contrast, comedy *style* as embodied cultural capital returns the power of distinction back to the consumer. Its activation, crucially, is not only confined to revered objects of comedy. Instead, as an aesthetic lens embedded in habitus and rooted in the notion of connoisseurship, it constitutes an embodied capacity that allowed HCC respondents to reconfigure and aestheticise almost any comic object. As demonstrated in HCC preferences for ‘crossover’ comedians like Simon Amstell, Jimmy Carr and Eddie Izzard, this centred on the employment of deliberately rarefied readings – readings that, decisively, foregrounded aesthetic elements these respondents felt were missed by others. Armed with their distinctive style of appreciation, there was a sense that HCC respondents believed they could always ‘get’ more from any kind of comedy, extracting as Trever noted a ‘whole other level’ of humour.

⁴⁸ Of course, as Chapter 4 outlined, individuals within these cultural capital groups rarely had identical styles of comic appreciation, and there was evidence of dissonance in many respondents comic style. It is useful to conceptualise cultural capital groups, therefore, as ‘force fields’ (Bennett et al, 2009), within the parameters of which individuals may vary, though within certain limits’.

The power of this aesthetic was also underlined during interviews with upwardly mobile respondents. While the upward mobility of these respondents had invariably led to the development of 'highbrow' comedy tastes, most expressed insecurity or anxiety about 'correctly' interpreting or understanding these forms of comedy. As their 'highbrow' tastes had arguably been 'learned' and accumulated rather than 'naturally' embodied, there was a lingering sense of inferiority about publicly expressing 'highbrow' tastes. Although such deference was a concessionary signal of how much they valued this embodied style, it also served to illustrate their perception that such cultural capital was forever out of their reach. Echoing one of Bourdieu's (1984: 411) most telling observations, then, cultural capital resources appeared to profoundly impact which respondents felt they had the 'right to speak' about the aesthetics of comedy, and thus restricted those who could profit from distinction to respondents from backgrounds rich in embodied cultural capital.

Reflecting on this data, I tend to agree with Coulangeon (2005: 127) that embodied cultural capital constitutes the most 'audacious' resource for expressing cultural distinction. It illustrates how today's culturally privileged, released from the restricted realm of hallowed objects, have the ability to distinguish themselves in potentially limitless cultural fields. Indeed, I believe the increased realisation of embodied cultural capital in popular cultural consumption may be representative of a larger cultural shift away from the pursuit of distinction as a separate and exclusive activity, as emphasised by Bourdieu in *Distinction* (1984), and closer to a situation where the expression of cultural aptitude and cultural class identity is a more open and performative practice. As Skeggs (2004: 148) has noted, a shift has occurred from 'middle class formation reliant on achieving status through hiding and restricting knowledge to one in which status is achieved through the display of this knowledge and practice: exclusivity to transparency.'

Finally, it is perhaps worth summarising the contribution I feel these central findings add to the current field of British cultural sociology. It must be acknowledged that this area has been given a major boost, recently, by the seminal study of British

cultural taste carried out by Bennett et al (2009), to which I make frequent mention throughout this book. Indeed, in many ways I see the main thrust of this research as an attempt to deepen, and in some ways critique, the influential findings presented by these authors. By honing in on comedy for example, one artistic field largely ignored in *Culture, Class, Distinction*, I believe this book adds support to Bennett et al's central conclusion – that close associations persist between patterns of British cultural taste and social class. Furthermore, I think my data expands on these findings, demonstrating that certain objects and styles of comedy should be added to the repertoire of distinctly British 'high-status cultural signals' identified by Bennett et al (2009).

However, I also believe my findings challenge one of the most pivotal conclusions in *Culture, Class, Distinction*, namely that the 'dominant expression of cultural capital' in contemporary Britain is 'perhaps the adoption of an omnivorous orientation' (254). While this may be true in certain cultural fields, my findings indicate that it may constitute a dangerously misleading portrait of consumption in popular fields like comedy. I use the word 'misleading', in particular, because I believe much existing quantitative-led research (including Bennett et al, 2009 but also Peterson and Kern, 1996; Goldthorpe and Chan, 2005; Miles, 2010) wrongly codes taste for art forms like comedy, or even genres within them⁴⁹, as invariantly 'lowbrow'. In turn, this leads to analysis where signs of the culturally privileged diversifying into fields of popular consumption are misinterpreted as evidence of a newly omnivorous elite embracing cultural diversity. Certainly, my findings have strongly problematised this interpretation. In particular, they have shown that if cultural sociologists are willing to dig further and examine taste in terms of specific *items* of popular culture and their accompanying *styles of appreciation*, they are likely to find that distinction strategies often prevail. In terms of comedy, at least, this is certainly the case. Not only has this research revealed fine-grained distinctions in consumption of particular

⁴⁹ One of the starkest findings in this thesis was the unreliability of comedy 'genres'. While my MCA analysis showed that preferences for seven comedy genres was strongly associated with cultural capital resources, I was forced to remove this from the analysis when it became clear during interviews that genres were too amorphous to adequately categorise.

objects of British comedy, but more importantly it has shown the distinct currency of possessing, performing and cultivating a ‘good’ sense of humour.

Comedy Taste as Cultural capital: Strength and Legitimacy

As outlined, my data indicates that some objects and styles of comedy taste constitute important expressions of cultural capital in the British cultural field. However, in terms of wider sociological significance, this still leaves a number of questions unanswered. One of the most central of these relates to the *weight* of comic cultural capital, its relative *value*, and how successfully it is *deployed* in everyday life. To return to Lamont’s (1988: 152-159) useful and unambiguous definition, the main issue is whether HCC comedy tastes really constitute ‘widely shared status signals’. This question is important, because as Thornton (1996) neatly illustrated, status signals which cannot claim such diffuse legitimacy are better understood as subcultural capital.

Although it must be acknowledged that this book is unable to offer a definitive answer to this complex question, it does provide some important analytical insight. Qualitative data, for example, indicated that respondents saw comedy as central to British culture, and certainly not as a subculture operating outside the perimeters of the mainstream. Indeed, there was even some evidence that HCC appreciation styles functioned as a transferable form of cultural capital, with the main aesthetic principles used for comedy transposable to more legitimate art forms like film and music. The legitimacy of HCC comic styles was also augmented via analysis of comedy critics. This data suggested that critics are pivotal mediators of value in the comic field, with their authority almost universally recognised by comedy consumers. Moreover, textual analysis demonstrated striking similarities between the aesthetic judgments of critics and the comic styles of HCC respondents, illustrating the role intermediaries play in legitimising HCC styles as forms of capital.

Despite this, the issue of whether an aesthetic hierarchy for comedy is ‘widely’ agreed upon is not completely straightforward. For example, ‘highbrow’ comedy still largely lacks the institutional backing provided by state funding or educational

consecration, and outside my Edinburgh Fringe sample it may be less clear whether all cultural consumers view comedy as so pivotal to British culture. Furthermore, the legitimacy of ‘highbrow’ comedy was also challenged by some data indicating alternative notions of comic value. Indeed, among some LCC respondents there was a defiant, even pitying, rejection of ‘highbrow’ humour. Flanked by a long history of working class dominance in the British comic field, these respondents felt a distinct sense of ownership over comedy and comic value, suggesting that as an art form it was best served through aesthetic principles like laughter and pleasure. This was illuminating, as it indicated competing notions of value at work in the field.

However, echoing other literature that has explored the centrality of humour in working class cultures (Bourdieu, 1988; Willis, 1977), it’s important to remember that this LCC comic style had limited sources of external legitimacy⁵⁰ and was only valued among a restricted LCC audience. It is perhaps the LCC notion of comic value, then, that is best characterised as a form of subcultural capital.

Comedy and the Reproduction of Inequality

As well as issues of weight and convertibility, my findings concerning ‘comic cultural capital’ also pose larger sociological questions in terms of wider processes of social and cultural exclusion in contemporary Britain. Elements of comedy style and taste may carry cultural currency, but what is perhaps more important, in sociological terms, is whether this capital is imbued with symbolic significance - if it helps to mark boundaries that limit and constrain people’s lives. Thus a crucial aim of this book, realised in Chapter 7, was to explicitly interrogate the nature of the symbolic boundaries that separated British comedy tastes. This analysis revealed signs of two forms of symbolic violence.

First, there appeared to be a diffuse *misrecognition* of the intrinsic value of HCC comedy tastes and styles. The main manifestation of this, among LCC respondents,

⁵⁰ In Chapter 9, I showed that the only type of comedy critic that supports the LCC aesthetic is in tabloid newspapers like *The Daily Mirror*, although this is the only tabloid that employs a full time comedy critic.

was the process of ‘self-elimination’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 379) where respondents would deliberately opt out of consuming HCC comedy. For example, certain telling phrases such as ‘beyond me’ or ‘that just went over my head’ came up time and time again. These short utterances were particularly striking as they implied a certain imagery - of humour so sophisticated it somehow passes over LCC intellectual capacity - which indicated a deeply rooted sense of inferiority and deference⁵¹.

Second, and arguably more powerful, was the overt boundary-drawing undertaken by HCC respondents. In what were striking findings, Chapter 7 revealed that respondents not only recognised themselves through comedy taste, but crucially were also recognised by *others*. Comedy was used to police the boundaries of cultural and class identity, with HCC respondents, especially, reinforcing their sense of self through the explicit rejection of what they saw as the flawed consumption of others. Indeed, eschewing the kind of openness described in other cultural areas (Lamont, 1992; Bryson, 1996) HCC respondents made a wide range of aggressive and disparaging aesthetic, moral and political judgments on the basis of comedy taste, inferring that one’s sense of humour revealed deep-seated aspects of their personhood. Andrew’s reaction to the comedy taste of an old school friend summed up the scale and potency of such judgments. For Andrew, the knowledge that his friend liked one particular comedian - this ‘one act of cultural awfulness’ - was enough to feel confident that he could subsequently discern and reject everything else about this person’s personality.

