

Understanding Comedy And Humour From The Eyes Of An Unqualified Teen

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Through this project, I researched comedy and the philosophy behind comedic function in society, its prevalence in daily life, and the creation of jokes. I sought out opinions from “the greats”: Thomas Hobbes, Immanuel Kant, Sigmund Freud, and Jerry Seinfeld. However, my research made me increasingly confused about my own intentions and predispositions to comedy. This led me to criticize my own humor, allowing me to conjure the notion that I wasn’t funny and that nothing really is.

When it came to my art work, I was entirely undecided about what I should do. In reflection of my chaotic research, I decided to make a painting that is strange and, hopefully, funny. I became a chicken and winged it. I wondered if comedy had a place in art, like when you’re a kid in a museum all the modern art looks funny. Why would anyone like looking at that urinal? It’s absurd.

This painting depicts three clementines alongside a young boy eating a car while staring at the fruit. The rest of the painting is covered in yellow and white stripes. The subject matter and situation within the painting are intended to be funny, and compositionally there are flaws, which makes this piece comedic. The white lines around the clementines try to draw attention to them, but instead they overpower the clementines, washing them out and doing exactly the opposite of the seemingly supposed intention. The placement and size of the objects is off; the clementines are bigger than the head of the boy who seems to be closer to the viewer than the fruits. I hope this installation awakens the inner child in viewers.

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What is comedy? One might think this question is easily answered by quick look at the Webster's dictionary definition. But I have found that even a seven page essay can't begin to cover what comedy is, the philosophy behind it, how it works, its role in society and our lives.

However to begin to understand on a small scale what comedy is I thought about how I craft jokes. While thinking about my personal process I created a small list of important values and themes in jokes, in no particular order: tone, relatability, absurdity, relevance, timing, repetition. For me these are the most important basic tricks of joke telling as I rely on flow of conversation and input of people which is vastly different to stand-up which requires one to on most occasion rely on oneself to talk solely. For the most part I tell stories to make other laugh meaning that what I am saying must make sense in the conversation, be relevant, and contribute to it, be relatable, otherwise people would find my words jarring and annoying. That's where timing, tone, absurdity, and repetition come to play; if you tell a story the timing of the joke must be right if you are too early, there's no surprise or anticipation, and if you are too late everyone's bored or done with what you have to say. As for tone it is best to stay with one for the whole for the duration of the joke changing it can be good or confusing depending on the situation, deadpan, saying something blankly, without emotion, can be funny if the story is absurd making the reaction and telling of it funny in that it is contradictory to what is being said. One could also tell it very enthusiastically but must have good dictation and speech, if you are too enthusiastic one might focus more on the humor in the style than the joke so one must be careful of that or of being called crazy. With absurdity, I have found that it is best when used at extremes, like one absurd element or all. Repetition is a large component of inside jokes which for people my age are favorable. In my opinion, from talking to high school students with a similar North American background to myself, the most common types of conversational humor are: physical, self-deprecating, surreal, improvisational, wordplay, wit, topical, observational, bodily, and dark. The mixture of these types and their presentation are indications of style, which in my opinion changes from person to person. Comedy are present in any form of communication: art, radio, film, speak, literature, and advertisements. Laughter has been forever present throughout time since the beginning of communication itself and when we were simple chimpanzees.

From my perspective the first form of comedy was physical. It breaks language and is a purely visual comedic act. It is the easiest to understand as a kid compared to the other common forms. Due to portrayals of early human life in movies, we see this as the case; life experiences don't help dissuade this, I remember how boys would laugh at each other for tripping or falling in kindergarten, why shouldn't early humans hold the same practice of physical comedy? The invention of language and literature led to the progression of comedy in other forms now seen today, surely coming from the mouth the same time sentences were. In medieval times dwarfs and other people with either mental or physical disabilities were often chosen to become court jesters. Ostracized by society, unable to fit in, becoming a joke with a cushy bed was a step up even if they were to be laughed at for their appearance or mental state, these jesters were referred to as "natural fools."¹ An infamous example of this is Will Somer, a jester to Henry VIII, who had a learning disability and was favored for it; despite his high standing the court he was looked after by a "keeper,"² as he deemed unable to provide for himself. However not all candidates

¹ "The King's Fools - Disability in the Tudor Court." *Historic England*, historicengland.org.uk/research/inclusive-heritage/disability-history/1485-1660/disability-in-the-tudor-court/.

² See 1

were solely chosen for their looks or disability, they were chosen for their wits. Their intelligence payed off for the benefit of the king, himself, and the kingdom; as this tradition of royal court jesters did as traditions do, royalty began to trust their jesters and some became political advisors. Unlike other advisors, jesters were granted special rights to freedom of speech allowing them to sway the king's opinion through farce. "They can speak truth and even open insults and be heard with positive pleasure ... For truth has a genuine power to please if it manages not to give offence, but this is something gods have granted only to fools."³ This freedom was the start of the political commentary seen today.

The standardization of television and availability of entertainment, opened new doors for comedians who were now able to leave the dusty shanties for car radios, black screens, and auditoriums. Comedians had a bigger platform than ever before and were thriving off the popularization of stand-up. Sex, drugs, and religion were as always up for debate in the comedy scene causing backlash from citizens and political figures due to the public vulgarity of it all. Stand-up comedian George Carlin performed an act "the seven words you can't say on television," where he said seven curse words on television in a deadpan manner, and was sued in the Supreme Court for his act leading to the creation of the "family hour," an hour dedicated to family friendly shows on television, network-wide. In response to this case, he says, "There are no bad words... Bad thoughts. Bad intentions. And *woooords*."⁴ He has explained that he meant to bring attention to the power of words in American society but some argue this was not the way to do it.