It is worth noting that although the ‘other’ implied by these kind of HCC taste judgments was rarely named in terms of cultural capital resources or social class, the insinuation of stratification was implicit from the comedy tastes and linguistic terms used. In fact, in its strongest form, such boundary-drawing arguably constituted a form of ‘class racism’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 178). Echoing recent research (Lawler, 2005; Hayward, 2006), I would go as far as to suggest that many of my HCC respondents used comedy taste as a means of explicitly ‘pathologising’ those with low cultural capital – equating taste with fundamental and far-reaching notions of personal

⁵¹ However, this finding should be tempered somewhat by the fact that some LCC respondents presented such non-consumption as an expression of indifference, or even defiant rejection, rather than deference.

‘worth’. Indeed, it is possible to draw strong comparisons between these charged and classed expressions of condemnation and recent media discourses concerning ‘chavs’ and ‘chav culture’ (Hayward, 2006: 14-21). In both cases, symbolic violence is justified almost completely on the basis that certain consumption choices are vulgar and aesthetically impoverished.

This finding also assumes an amplified significance when placed in the context of the recent findings of Bennett et al (2009). In one of their most unequivocal conclusions, these authors found that there has been an ‘almost total elimination of hints of snobbishness or expression of condescension towards other social classes’ and they conclude accordingly that ‘the British *rarely* seem to use aesthetic preferences as indicators of social worth’ (194). Clearly, these findings are strongly divergent to those I report here. However, rather than dispute Bennett et al’s clearly extensive and robust findings, I would like to argue only that their study may have missed areas of cultural consumption, such as comedy, where symbolic divisions are markedly higher than the norm. As Lawler (2005: 797) has noted, contemporary processes of stratification are *dynamic*, and researchers should be vigilant that categories such as social class are continually being redrawn and remade through new areas of taste distinction such as comedy.

In fact, my findings suggest that comedy’s capacity to mark social boundaries may be relatively unique, and bound up with comedy’s inextricable relationship with everyday uses of humour. For example, while they may not map onto each other perfectly, it is logical to assume that there is much overlap between what people find humorous in comedy and what they find humorous in everyday life. As Trever neatly summed up ‘there’s something fundamental about what makes you laugh’. Moreover, humour is a pivotal lubricant in social interaction, acting as an immediate marker of one’s ability to communicate with others. Whereas shared humour is usually a foundational ingredient of friendship, trust and intimacy, its absence often delineates an unbridgeable social divide. It marks out - usually with immediate effect - difference. Considering the centrality of humour to constituting ‘us’ and ‘them’ in everyday life, it is perhaps not surprising that it also performs a similar function in

terms of what one finds artistically humorous. Indeed, as any reader who has ever watched comedy where they are the *only one* laughing can testify (or indeed the *only one not* laughing), the absence of shared comedy taste can act as a very powerful marker of social difference.

Theoretical Reassessments

Reflecting on these findings, I believe they may have some significant theoretical implications. In particular, they reveal some small but not insignificant weaknesses in Bourdieu's theoretical apparatus. It is important to remember that, as Wacquant (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:xiii–xiv) famously remarked, 'Bourdieu's work is not free of contradictions, gaps, tensions, puzzlements, and unresolved questions,' and therefore thinking with Bourdieu can necessitate thinking beyond and against Bourdieu where required (Sweetman, 2003). Following in this vein, I believe my findings point to a more nuanced contemporary understanding of cultural capital, particularly in terms of the concept's ability to explain the relationship between cultural taste and social stratification.

First, it must be acknowledged that Bourdieu's inert and one-dimensional characterisation of popular culture (Fowler, 1997; Shusterman, 2000) is outdated in a British context. While Bourdieu (1984: 270-2) saw cultural forms such as comedy as homologous with the sub-field of mass production, this book has demonstrated that the contemporary field of comedy is characterised, first, by a huge diversity of both mass *and* restricted production, and second, by highly stratified patterns of consumption.

Second, the book has demonstrated that future studies of cultural capital must move away from solely focusing on the quantitative significance of tastes for certain hallowed 'objects' of culture, whether individual items, genres or even entire art forms. In a cultural field where production and consumption is constantly changing, it is rarely possible to identify these objects as having invariant high or low status. All too often studies make the mistake of flippantly assigning these unstable labels and

subsequently go on to produce unreliable findings⁵². While I am not advocating abandoning such quantitative analysis - I use it myself here - I believe such work should ideally be carried out in conjunction with qualitative enquiry. The advantage of this kind of data is that it allows for an examination of not just *what* culture people consume, but *how* they consume; their embodied style of appreciation. Considering the increasing complexity of the cultural field, I believe it is only by looking at this *modality of consumption* that future researchers will be able to discern the real contemporary power of cultural capital - as a resource most recognised and most effectively *cashd in* via the embodied performance of distinction.

It is also worth noting two additional ways that this book builds on *existing* critiques of Bourdieusian social theory. First, the book has underlined some of the difficulties of working with Bourdieu's notion of habitus. Although I believe the concept still provides a persuasive account of the way in which one's conditions of existence secures at least a probabilistic chance of obtaining homologous cultural capital resources through education and occupation, it is important to note the increasingly diverse ways this unity can be threatened. In particular, my findings support Goldthorpe's (2007) assertion that the British education system does not always simply reproduce people's cultural capital resources, but in many cases can actually create valuable new resources. Similarly, it is hard to ignore that 30% of my sample reported mixed cultural capital resources that were due, in the majority of cases, to upward mobility. While some such short-range journeys may be understood as expressions of what Bourdieu sees as the band of one's 'possible trajectories', this is harder to apply to the many cases of long-range social mobility. My data also indicated that Bourdieu's habitus underestimates the extent to which individuals are 'inter-subjective' entities (Bottero, 2010), whose cultural capital resources are affected by 'multiple socialising agents' (Lahire, 2006) throughout the lifecourse, such as friends and partners, and who sometimes make consumption choices due to context or politeness rather than always under the unconscious force of habitus.

⁵² Limiting myself to just one of many examples concerning comedy, Miles and Sullivan (2010) generate a television taste map from the DCMS Taking Part survey which situates those with taste for 'comedy' in the 'lowbrow' quadrant of the map. Considering the findings of this research, the validity of this result is seriously compromised.

Second, the book also supports recent critiques that have questioned the validity of Kantian disinterestedness as the sole aesthetic logic that holds the notion of habitus and cultural capital together (Bennett et al, 1999; Bennett et al, 2009). My findings differ from some in indicating that the shadow of this aesthetic lens *does* still underwrite comic appreciation styles in important ways. However, it also clearly shows that the culturally privileged use moral, political and even emotional criteria to distance themselves from other groups. In this regard, the book reiterates Lamont's (1992) assertion that the significance of such symbolic boundaries should be explicitly examined, rather than assumed in the way Bourdieu (1984) often implied it could. Thus systematic differences in taste between those of different social groups does not necessarily imply a zero-sum field in which the privileged exert symbolic violence on those below. For example, this book finds that certain divisions in comedy taste, such as that based on moral or political values, are not easily mapped hierarchically and are often fiercely contested.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the book presents a significant challenge to the increasingly influential Cultural Omnivore Thesis (Peterson and Kern, 1996; Bennett et al, 2009). In particular, my findings somewhat puncture the celebratory air of much of this research, which has equated omnivorousness with the breakdown of symbolic boundaries. Among my sample, the only signs I found of true comedy omnivorousness were among the upwardly mobile. However, contrary to work that presumes that omnivorousness is a consciously adopted lifestyle choice (Featherstone, 2007), my findings indicated that it was more likely to reflect the upward or downward trajectory of one's cultural capital resources. Indeed, this may suggest that trends towards omnivorousness in Britain, for example, may be more reflective of consistent rates of absolute social mobility than purposeful democratising strategies. This is a potentially telling distinction, as it also problematises the widely held notion that omnivorousness itself always constitutes a form of cultural capital (Bennett et al, 2009: 254) or yields social benefits (Bryson, 1996; Erickson, 1996). Instead, my data indicated that traversing the taste hierarchy often had more negative than positive social implications. Certainly, possessing a

working knowledge of all mainstream comedy may be useful for forging weak bonds in settings like the workplace, but the significance of this may be superseded by the harmful effects of combining tastes many consider to be contradictory.

Accordingly, I suggested in Chapter 6 that most MCC respondents appeared less culturally omnivorous and more *culturally homeless*. Stuck between two dominant taste cultures, they were often plagued by a lingering insecurity or uneasiness when communicating their comedy tastes, and often reported awkward social reactions when they deployed LCC tastes in HCC-dominated environments and vice versa. While such findings were of course restricted to the field of comedy, they nonetheless indicated that future studies of omnivorousness would do well to pay closer attention to both *how* omnivorous taste is established, and also what positive *and negative* implications result from deploying such diverse taste in social life.

The Limits of This Research

While I believe the data collected and analysis carried out here has been robust, there have been several noteworthy drawbacks. Most of these were methodological. The most obvious was perhaps the fact that my survey involved a non-probability sample collected at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. As mentioned in my methodology, this meant the sample had a skew that under-represented those with low cultural capital resources, those from ethnic minority backgrounds, and most probably those from non-Scottish and non-urban areas. Such sampling issues had obvious implications for the representativeness of the study, and it's worth reiterating that I do not claim that my findings constitute sweeping generalisations about British comedy taste that will necessarily stand good over time.

It is also worth noting that the problems I encountered with representativeness extended beyond simply the statistical distribution of the sample. In particular, I am aware that the interviews I carried out may not have provided the best means of 'representing' LCC comedy taste. This is primarily because of the cultural capital resources demanded by the interview context, which was arguably inherently tailored

towards the ‘elaborate’ linguistic code of HCC respondents. However, the stilted flow of LCC interviews was also caused by my own sense of unease and inability to create rapport. Acutely aware of my own culturally privileged background, I lacked the linguistic terms of reference to build relationships with these respondents, and this no doubt had a profound impact on the quality of data gleaned from these interviews (see Methodological Appendix for further detail).

Finally, it is worth acknowledging the study’s weaknesses in examining the potential *convertibility* and *transmissibility* of cultural capital. For example, although individual respondents may regard comedy taste as a status marker, the study has not been able to show how such respondents may be activating and deploying comedy taste in social interaction, and subsequently how it might be converted into forms of social and economic capital. In a U.S context, Lizardo has (2006) argued convincingly that sharing ‘highbrow’ cultural tastes is likely to produce the kind of strong-tie networks that yield social capital, but this is clearly an area that needs further investigation in relation to British comedy. Similarly, although there may be some evidence of HCC respondents transposing their comic aesthetic to other cultural fields, this issue of transmission is not adequately understood. In order to definitively establish the role of comedy taste in processes of cultural distinction, it is arguably imperative to examine the currency of comedy taste *in direct relation* to other forms of cultural taste.

Future Directions

Despite its drawbacks, this research points towards a number of exciting and important avenues for future sociological enquiry. While a more representative study of British comedy taste would certainly help to fill gaps left by the book, I believe a more useful strategy would be to conduct a larger study that examines taste for all forms of British popular culture. This is because, in many ways, I see this book as a case study for popular cultural consumption in general, one that illustrates how previously discredited realms may be being utilised as sites in the redrawing of class cultures and the pursuit of distinction. A future study would therefore do well to hone in on cultural areas normally left out of large-scale studies of cultural consumption, such as advertising, travel, food, magazines, fashion, musical theatre, night-time

leisure, cyberculture, toys and street dance, and interrogate whether new forms of distinction are also being expressed here.

Another much needed innovation in cultural sociology is a detailed, ethnographic examination of how taste is actually deployed in everyday life (Goffman, 1959). This kind of study would provide vital data on the ‘micro-political’ element of distinction, in particular illuminating much neglected issues of cultural capital conversion and transmission. For example, while consumption patterns may tell us how much cultural capital an individual possesses, it does not tell us how successful this individual is in converting such capital into other forms of social or economic profit. After all, as Bourdieu (1976) himself noted, those with the same levels of capital will not always derive the same profits. Indeed, he compared this process to a card game whereby a player is dealt a hand but his ability to succeed depends on his gamesmanship or in cultural capital terms, his investment strategies. Such ethnographic data may also, crucially, illuminate the *weight* of different forms of cultural capital. It would detail how people experience *signals* of objectified and embodied cultural capital, and what kind of impact each carries in social interaction⁵³.

The book also points to future directions in the sociology of comedy and humour. In particular, I believe it highlights the need for further enquiry into the role of humour in British everyday life. For example, the book has uncovered that comedy marks very strong symbolic boundaries, but it has been unable to definitively answer *why*. One potential explanation is that comedy taste is closely bound up with the way people use humour to establish social bonds. However, further enquiry into this suggestion is needed. The research also provides fertile ground for cross-cultural comparison. While Friedman and Kuipers (2012) have provided a largely corroborative study of British and Dutch comedy taste, there are also many other countries, such as the USA, Australia and Canada, where comedy also represents a large cultural industry, but where traditionally culture has played a lesser role in marking out social distinctions (Lamont, 1992; Bennett et al,1999). It would

⁵³ One study that may begin to answer these kinds of questions is currently being conducted by Bradley and Atkinson at the University of Bristol. Entitled ‘Ordinary Lives’, this ethnographic study aims to interrogate the reproduction of class in everyday life.

therefore be illuminating to see the significance of comedy taste within and across these national contexts, as well as in European countries such as Italy, Spain and France, where comedy is a much less established art form.

Such comparisons may also illuminate if and how British comedy, in general, may function as a form of ‘national cultural capital’ (Bennett et al, 2009; 258-9). For instance, many researchers have commented on the distinctive and eminent international status of British comedy and the British sense of humour (Mills, 2005; Easthope, 2000), and British comedians certainly have a long history of success abroad. A fruitful line of enquiry may therefore be an examination of whether comedy, as a distinct area of culture, is central to notions of national belonging in Britain and also whether it carries currency as a form of taste in international contexts.

Funny to Whom?

At the beginning of this book, I recounted the media storm that erupted in January 2011 when BBC1 Controller Danny Cohen declared that BBC comedy had become ‘too middle class’ (Gammell, 2011). As I explained, Cohen’s comments were immediately followed by a chorus of outrage from those working within and around the comedy industry. Comedians, writers, journalists and critics were all in agreement Cohen had missed the one universal that underpinned comedy – funniness.

My suspicion as a long-serving comedy critic, however, has always been that such notions of ‘universal funniness’ are entirely fictional. And, in many ways, the findings of this book have only acted to cement my misgivings. In particular, they have highlighted - unequivocally - that British people do not find the same things funny. On the contrary, quantitative and qualitative data has shown that the British sense of humour is highly stratified, especially according to *when* and *how* one was brought up.

Yet although this main finding may have confounded the views of most working in the comedy industry, I also think it offers some insight into why such notions of ‘universal funniness’ prevail in British society. I think it’s possible to argue, for

example, that when commentators assert that a comedian, a sketch or a joke is universally funny, what they really mean is that they think it is universally *good*, that it should be considered universally 'valuable'. This is important because these commentators play a pivotal role in defining what the British public see as 'good' comedy. As cultural intermediaries, they are endowed with the cultural authority to publicly assess what is and what isn't good comedy. And while their judgments may not correspond to what a lot of British people *actually* find funny, these same people nonetheless tend to concede the value and legitimacy of such judgments (as demonstrated in Chapter 8).

Indeed, it is this point that I believe gets closest to the crux of the book.

Fundamentally, there is no such thing as universal comedy, only competing versions of what is and isn't funny and ongoing struggles over what is and isn't 'good' humour. However, sociologically, what is important is that British society tends to value certain versions of funniness or 'good comedy' over others. In fact, the version that dominates is not only that which is communicated by cultural intermediaries, it is also the version most valued by the culturally privileged. In turn, in their hands, this version of comic value - distilled into certain comic tastes and styles - becomes a form of cultural currency. It can be deployed in social life as a resource, an asset and a capital, and in doing so communicates a powerful sense of cultural distinction.

Appendix 1: Methodological Appendix

As the theoretical underpinnings of this book are rooted in the work of Bourdieu, it follows that the research design was also strongly influenced by his methodological approach. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984) employed a range of methods to investigate cultural taste, using survey analysis alongside interviews, textual analysis and photo analysis. Thus, in order to engage with Bourdieu on his own terms, employing a mixed methodology was a key component of my research design. This brief appendix aims to give a chronological outline of how I conducted the research in this book. It begins by explaining the main elements of the research design – the survey and follow-up interviews. It explains how both these methods were conceived, executed and also the potential methodological advantages that were gained from their triangulation. Finally, it explains the use of textual analysis to analyse comedy reviews and the ‘go-along’ ethnography conducted with comedy scouts.

The Survey and Its Analysis

The Sample

As I wanted to carry out a relatively large survey but lacked the resources (in terms of time and money) to carry out a random probability sample of all British adults, I decided to administer my survey at the 2009 Edinburgh Festival Fringe. The Fringe was chosen primarily because it represents the focal point of the British comedy

industry and contains by far the largest concentration of comedy consumers in any one place at any one time in Britain.

In terms of sampling, the transient nature of Fringe festivalgoers meant that the true 'population' of comedy consumers at the Fringe was impossible to document. However, in order to sample with the most realistic concern for randomisation, the survey used the sampling frame of the Fringe programme and took a systematic random sample of every 20th comedy show. The survey was then distributed (via clipboard) at each of the chosen shows (n=34), surveying audiences as they went into the performance and again as they came out⁵⁴. The overall survey response rate was very high (approximately 90%). This was most likely due to the leisure context in which I was administering the survey. People were generally relaxed and sociable, and had time 'to kill' before going into a show. The final achieved sample size was 901 (46 spoiled surveys were discarded⁵⁵).

It is important to note that previous research has indicated that Edinburgh Festival Fringe audiences tend to be disproportionately drawn from middle class backgrounds rich in cultural capital (The Fringe Society, 2009; Ferguson, 2013). Such a sampling skew appears to be somewhat confirmed in my sample. As Table 1 illustrates, 31% of the sample were from 'low cultural capital' (LCC) backgrounds, 30% from 'mixed cultural capital' (MCC) backgrounds and 39% from 'high cultural capital' backgrounds (HCC)⁵⁶. Although this skew was smaller than I expected, it does nonetheless differ strongly from the probability sample of British occupational class recently reported by Bennett et al (2009: 55). These authors find Britain still dominated by a working class population twice the size of a privileged 'professional-executive' class. It's important to consider that the survey used in this study may

⁵⁴ For example, on the 11th of August 2009, audiences at Julian Clary's 'Lord of the Mince' (Udderbelly Theatre, 9pm) were surveyed in the queue as they waited to go in. 29 questionnaires were collected.

⁵⁵ These surveys were either covered in graffiti or only partially completed.

⁵⁶ The ways these groups were constructed is discussed in the next section.

therefore under represent British comedy consumers with less cultural capital resources⁵⁷.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	LowCC	282	31.2	31.2	31.2
	MixedCC	268	29.8	29.8	61.0
	HighCC	351	39.0	39.0	100.0
	Total	901	100.0	100.0	

Table 1: Cultural Capital Resources of Survey Respondents

As Table 2 illustrates, the gender skew appears minimal with the sample made up of 52% males and 48% female.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	454	50.4	51.8	51.8
	Female	422	46.9	48.2	100.0
	Total	876	97.3	100.0	
Missing	System	25	2.7		
Total		901	100.0		

Table 2: Gender of Survey Respondents

In terms of age, Table 3 demonstrates that the sample does appear to significantly under represent older comedy consumers. Only 15% of the sample were over 45, whereas 68% were under 35. This perhaps reflects the hedonistic atmosphere of the Festival Fringe, which is increasingly aimed at a younger audience. It may also reflect the sensitivities of older respondents, who may be more likely to withhold their age from questionnaires (56 respondents declined to state their age).

⁵⁷ The fact that respondents were sampled at an arts festival also indicates that CC groups may not be representative, as they disproportionately represent those who are already ‘culturally engaged’.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	12-24	236	26.2	28.0	28.0
	25-34	342	38.0	40.5	68.5
	35-44	142	15.8	16.8	85.3
	45-54	75	8.3	8.9	94.2
	55-64	38	4.2	4.5	98.7
	65-90	12	1.2	1.3	100.0
	Total	844	93.8	100.0	
Missing	System	56	6.2		
Total		901	100.0		

Table 3: Age of Survey Respondents

Unfortunately, the survey did not record respondents' ethnic backgrounds or place of residence. However, my anecdotal recollection of the sample combined with my general perception of the Fringe leads me to believe that the sample also significantly underrepresented British persons from ethnic minorities and those from outside Scotland and outside London.