Blaise Pascal, French Mathematician, Theologian, Physicist, and Philosopher⁵, said, "Nothing produces laughter more than a surprising disproportion between that which is expected and that which one sees." This statement is true and true to my own experiences. When I was a kid, my brother's friend told me and my dad some dead baby jokes that included the chicken crossing the road, combining different traditional jokes with dead babies. After that when I asked my dad why the chicken crossed the road he said "dead baby." I laughed because of the surprise of it. We love to laugh at things that are indecent too.

There are three main types of theories on comedy which are superiority, incongruity, and relief. Thomas Hobbes's own theory on comedy stemmed from the belief that humans are selfish and comedy is used to prove power over others or acceptance of one's own past failures, insinuating growth, through laughter and jokes- "the idea of laughter as self-applause can nevertheless be defended by pointing out that, even though somebody else's joke occasions my laughter, what I am laughing at, what produces my joy, might be that I can see the point and thus appreciate my superiority."⁶ The problem with this theory is that it doesn't cover all types of humor like surreal jokes.

Incongruity is a theory that supports absurdity in comedy, this theory is well supported by the ideas of Immanuel Kant who wrote, "In everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (in which the understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction). Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing." This goes to say that a joke is funny if it shows us other perspectives or provides a different view on a certain subject whether it be positive, negative, or absolutely foolish. It would

³ Erasmus, Desiderius. *Erasmus's Praise of Folly*. Blackie and Son.

⁴ George Carlin

⁵"Blaise Pascal." *Biography.com*, A&E Networks Television, 17 Nov. 2017, www.biography.com/people/blaise-pascal-9434176.

⁶ Thomas Hobbes

be like telling the perspective of a toilet instead of making fun of the bodily functions of a person, it's unexpected and unique, making connections to feelings we have ourselves.

Lastly, relief theory, popularized by Sigmund Freud explains that humor is a way for people to find relief from mental inhibitions or societal censors. It is the relief from these "censors" making us closer to our natural impulses. A theory opposite to this suggests that laughter and comedy is more of a social nicety to further connect people. This theory was developed after research found that monkeys used laughter to develop relationships; "They are using emotional expressions in distinctive ways that give them important social advantages."⁷ I have found this to be true as that is the reason I am interested in comedy and have tried to be funny all my life. As for joke construction theories there are few that explain the process. In the N+V theory by Thomas Veatch gives an answer to general joke construction by saying that N is a normal occurrence and V is a violated moral or social order, a good joke has these two qualities combined to spark interest without intrude. An example of this is, "Why did the monkey fall out of the tree?... Because it was dead."⁸ This statement is funny because it is a violated moral that is logical and in some situations could be truthful. In the scientific and philosophical communities, this is not an agreed upon theory, many people refute it saying that not all jokes fit the formula due to their construction or style; however, for the most part I believe this theory is right and aligns with the general ideas behind jokes. There is no accepted theory to explain humor.

A lot of humor is circumstantial and oriented around place and culture making one finite theory hard. With some countries and people place more respect and importance on it than others you can be seen as a smart person or idiot. In a study, "To Be or Not To Be Humorous? Cross Cultural Perspectives on Humor," it explores people's views on humor and its relationship with individuals providing insight to the differences in humor for both places. "...,Westerners regard humor as a common and positive disposition; the Chinese regard humor as a special disposition particular to humorists, with controversial aspects."⁹ One can infer from this research that social settings and communications are different as many Canadians are believed to be humorous making them so while humor is present only in some individuals in Chinese society. This difference affects social natures of conversation, cultural norms, and popular comedy genres though the internet has created fuller breath of information and made humor more similar to the comedy style of America; there are still cultural characteristics to comedy. Confucianism was highly present in Chinese society and partially shaped the society and values of people today. "Confucianism teaches that a gentleman must maintain gravity and eschew mirth, jesting, and playfulness, which indicate disrespect, and could damage social relationships within the Confucian ethos."¹⁰ As a result of this denouncement of humor, the most popular comedy involves doing the exact opposite of what society wants to do, a comedy style named *xiangsheng*, or crosstalk. This involves expressive tone of voice and facial movements, subtly dismantling such societal restrictions by doing the opposite. This type of comedy is found funny in North American societies but not as widely as it is out East because it is not groundbreaking or a benign violation. This form of comedy might also be more popular than political commentary, which is rising in North America, because of the different laws protecting freedom of speech. Historical aspects and colonization play large roles in comedy and American centric jokes still

⁷ Marina Davila-Ross, PhD.

⁸ Thomas Veatch

⁹ Yue, Xiaodong, et al. "To Be or Not To Be Humorous? Cross Cultural Perspectives on Humor." *Frontiers in Psychology*, Frontiers Media S.A., 2016, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5048456/.

¹⁰ Yue, Xiaodong. "Confucianism and Chinese Humor." *Humor and Chinese Culture: A Psychological Perspective*.

dominate the field whether it be memes or stand up, probably because of the demand and belief that almost everyone is or can be funny, more people strive to be. I find that being funny is advantageous and helps me make more friends. Professionally and academically however humor is frowned upon but is becoming more accepted in those areas too.

So what's funny? A kid falling down a set of stairs, Stephen Colbert making a joke about Trump's hair, a unicorn being born over there, or the fact that I care. Like personalities and life, comedy is a mystery defined by uncertainty and individuality, a unique way to spread ideas and share feeling. But like who cares?