Questionnaire Design

The main intention of the questionnaire was to measure people's 'comedy taste'. Respondents were therefore asked to indicate their preferences for 16 stand-up comedians, 16 TV comedy shows and 7 comedy genres, using a four point scale of 'like', 'neither like nor dislike', 'dislike' and 'have not heard of'. The inclusion of respondent's dislikes as well as their preferences was important, as previous research has indicated how important cultural aversion can be in the erection of symbolic boundaries (Lamont, 1992; Bennett et al, 2009). Similarly, a 'have not heard of' category was added to reflect concerns that taste boundaries often revolve around levels of 'cultural knowledge' (Kuipers, 2006). Finally, the questionnaire also asked a number of questions relating to comedy reviews and criticism.

In preparing the stand-up and TV comedy questions I aimed to identify a range of items that represented the full spectrum of the British comedy field. In order to avoid bias towards particular social groups or taste communities, the items were selected on the advice of a small panel of professionals working in the comedy industry. The

panel was made up of Dave⁵⁸, owner of a prominent comedy PR company, Leigh, an award-winning comedian and Edward, an experienced national newspaper comedy critic. I also drew upon my own knowledge and experience as a comedy critic and publisher in the field. In conjunction with the panel, the reputation of a range of comedy items were debated and finally a list was constructed that aimed to represent all areas of the comedy field. The structure and layout of the questionnaire was informed by a pilot survey which was carried out at the Glasgow Comedy Festival in May 2009 (n=55).

The survey also asked a number of demographic questions in order to construct variables for gender, age and ‘cultural capital resources’. While the first two are self-explanatory, the construction of ‘cultural capital resources’ needs to be unpacked. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984: 128-29) measured cultural capital by looking at a respondent’s social origin (an aggregate of the occupation and educational qualifications of the respondent’s father and paternal grandfather) and their own education. However, as explained in my literature review, I build on subsequent literature in arguing that cultural capital should be seen as a set of ‘resources’ that are yielded from three significant avenues of acculturation and socialisation (Holt, 1997; Lamont, 1988) – social origin, education and occupation.

My variable of ‘cultural capital resources’ was therefore made up of equally weighted measures for social origin (parental occupation and education), education, and occupation. This operationalisation of cultural capital updated Bourdieu’s work in two important ways. First, in order to reflect advances in women’s educational and occupational achievement since *Distinction*, I measured respondent’s social origin in terms of both paternal and maternal occupation and education. Second, I included respondent’s own occupation as a third cultural capital ‘resource’. This follows work by Collins (1975), Willis (1979) Erickson (1996), Holt (1997, 1998) and recently Lahire (2007) that emphasises the significance of the work environment as a site for acculturation (See Chapter 3 for more detail on this).

⁵⁸ Pseudonyms have been used to protect anonymity

Indeed, the inclusion of occupation as a measure of cultural capital was later validated during interviews, with many respondents describing the impact of their work environments on their comedy taste. To give just two examples:

I think the main thing that makes people laugh is getting hurt. Not extremely hurt, but hurt. I mean in my line of work people get hurt all the time. Y'know they cut their hand open or something. I mean it's fucking hilarious. You know it's not going to drop off or they're going to die from it. Y'know, it happens to us all. One time it might be me. The next it might be Joe, or James over there. It happens to us all in the course of the week. You tend to laugh at things like that (Finn)

Working for [arts organisation], I suppose you just find yourself taking more interest in culture. Sometimes we have comedy gigs in the theatre here, as well, so everyone in the office will just head down after work to check it out, it's just kind of automatic (Frank).

Finally, the combined cultural capital resources possessed by each respondent were calculated by way of an aggregate 'score' for each of the measures outlined. The calculation of this Cultural Capital 'Score' was made as follows: 'Education' was calculated on a scale of seven in terms of 'highest completed', ranging from 'left school at 16' to 'completed a PhD'. This a scale adapted adapted from Bourdieu (1992).

'Occupation' was computed on a scale of nine corresponding to the jobs which most emphasise 'cultural skills'. This is a relatively unorthodox approach to measuring respondent's 'level' of employment, adapted from a similar scale used by Peterson and Simkus (1992: 154-6). They argue that most scales generally group together occupations that have vastly different 'job conditions' and require highly contrasting levels of 'cultural skill'. The scale used here is subsequently an attempt to reflect more accurately the *cultural* hierarchy of occupations (and thus the cultural capital resources they endow). Although it is very similar to conventional occupational scales, there are a few notable differences. For example, the category 'artists' is higher in the scale than 'higher managerial' (including business owners and high-ranking managers), a distinction usually the other way round in occupational scales.

Finally, social origin was calculated by recording *both* parents' education and *both* parents' occupation when the respondent was 14. The figure for each of these three measures was then collapsed into a score out of 5 to make a total score out of 15. This is an updated version of the scale used by Holt (1997, 1998).

However, unlike Holt, this study identified three rather than two main cultural capital groups from the data – those with high resources (score >10), those with low resources (score <8) and those with mixed resources (score 8-10). It is important to note that this three-group model was not the result of pre-determined boundaries, but instead a schema that fits most closely with the comedy taste distinctions uncovered in the data. Thus I do not claim that the three cultural capital groups contain any special explanatory power or class-like qualities (in the Marxist sense), rather that their borders identify the most salient divisions in social space resonating from cultural capital resources. They represent what Bourdieu (1998: 10-12) termed the most useful 'theoretical divisions' – which 'bring together agents who are as [demographically] similar to each other as possible and as different as possible from members of other classes' (ibid)⁵⁹. Typically, those with high resources were university graduates or post-graduates employed in professional occupations. They also tended to have at least one parent (and often both) with a similar educational and occupational profile. In contrast, those with low resources tended to have only GCSE or A-level equivalent qualifications and were employed in more manual or skilled jobs. Again, their parents typically had similar profiles. Those with mixed resources tended to either come from intermediate class backgrounds, or have distinctly upwardly mobile trajectories (although there were some cases of downward mobility). (See Appendix 2 for a fuller description of all interviewees).

⁵⁹ It is worth noting that although these respondents were grouped together, this does not mean they necessarily had had temporally static positions in social space. Instead, HCC and LCC respondents often had short-range upward or downward occupational and educational trajectories, but these trajectories rarely radically altered their cultural capital resources.

Multiple Correspondence Analysis

In order to analyse survey responses, I followed the example of Bourdieu (1984), Coulangeon and Lemely (2007) and more recently Bennett et al (2009) in using Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA)⁶⁰. MCA is a form of principal component analysis but unlike other multivariate techniques, it does not begin by defining dependent variables and then showing how independent variables may be causally related to them. Instead, its starting point is *inductive* and refrains from pre-judging the potential relationships in the data. Taste variables are therefore categorised into modalities and then using geometric analysis two visual maps are constructed, one for the ‘cloud of modalities’ and one for the ‘cloud of individuals’. From these maps, the principal axes are then identified and interpreted (Le Roux and Rouanet, 2004).

The axes separate individual responses relationally, in this case assessing the relationship between different modalities of comedy taste. Thus by comparing one respondent’s pattern of comedy taste in relation to every other respondent, it was possible to plot the symbolic distance between the mean points of each modality in the map. In short, this meant that if everyone who liked Eddie Izzard also liked Bernard Manning then these modalities would occupy the same position in the map and vice versa. MCA therefore provided a useful visual tool for understanding which items of respondent’s comedy taste were clustered together⁶¹.

As Bennett et al (2009: 44) note, there are three additional methodological advantages in using MCA. First, it allowed me to understand the major patterns in my data without ‘smuggling in assumptions about the social determinants of taste’. Thus the key axes were constructed solely in relation to the relationships detected between the modalities of comedy taste, and were not subject to any explanatory variables. However, proceeding from this inductive position, the second attractive attribute of MCA is that it allowed for social demographic measures to be superimposed onto the initial cloud of modalities (without affecting its coordinates) to establish whether they

⁶⁰ It is important to note that alongside MCA, I also employed a number of more conventional statistical techniques. For example, frequencies and cross-tabulations were also employed to describe and corroborate the associations between comedy taste items and social demographic variables.

⁶¹ The visual appeal of MCA also means it is useful for engaging academic audiences normally uncomfortable with the statistical presentation of quantitative analysis (Miles and Sullivan 2010).

were associated with comedy taste. Finally, the third advantage of using MCA is that it defines the ‘cloud of individuals’, which allowed me to locate every single respondent along the same coordinates as the modalities of comedy taste. Significantly, the cloud of individuals included all the information from the supplementary variables and therefore I was able to see which groups of individuals (i.e. male vs. female, HCC vs. LCC) were located close to each other in the map. Finally, as Figure 5.1 illustrates, the cloud of individuals also ensured that I could pinpoint the location of each of my subsequent interviewees, linking their interview testimony to their survey responses. As Silva et al (2008: 4) note, this allowed for ‘a rich dialogue’ to evolve ‘between quantitative and qualitative data’.

However, it must be noted, there are some limitations of thinking about social space in purely geometrical terms. As Bennett et al (2009: 34) note, there is a danger that separating comedy tastes geometrically artificially polarised oppositions between different respondents. For example, survey responses could not measure the strength of comedy preferences, which may have revealed oppositions to be less meaningful than the survey data presented. Furthermore, neither survey data nor MCA could adequately reveal *why* respondents liked the comedy they did and what aesthetic criteria they deployed when articulating their preferences. As I felt these questions were crucial to understanding the symbolic importance of comedy taste, I decided it was necessary to triangulate survey methodology with qualitatively-focused interviews.

Interviews and Their Analysis

Sampling

Sampling for the interviews was based on a theoretically defined sub-sample of the original survey respondents. Of these, 29% (n = 277) indicated that they were happy to be interviewed and from this I selected a final list of 24. These respondents were chosen primarily to reflect the demographic distribution of the survey sample. Thus there were 9 interviewees with high cultural capital resources, 8 with mixed resources

and 7 with low resources. I also tried to reflect the gender proportions from the survey, resulting in 13 male interviewees and 11 female, and the age proportions, resulting in 11 interviews with those under 35, 9 with those between 35-54 and 4 with those over 55. Finally, I tried to account for a spread of geographical locations, including a mixture of those living in urban and rural areas. Interviews eventually took place in Edinburgh, Glasgow and London, and included many respondents from more rural areas who kindly travelled into urban centres to meet me. Some of the living locations of these respondents included Linlithgow, Dunbar, Bonyrigg, Salford, Motherwell and Essex. In order to ensure that comedy taste judgments did not alter significantly during the time lag between the survey and the interviews, I conducted all interviews between the middle of October and the middle of December 2009. A few days before each interview, I also emailed each respondent a list of YouTube clips that gave brief examples of every comedian and comedy TV show on the survey. As I was asking about multiple comedy items - some of which are not currently in the public domain - this technique was used as a way of reorienting respondents to the subject matter before the interview. My semi-structured interview schedule focused on six main themes: comedy taste items included in the survey; comedy taste items not included in the survey; aesthetic criteria underpinning comedy taste; importance of comedy reviews to taste judgments; the drawing of symbolic boundaries on the basis of comedy taste; and respondents background, career and lifecourse

The Issue of 'Flow'

My aim during the interviews was to establish a conversational style, whereby a relaxed exchange could ensue. However, I found that the 'flow' of interviews varied significantly according to the cultural capital resources of respondents. For example, although the interview schedule was the same for each respondent, the length of interviews varied between 1hr and 48 minutes for HCC Dale and 47 minutes for LCC Dan.

Perhaps not surprisingly, HCC respondents were most comfortable in the interview setting. These respondents seemed at ease with my professional status as a researcher

and spoke to me on equal terms, encouraging a two-way dialogue. They offered detailed, elaborate and critically distanced views on comedy taste and were notably reflexive when talking about their own lives. As someone with similar cultural capital resources, I also felt most comfortable in these interviews. In fact, the rapport I built with some HCC respondents was so strong that, at times, I believe I was able to access what Goffman (1969) termed 'backstage' insight into the thoughts, judgments and prejudices of these respondents. This was most clearly demonstrated when these respondents talked about the way they viewed those who had contrasting comedy tastes to their own. While recent research has highlighted the absence of boundary-drawing in contemporary 'taste talk' (Bennett, 2009), I instead found that HCC respondents were often happy to draw very aggressive boundaries on the basis of comedy taste (see Chapter 7).

In contrast, the interview experience seemed difficult for most LCC respondents. Answers were much shorter, less reflexive, less detailed and respondents seemed to reveal only their 'front stage' selves. For example, a stock LCC response to my asking why he/she liked a comedy item was 'because it's funny' or 'because it makes me laugh'. These responses were often followed by an uncomfortable silence as I waited for respondents to elaborate on an answer that they obviously felt needed no further explanation or justification.

The fact that LCC interviewees were notably less reflexive and offered less explanation about their comedy tastes could be used to argue that comedy held less significance to these respondents. However, as Skeggs et al (2008: 9-11) convincingly argue, this discrepancy probably had more to do with how cultural capital resources are activated in different research encounters. These authors argue that successful interviewing relies on a respondent having skills such as self-reflexivity, but they go on to argue that access to such linguistic skills is itself reliant on cultural capital resources. Thus, the interview context may have been inherently tailored towards the 'elaborate' linguistic code of HCC respondents and inherently incompatible with the 'restricted' code of LCC respondents (Bernstein, 1971).

It must be noted, however, that the stilted flow of interviews with LCC respondents was as much to do with my own inability to create rapport. Mindful of Bourdieu's (1999: 607-626) call for researchers to undertake 'participant objectification' and reflect on the impact of their own 'social coordinates' when interviewing those with less capital resources, I tried to create an interview relationship characterised by 'active and methodical listening', where my primary role was to be 'totally available' to each respondent and submit without intervention 'to the singularity of their life histories'. However, in many ways, this reflexive attempt to reduce the distorting effect of my own presence and reduce the 'symbolic violence' exerted through the interview relationship was wildly unrealistic. In particular, as my lifecourse and social experience has thus far been relatively 'class homogenous' (Seidman, 1998: 154), I continually felt I lacked the linguistic terms of reference to build a comfortable relationship with LCC respondents. I lacked the social proximity to convincingly engage in the kind of 'controlled imitation' of these respondents' language, views and feelings that Bourdieu (1999: 607-628) argues is so important for successful data collection. I was also acutely aware of how these respondents viewed me as a university researcher. I cannot say for sure whether they were intimidated by this apparent status difference, but in some cases it did appear to affect taste judgments. For example, a number of respondents who had expressed preferences for certain comedians in the survey, such as Bernard Manning and Roy 'Chubby' Brown, seemed to play down these preferences in the interview. This may have been because they made a mistake on the survey, but I felt it was more because they seemed to be conscious of my moral and aesthetic judgments. It was as if they inferred that expressing preferences for these comedians was not the 'right answer' according to me, the researcher⁶².

It is also important to note that in such instances, although I tried to conceal my own taste judgments, the power of my non-verbal communication may have been significant. For example, I was acutely aware of my presence as interviewer in

⁶² Although such 'discrepant' taste statements may be problematic due to their potential distortion, they also represent highly valuable pieces of data. As Lamont (1992:13) notes, such 'impression management' on the part of respondents arguably revealed their implicit understanding of the cultural hierarchy and their attempts to separate themselves from tastes that they knew to carry low status.

instances when respondents recounted their favourite jokes to me. In these interactive instances, it was very hard to hide my instinctive taste reaction. For example, LCC respondent Laura Craig, an office manager, told me this joke:

I got an email the other day about a gay airline steward. So he was laughing and joking with everyone and then he goes down the plane and says 'ok, the pilot's gonna get this big beastie down on the ground so I want you all to put your trays up. And he's prancing up and down and there's this women and she's got her tray down. And he says excuse me lady, put your tray up. And she turns round and says 'I'm a princess in my country and nobody tells me what to do'. And he turns round and says 'well in my country I'm a queen so I rank you. So bitch get your tray up' (laughs).

When Laura finished telling me this joke she let out a big belly-laugh and looked at me to see my reaction. Unfortunately, I hadn't found the joke funny - to me it was crass and slightly homophobic - and this was clear from my reaction. Again, it's difficult to know what impact this had on the rest of the interview but suffice to say Laura didn't tell any more jokes! Similarly, in some cases my predispositions and non-verbal communication may have acted to signal the comedy that I *do* like. For example, although I never stated my preferences, a number of HCC respondents assumed - presumably from my demeanour - that certain YouTube clips I had sent them were my own favourites. Talking about the clips of Stewart Lee, for instance, arts professional Frank said:

Thank you for sending through those wonderful clips. I assume they must be your favourites? (Silence) Well, thank you, I haven't seen them for a long time and they made me very happy.

Triangulating Quantitative and Qualitative Data

As mentioned, employing mixed methods was a key component of my research design. There are multiple ways in which I believe this was useful. First, the interviews acted as a useful 'check' on the validity of survey data. This was achieved primarily by comparing data from the survey and the interview, but also by locating the exact coordinates of each individual in the 'cloud of individuals'. In most cases, the interview testimonies of respondents situated in similar parts of the two most

important axes of comedy taste were strikingly similar, indicating an encouraging ‘convergence’ in the taste findings yielded from different methods (Erzeberger and Prein, 1997). For instance, Figure 5.1 charts the position of all interviewees along Axes 1 and 2 of the comedy taste MCA. When compared to the taste results detailed in Chapters 4 and 5, it demonstrates a clear coherence between HCC respondents’ elective affinities (in terms of comedy taste) across the survey and interview data.

Interview data was also useful for checking the *validity* of cultural capital ‘scores’ detailed in the survey. As outlined, I generated these scores by quantitatively measuring respondent’s familial socialisation, formal education and occupation. However, such variables could not necessarily guarantee an accurate measurement of an individual’s *real* cultural capital resources. For example, one may have parents in very high status jobs, but in reality they might have little interest in art and culture and therefore communicate little cultural capital to their children. In order to tap the concept of cultural capital more effectively, then, I used interviews to ask respondents open-ended questions about the role of culture in their upbringing, education and occupation. In the main, this interview data supported the cultural capital scores obtained from the survey.

Respondents who I anticipated from survey responses to have a high level of cultural capital generally verified this assumption. In these cases, it was generally family upbringing and education that appeared to be the most powerful tools in the accumulation of cultural capital resources. For example, these respondents described growing up in households where art and culture was deliberately *foregrounded*:

We went to the theatre a lot, and there was always lots of books in the house, Your typical middle class cultural background, I suppose. I was taken to see Shakespeare when I was very young and was always taken to the cinema to see what my parents termed ‘good’ films rather than the latest blockbusters. My mum and dad always took me to things that were in general a wee bit more challenging. And so, yes, I was always brought up to always respect the cultural part of my life and make sure it was a large part of my life (Dale).

In some cases, this privileged cultural background even extended to the specific communication of knowledge about legitimate forms of comedy:

With my parents, culture was a really big priority. And my dad was really into comedy, so I was brought up with like *Rising Damp* and all the old Marx Brothers films. He would tape things for me and make sure I watched them. So from a young age I really appreciated it. I remember literally falling off my chair watching the chair scene in *Duck Soup*, the Marx Brothers film (Trever).

For HCC respondents, the role of education was also central in the development of their cultural competence. In particular, many mentioned university - or their social life during university - as playing a key role in the development of their comedy tastes. Frank, an arts professional, described university as a period of “broadening horizons”, and Andrew (IT Manager) and Kira (environmental consultant) both explained how, during this time, they first started to go to “alternative” comedy nights at their university student union. In addition, although it was never discussed explicitly, some interviews with HCC respondents suggested that their orientation to comedy had been influenced by the educational experience of university. For example, Frank compared his interest in comedy to his master’s degree in philosophy:

Modern comedy for me has become not a million miles away from what drove me to do a philosophy degree and what I loved in that. It’s that comedians are discussers of ideas, point stuff out to us, remind us of stuff, makes us think more deeply about stuff.

Similarly, interviews with LCC respondents also largely validated survey scores. In particular, the role of culture in LCC descriptions of upbringing and education were conspicuous in their absence. These respondents described sparse cultural backgrounds, and often laughed at the incongruous suggestion that art could have played a large role in their childhood:

SF: Did your parents introduce you to a lot of art and culture when you were growing up?

Ivan (hairdresser): (laughs) My dad is a builder and my mum is a housewife. I don’t think they’ve ever even been to an Art Gallery in their life. The only way they would go to a theatre is if I was in something. So no art and culture was something I had to find out for myself.”

I grew up in South West Scotland so the closest Theatre was 35 miles away (laughs). So we might have gone to the occasional pantomime. But my parents weren't into the arts. My mother's always lived within about 20 miles of where she was born in Dumfries and Galloway. She's never really lived in a city so she's never had exposure to arts. She might have loved it, but she never really had the exposure (Dave, events assistant).

The Problem of Genre

Although interviews mainly displayed a homology with survey data, there were a number of instances where interview findings showed signs of 'dissonance'. In some cases this dissonance seemed to be due to relatively innocent errors, such as respondents making mistakes on hurriedly completed surveys or data inputting errors. In other cases, though, it was more serious. For example, in the survey, respondents were asked to indicate their preferences for seven genres of comedy. Initially, this question appeared to yield significant results. It indicated that preferences for certain genres such as political, critical-observational and surreal comedy were strongly associated with respondents with high cultural capital resources and genres such as obscene and trad-observational comedy were strongly associated with those with low resources. Such a finding had important implications, suggesting that it was not just comedy items that carried objectified cultural capital, but also 'highbrow' *genres* of comedy. However, when this finding was interrogated during interviews, its explanatory power began to unravel.

Interviewees were perplexed by questions concerning comedy genres. In particular, most felt genres were too broad to simply like or dislike:

I think genres mean something in terms of the broad direction that someone is going to take, but I quite like horror films, but there's only certain types I like, even though they're all fitted into one genre. I think most people have got a variety of things they like and I don't think anybody in the real world, except for perhaps in some sort of marketing man's wet dream, who will just buy everything that exists in one genre (Melissa).

There was also a sense that respondents felt the boundaries between genres were too porous, and most people constructed their own subjective definitions of what each genre meant. As Sarah noted, 'You can bring your own associations for what things are'. Similarly, Laura noted:

What do you mean by physical comedy? Does he fall about onstage? Is he a clown? What do you mean by physical? It can mean a lot of things.

Finally, some noted that the question was problematic because most comedians straddle multiple genres. Thus, whether one enjoys a genre or not is completely dependent on the comedian. For instance, Trever told me:

And then you've got certain performers that just defy genres. Like Hans Teeuwen, you could pretty much put him in all the genres you mentioned, the same with Simon Munnery. And you could put Phil Nicol in most...

This widespread hostility towards genre boundaries constituted a highly significant finding. In the main, it illustrated the obvious limitations of over-generalised survey questions and the 'dissonance' that can emerge from conducting data analysis across different methods. While my interviewees had all happily filled out a survey question about genre preferences, interviews revealed that most had strong reservations about the validity of such a question. This demonstrates how survey categories can sometimes 'force' participants into stating preferences that they do not necessarily hold. In turn, this can also lead to misplaced or misleading data that can misrepresent the tastes of subjects. Indeed, as Silva and Wright (2007) note, it is only through qualitatively examining people's 'lived experience' that one is able to identify such 'errors'. In this case, having uncovered such a finding, I felt I had no choice but to completely remove genres from my analysis.

This finding has potential implications for other researchers who have used, and continue to use, genres as a valid measure of cultural taste (Bennett et al, 2009; Goldthorpe and Chan, 2007). It demonstrates that genres can constitute unhelpful categories in taste research, because audiences assign very different meanings and levels of legitimacy to items that derive from the same genre (Phillips, 2005). One way to counter this problem, as I do here, is to analyse taste at the level of individual cultural items. Using this approach, respondents at least have a shared understanding of what 'object' they are judging.

Linguistic Textual Analysis

As well as the central triangulation of survey and interview data, the book also used textual analysis to examine the role of comedy reviews in the legitimization of certain comedy tastes and styles of appreciation. Again this approach was in-keeping with the methodological spirit of Bourdieu, who also used textual analysis in *Distinction*. However, while Bourdieu's textual vignettes were wide, informal and again illustrative, my aim here was to provide a more systematic and focused analysis of comedy reviews. The textual analysis drew upon reviews of five different comedians at the 2009 Edinburgh Festival Fringe, all of whom were all also included in the original survey; Stewart Lee, Hans Teeuwen, Simon Amstell, Michael McIntyre and Jim Bowen. Although this was a small non-probability sample, the comedians were nonetheless chosen to reflect the diversity of British comedy genres and the different taste communities uncovered in the survey. For instance, Stewart Lee and Hans Teeuwen are both highly satirical and avant-garde comedians who were predominantly popular among HCC respondents; Simon Amstell and Michael McIntyre were popular TV comedians who are known for their observational style and are largely popular with all survey respondents; and finally, Jim Bowen is an older stand-up, known for his 'trad' style, who was popular almost exclusively among LCC respondents.

In addition, in order to engage with the internal 'field' of comedy criticism, reviews of these comedians were examined in five different publications; *The Guardian*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Daily Mirror*, *Chortle*, and *Fest Magazine*. These review publications were chosen to represent the differing sources of comedy criticism that exists nationally, locally and online. *The Guardian* and *Daily Telegraph*, for example, are large national broadsheet newspapers representing different sides of the political spectrum (*Guardian* left leaning; *Telegraph* right-leaning). Both newspapers also hold prestigious positions in the field of arts criticism and are consumed by a largely HCC audience. *The Mirror* is also a national newspaper but is aimed at a more LCC readership and arguably holds a less prestigious position in the field.

Fest Magazine is a free arts publication that runs locally during the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. I have unique knowledge of *Fest* as I have been the magazine publisher since 2003. The fact that *Fest* is free, young and local means it holds little prestige in the field, although it is aimed at audiences from across the cultural capital spectrum. Finally, *Chortle* is a comedy website aimed at comedians and those working in the comedy industry. Although its prestige among the general public is limited, its status is very high among many producers and intermediaries working in the comedy field (Lee, 2010).

The framework for the textual analysis was adapted from Deacon et al's (1999: 162-184) model of 'linguistic textual analysis' of media texts. This first involved studying the 'formal staging' of the text, in which I examined the position of each publication in the wider field of comedy criticism. I then turned to the issue of 'intertextuality' among comedy reviews, and in particular whether any common 'thematic structure' and 'discourse schema' could be found. Central to this was analysis of critics' 'lexical choice' and how such linguistic selections may have been underpinned by ideological beliefs and values. Finally, the textual analysis was compared with the qualitative codes of HCC comic appreciation to discern whether there was any correlation between the styles of appreciation communicated by critics and the styles articulated by respondents with high cultural capital resources.

Go-Along Ethnography

The final piece of empirical research I draw upon was conducted at the 2012 Edinburgh Fringe and involved 'go-along' participant observation, followed by interviews, with 9 cultural intermediaries (comedy agents, venue bookers, producers and TV and radio commissioners) who work as temporary 'talent scouts' at the Fringe. I shadowed each scout for approximately 4-6 hours and in this period they scouted between 2-4 comedy shows, depending on their schedule. In total I went to 22 comedy shows with scouts. Immediately after shadowing I conducted an interview with each scout, lasting approximately 1-1.5 hours.

Although I acknowledge that a sample of 9 respondents is somewhat limiting in terms of representativeness, it is important to note that my aim here was not to claim robustly generalisable insights about British comedy scouts. Instead, I believe my go-along engagements with comedy scouts – stretching across 22 outings - provided a uniquely rich ethnographic insight into the ‘authentic’ experiences and practices of scouts as they unfolded in real time. Indeed, while there are a few ethnographic studies of cultural gatekeepers (Mears, 2011; Powell, 1986; Wynn, 2011), these are comparatively rare. Moreover, I believe go-along ethnography has a number of advantages. As cultural gatekeepers do not usually comment on ‘what is going on’ while acting in natural environments, it is difficult to access their concurrent interpretations through observation alone. Similarly, stand-alone interviews take gatekeepers out of their professional environment, making it hard to assess how their reflections about decision-making relate to their ‘real’ practices. Using Go-along, in contrast, which represents a hybrid between participant observation and interviewing, arguably bridges these problems. Both by observing scouts’ practices and, most importantly, by being able to ask about these practices in real time, I was able to capture the ‘stream of perceptions, emotions and interpretations’ that scouts may usually keep to themselves (Kusenbach, 2003: 464).

I was able to recruit scouts by drawing on my own contacts in the field. Although I had never actually met any of the respondents prior to the study, I was able to use my social capital to secure their involvement. This insider position both helped and hindered the fieldwork. Respondents were aware of my journalistic identity and some were apprehensive about disclosing controversial information (‘don’t even think about putting that in your magazine!’). On the other hand, my field position facilitated privileged access to exclusive festival spaces, such as private-members bars, where scouts spent much of their time socialising and networking in-between shows. These environments provided important insight into the ‘social architecture’ of the Fringe, rendering visible a complex web of informal yet professionally salient relationships, and allowing me to see how scouts negotiated this often perilous social landscape (Kusenbach, 2003: 466).

Appendix 2: Cast of Characters

HCC Respondents

Kira, 32, is an environmental consultant from Edinburgh. She has a PhD in Chemistry from the University of Edinburgh and has her own consultancy firm with her partner, Brian. Her father is an audiologist with a master's degree and her mother runs a charity shop, and also has a degree.

Frank, 35, is Deputy Chief Executive of an arts organisation. Originally from Surrey, England, he now lives in a modern apartment in central Glasgow with his girlfriend, Wendy, a lawyer. He has a MA in philosophy and a BA in history. His mother was a doctor and his father died when he was 8 years old.

Andrew, 53, is an IT consultant from Kent, England. He lives with his girlfriend, Michelle, a talent scout, in a rural village in Kent. He has a degree in electronics. His father was a teacher with a masters degree and his mother has her own business and a degree.

Sarah, 21, is a fourth year English Literature student at the University of Edinburgh. She is from Dundee and her father is a bank manager and has a degree - her mother is a retail assistant who completed her Higher Grades.

Marilyn, 31, is an actress who lives in a flat with her boyfriend, Mark, in Islington, North London. Her father works in the City of London as a banker, and has a masters degree and her mother works in admin. She has a degree in English.

Trever, 26, is a TV writer from Sheffield who now lives in Bethnal Green in East London with his girlfriend, an accountant. He has an undergraduate degree in history. His parents were teachers and both have undergraduate degrees.

Dale, 37, is a lawyer turned journalist from Canterbury who now lives in Glasgow. He has an undergraduate degree and a masters in Law. His father owns a large business in Edinburgh and his mother is a housewife. They both have degrees.

Steve, 22, is a Masters Student in Film Studies at the University of Edinburgh. Originally from Leeds, he now lives in central Edinburgh with friends. His mother is dead and his father is the director of a construction company in Leeds. He has a degree.

Graham, 33, is a photographer from Kendal in the Lake District. He has an undergraduate degree and an MA in photography. His father was a lawyer and his mother was a teacher – they both held degrees.

MCC Respondents

Harriet, 25, is a primary school teacher from Huddersfield who lives with her husband Gary, an electrician. She has a degree. Her father was a builder and her mother was a housewife. Neither have any qualifications.

Pete, 40, is a theatre company administrator from Sunderland but who now lives in a flat in South London, by himself. He has a degree in theatre studies. His father was a builder and his mother was a housewife. His parents have no qualifications

Patrick, 41, is a physics secondary school teacher from Salford, near Manchester. He now lives in Bonnyrigg by himself and works in a school in Balerno, Scotland. He has a PhD in physics. His father worked as a butcher and his mother was a housewife. Neither had any qualifications.

James, 38, is an Autism Practitioner from Glasgow. He has a degree. His father was a fireman and his mother was an administrator. Neither has any qualifications beyond Scottish standard grades.

Sophie, 57, is a retired primary school teacher who lives in Morton, Scotland with her husband, a joiner. She has a teaching qualification. Her father was a towage manager, her mother was a housewife. Neither have any qualifications.

Hannah, 58, is a retired teacher from Birmingham who now lives in Edinburgh with her husband, Martin, a recruitment consultant. She has an undergraduate degree. Her father was a cinema manager and her mother a wages clerk. Neither had any qualifications.

LCC Respondents

Andy, 48, owns of a small picture framing shop in Aberdeen with his wife Tina. Neither have any qualifications. His father was a builder and his mother was a housewife. Again neither had any qualifications

Finn, 40, is a tree surgeon from a small village in the West of Scotland. He lives with his partner, Tracey, a secretary, on the outskirts of Edinburgh and their 12-year old son. He has no qualifications. His parents have no qualifications and both worked as assistants in a rural hospital.

Dan, 23, is a team leader at a supermarket and lives in Currie on the outskirts of Edinburgh with his parents. He has completed his Higher Grades. His father was a chef, and has completed standard grades and his mother is a primary school teacher with a degree.

Duncan, 53, is an electrician from Edinburgh. He lives with his wife, Jean, a secretary. He has no qualifications. His father was an electrician and his mother was an administrator. Neither had any qualifications

Dave, 36, is an Event Assistants from a small village in South-West Scotland. He completed his Scottish Highers, but has no degree. His father was a carpenter and his mother a secretary. Both completed Scottish standard grades.

Ivan, 28, is a hairdresser who lives in Yeovil, Somerset, with his partner, Dale. He has completed GCSE qualifications. His father was a builder and his mother was a housewife. Neither had any qualifications.

Laura, 52, is a personal assistant/office manager who lives in Edinburgh. She has completed Scottish standard grades. Her father was a silver engraver and her mother an office manager. Neither have any qualifications.

Appendix 3: Contributions of Active MCA Categories

Contributions of active categories

(modalities contributing more than the average contribution and retained for inspection are in bold)

Label	Relative Weight (%)	Squared distance to origin	Axis 1	Axis 2	Axis 3
JimBowen					
Bowen+	0.552	4.66038	0.17	4.15	0.06
Bowen=	0.899	2.47490	0.28	0.23	0.49
Bowen-	0.771	3.05405	1.55	0.08	1.80
Bowen?	0.903	2.46154	1.83	3.25	0.55
TOTAL	3.125		3.82	7.71	2.90

SimonAmstell

Amstell+	1.785	0.75097	0.78	0.10	0.59
Amstell=	0.486	5.42857	0.00	0.36	0.33
Amstell-	0.205	14.25420	0.01	0.21	0.19
Amstell?	0.649	3.81283	2.46	0.07	2.33
TOTAL	3.125		3.25	0.74	3.44

Eddielzzard

Izzard+	2.163	0.44462	0.68	0.01	0.05
Izzard=	0.580	4.38922	0.61	0.13	0.29
Izzard-	0.288	9.84337	0.35	0.51	0.97
TOTAL	3.031		1.64	0.65	1.31

MichaelMcintyre

McIntyre+	1.882	0.66052	0.01	0.38	0.67
McIntyre=	0.465	5.71642	0.18	0.09	0.00
McIntyre-	0.316	8.89011	0.60	0.00	0.37
McIntyre?	0.458	5.81818	1.48	0.78	1.25
TOTAL	3.122		2.26	1.26	2.29

RussellBrand

Brand+	1.396	1.23881	0.10	0.02	0.51
Brand=	0.656	3.76190	0.05	0.02	0.03
Brand-	1.014	2.08219	0.20	0.00	0.75
TOTAL	3.066		0.34	0.04	1.30

FrankSkinner

Skinner+	1.542	1.02703	0.00	0.93	0.10
Skinner=	0.910	2.43511	0.00	0.59	0.42
Skinner-	0.545	4.73248	0.10	0.02	1.47
TOTAL	2.997		0.11	1.54	1.99

PuppetryPenis

Puppetry+	0.337	8.27835	0.12	0.35	0.03
Puppetry=	1.306	1.39362	0.24	0.04	0.86
Puppetry-	0.639	3.89130	0.47	0.04	1.53
Puppetry?	0.844	2.70370	0.97	0.21	0.04
TOTAL	3.125		1.81	0.65	2.45

HansTeeuwan

Teeuwen+	0.344	8.09091	0.92	0.62	0.02
Teeuwen=	0.302	9.34483	0.23	0.10	0.11
Teeuwen?	2.378	0.31387	0.27	0.01	0.00
TOTAL	3.024		1.42	0.73	0.13

JimDavidson

Davidson+	0.368	7.49057	1.22	4.45	1.25
Davidson=	0.469	5.66667	0.23	0.84	2.87
Davidson-	1.899	0.64534	1.92	0.21	0.27
Davidson?	0.389	7.03571	2.11	4.23	0.14
TOTAL	3.125		5.48	9.73	4.53

KarenDunbar

Dunbar+	0.545	4.73248	0.70	2.22	0.87
Dunbar=	0.542	4.76923	0.28	0.13	0.44
Dunbar-	0.375	7.33333	0.52	0.02	0.80
Dunbar?	1.660	0.88285	0.03	1.26	0.35

TOTAL	3.122		1.52	3.63	2.46
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AndyZaltzman

Zaltzman+	0.420	6.43802	1.40	0.06	0.01
Zaltzman=	0.431	6.25806	0.24	0.35	0.25
Zaltzman?	2.156	0.44928	0.59	0.04	0.01
TOTAL	3.007		2.24	0.45	0.27

JohnnyVegas

Vegas+	1.444	1.16346	0.06	1.30	0.09
Vegas=	0.851	2.67347	0.14	0.12	0.86
Vegas-	0.639	3.89130	0.06	0.42	0.05
Vegas?	0.188	15.66670	1.03	1.53	0.44
TOTAL	3.122		1.29	3.37	1.45

MarkThomas

Thomas+	0.951	2.28467	2.23	0.03	0.14
Thomas=	0.510	5.12245	0.08	0.21	0.87
Thomas-	0.149	19.93020	0.01	0.27	0.46
TOTAL	1.611		2.33	0.51	1.48

StewartLee

Lee+	1.309	1.38727	3.91	0.63	0.07
Lee=	0.458	5.81818	0.01	1.41	3.17
Lee-	0.201	14.51720	0.11	1.07	0.57
Lee?	1.146	1.72727	3.55	0.10	0.27
TOTAL	3.115		7.59	3.21	4.09

RoyChubby

Chubby+	0.354	7.82353	0.62	4.11	0.33
Chubby=	0.472	5.61765	0.01	0.91	1.60
Chubby-	1.753	0.78218	1.70	0.16	0.38
Chubby?	0.538	4.80645	2.56	3.26	0.17
TOTAL	3.118		4.88	8.45	2.48

BernardManning

Manning+	0.389	7.03571	1.18	4.95	0.69
Manning=	0.510	5.12245	0.07	0.68	2.69
Manning-	1.792	0.74419	2.18	0.23	0.96
Manning?	0.434	6.20000	2.86	4.08	1.00
TOTAL	3.125		6.28	9.94	5.33

TheThickOfIt

Thick+	1.038	2.01003	3.27	0.93	0.20
Thick=	0.521	5.00000	0.00	0.93	0.35
Thick?	1.503	1.07852	2.14	0.01	0.01
TOTAL	3.063		5.41	1.87	0.57

LastOfSummerWine

LSWine+	0.736	3.24528	1.05	1.76	0.22
LSWine=	1.153	1.71084	0.10	0.16	2.31
LSWine-	1.090	1.86624	0.86	0.01	1.70
TOTAL	2.979		2.02	1.93	4.23

DirtySanchez

DSanchez+	0.632	3.94505	0.07	1.58	0.51
DSanchez=	0.847	2.68852	0.10	0.01	2.36
Dsanchez-	0.910	2.43511	0.78	0.36	0.34
DSanchez?	0.729	3.28571	1.21	0.14	2.83
TOTAL	3.118		2.16	2.10	6.03

BrassEye

BEye+	1.580	0.97802	3.19	0.41	0.00
BEye=	0.531	4.88235	0.18	1.02	1.18
BEye?	0.861	2.62903	4.01	0.03	0.62
TOTAL	2.972		7.39	1.46	1.81

StewartLeeComedyVehicle

LeeVeh+	1.205	1.59366	3.84	0.80	0.17
LeeVeh=	0.493	5.33803	0.01	1.80	2.97
LeeVeh-	0.194	15.07140	0.10	0.72	0.16
LeeVeh?	1.222	1.55682	3.48	0.09	0.27
TOTAL	3.115		7.43	3.41	3.57

MrBean

Bean+	1.403	1.22772	0.54	0.04	0.53
Bean=	0.795	2.93013	0.15	0.07	0.50
Bean-	0.896	2.48837	0.46	0.00	2.38
Bean?	0.031	99.00000	0.40	0.04	0.03
TOTAL	3.125		1.56	0.15	3.43

MontyPython

Python+	2.531	0.23457	0.05	0.01	0.25
Python=	0.368	7.49057	0.04	0.00	0.02
Python-	0.198	14.78950	0.10	0.28	3.20
Python?	0.028	111.50000 0	0.25	0.21	0.32
TOTAL	3.125		0.44	0.50	3.80

BobMonkhouseShow

MHouse+	0.524	4.96027	0.12	3.92	0.00
MHouse=	1.208	1.58621	0.11	0.02	1.73
MHouse-	0.997	2.13589	0.64	0.06	4.24
MHouse?	0.396	6.89474	2.14	4.44	0.83
TOTAL	3.125		3.02	8.44	6.81

Bullseye

Bullseye+	0.799	2.91304	0.26	3.63	0.02
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Bullseye=	1.021	2.06122	0.16	0.00	2.30
Bullseye-	0.948	2.29670	0.95	0.19	3.03
Bullseye?	0.351	7.91089	2.31	4.95	0.22
TOTAL	3.118		3.69	8.77	5.57

LeagueOfGentleman

Gentleman+	1.556	1.00893	1.10	0.03	0.04
Gentleman=	0.892	2.50195	0.28	0.02	0.34
Gentleman-	0.462	5.76692	0.03	0.05	0.30
Gentleman?	0.215	13.51610	2.22	1.06	0.80
TOTAL	3.125		3.63	1.15	1.47

YesMinister

Minister+	1.587	0.96937	0.43	0.01	0.77
Minister=	0.906	2.44828	0.00	0.08	1.59
Minister-	0.306	9.22727	0.06	0.35	1.12
Minister?	0.316	8.89011	1.21	0.77	0.70
TOTAL	3.115		1.71	1.20	4.18

MightyBoosh

Boosh+	1.563	1.00000	0.86	0.16	1.00
Boosh=	0.840	2.71901	0.03	0.10	0.02
Boosh-	0.396	6.89474	0.04	0.39	0.32
Boosh?	0.319	8.78261	2.25	0.12	3.29
TOTAL	3.118		3.18	0.77	4.63

twopointfourchildren

2.4+	0.934	2.34572	0.32	1.96	0.02
2.4=	1.066	1.93160	0.14	0.02	1.19
2.4-	0.726	3.30622	1.47	0.05	2.11
2.4?	0.399	6.82609	1.87	2.51	0.00
TOTAL	3.125		3.80	4.54	3.33

PeepShow

PShow+	2.094	0.49254	0.65	0.17	1.09
PShow=	0.545	4.73248	0.19	0.43	0.01
PShow-	0.194	15.07140	0.08	0.40	0.74
PShow?	0.285	9.97561	1.81	0.11	3.64
TOTAL	3.118		2.73	1.10	5.48

LittleBritain

LBritain+	1.618	0.93133	0.54	0.84	0.54
LBritain=	0.753	3.14747	0.20	0.31	0.00
LBritain-	0.722	3.32692	0.63	0.42	1.02
TOTAL	3.094		1.36	1.56	1.56

BennyHillShow

BHill+	0.694	3.50000	1.42	3.93	0.40
BHill=	1.146	1.72727	0.05	0.00	2.48

BHill-	1.031	2.03030	1.60	0.47	2.24
BHill?	0.253	11.32880	1.15	4.05	0.51
TOTAL	3.125		4.23	8.46	5.63

Appendix 3: Comedians and Comedy TV Shows mentioned in the article (in alphabetical order)

Alan Bennett (1934-) is an English comic novelist, playwright and actor, best known for his role in the satirical revue *Beyond The Fringe*.

Andy Zaltzman (1974-) is a is a British stand-up comedian and author who largely focuses on political material.

Benny Hill (1924-1992) was an English comedian know for his slapstick style and frequent use of sexual innuendo.

Bernard Manning (1930-2007) was an English ‘trad’ stand-up known for his provocative racist and sexist material.

The Bob Monkhouse Show (1983-1986) was a TV entertainment show presented by Bob Monkhouse where comedian guests were invited to perform stand-up.

Brass Eye (1997-2001) was an English TV series of satirical and darkly comic ‘spoof’ documentaries, which tackled controversial issues such as paedophilia and illegal drug-taking.

Bullseye (1981-1995) was a popular darts-based British television gameshow hosted by Jim Bowen.

Dirty Sanchez (2003-2008) is a British stunt and prank TV series featuring a group of three Welshmen and one Englishman harming themselves, and each other, through dangerous stunts.

Eddie Izzard (1962-) is an English stand-up comedian known for his cross-dressing on-stage appearance and surreal and whimsical style.

Frank Carson (1926-2012) was a ‘trad’ stand-up from Northern Ireland known for his ‘one-liners’ and catchphrases.

Frank Skinner (1957-) is a British writer, comedian and actor best known for his television presenting and the popular football pop song "Three Lions".

Hans Teeuwen (1967-) is a Dutch comedian, actor and occasional singer who has performed extensively in the UK. His comedy has been described as absurdist, apolitical and confrontational.

Jim Bowen (1937-) is an English stand-up comedian best known as the host of the ITV gameshow *Bullseye*.

Jim Davidson (1953-) is an English stand-up and television presenter known for his provocative jokes about women, ethnic minorities and disabled people.

Johnny Vegas (1971-) is an English stand-up comedian and writer known for his angry rants and occasional surrealism.

Josie Long (1982-) is an English stand-up comedian best known for her surreal, whimsical style and, in recent years, political material

Karen Dunbar (1971-) is a Scottish stand-up and television comedian, best known for starring in a number of popular Scottish sitcoms and for her strongly physical humour.

Kevin ‘Bloody’ Wilson (1947-) is an Australian comedy singer/songwriter who is known for the explicit, crude and sexual nature of his songs and general humour.

Last of The Summer Wine (1973-2010) was a very popular and long-running TV sitcom about a trio of older men living in rural Northern England.

The League of Gentleman (1999-2002) is a dark comedy sitcom set in the fictional village of Royston Vasey and follows the lives of dozens of the town's bizarre inhabitants.

Les Dawson (1931-1993) was an English ‘trad’ stand-up known for his deadpan style and politically incorrect jokes, especially about his wife and mother-in-law.

Little Britain (2003-2006) was a British character-based TV comedy sketch show that comprises sketches involving exaggerated parodies of British people from all walks of life in various situations familiar to the British.

Mark Thomas (1963-) is an English stand-up and TV presenter known for his left-wing political material and humanitarian activism.

Michael McIntyre (1976-) is an English stand-up comedian, known for his observational style. He has a strong popular following and his most recent stand-up DVD is the fastest selling stand-up in UK chart history, selling over a million copies.

Monty Python (1969-1983) were a surreal British comedy troupe whose TV sketch show, *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*, enjoyed popular success in Britain and throughout the world.

Mr Bean (1990-1995) was a British TV Comedy Programme featuring comedian Rowan Atkinson in the title role. The character and programme were best known for its distinctive physical and slapstick humour.

Peep Show (2003-) is a British sitcom that follows the lives of two men from their twenties to thirties who share a flat. It is the longest-running comedy in Channel 4 history

Robin Ince (1969-) is an English stand-up comedian, actor and writer. He is well-known for his experientnal stand-up shows tackling religion and science.

Puppertry of the Penis (1998) is a comedy performance show that involves two nude men who bend, twist, and fold their penises and scrotums into various shapes, accompanied by comedic narration

Roy ‘Chubby’ Brown (1945-) is an English stand-up known for his obscene, racist and sexist material. The controversial nature of his material ensures he rarely appears on television but has a large and loyal live following.

Russell Brand (1975-) is an English stand-up, television presenter, author, singer and film actor. He is known for his confessional stand-up which has tackled his own struggles with heroin and sex addiction.

Simon Amstell (1979-) is an English comedian, television presenter, screenwriter and actor, best known for his roles as former host of BBC PANEL SHOW *Never Mind the Buzzcocks*.

Simon Munnery (1967-) is an English comedy writer and experimental stand-up comedian

Spaced (1999-2001) was a cult TV sitcom written by and starring Simon Pegg and Jessica Stevenson, which followed two housemates living in London. It was known for its rapid-fire editing and surreal humour.

Stewart Lee (1968-) is an English comedian, writer and director. He is known for his intellectual and form-bending material.

Stewart Lee’s Comedy Vehicle (2009-) is a BBC comedy series created by Stewart Lee featuring his own stand-up and sketches based on a weekly theme. The programme is executive-produced by Armando Iannucci and script-edited by Chris Morris

The Day Today (1994) was a surreal English TV comedy that parodied current affairs TV programming.

The Mighty Boosh (1998-) is a surreal British comedy troupe featuring comedians Julian Barratt and Noel Fielding, which developed into a successful BBC sitcom.

The Thick of It (2005-) is a British TV comedy and ‘mockumentary’ that satirizes the inner-workings of contemporary British government.

The Young Ones (1982-1984) was a satirical TV sitcom about a group of undergraduate students who shared a house together. The sitcom was known for its anarchic, offbeat humour and became central to Britain's 1980s alternative comedy boom.

Yes Minister (1980-1988) was a satirical BBC sitcom set principally in the private office of a British Cabinet minister in the (fictional) Department of Administrative Affairs.

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