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'WORKING' FOR YOUR LAUGHTER: THE RISE OF THE BRITISH COMEDY SNOB

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'Culture attracts snobs', opined the *Daily Telegraph's* Guy Stagg in August 2011 (1). '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'. Indeed, Lee's snobbery was most clearly evidenced, according to Stagg, by his mockery of Britain's most popular contemporary comedian; Michael McIntyre. Lifting a quote (out-of-context) from Lee's 2009 stand-up show, *If you Prefer A Milder Comedian Please Ask For One*, Stagg pounced on a skit where Lee describes McIntyre's comedy as akin to 'spoon-feeding audiences warm diarrhoea'.

Now, as Lee himself later pointed out on the website *Chortle*, (2) these comments were 'overstated for comic effect'. However, he *did* note that 'alternative comedians' should use the 'safe middle ground' represented by McIntyre as a 'clearly definable mainstream' from which to define themselves against. 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'. This audacious claim was 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 was no indication that his artistic snobbery necessarily extended to judgments about comedy audiences. Yet, regardless of the validity of Stagg's argument, he did raise an important question about the prevalence and significance of comedy snobbery.

As a critic and magazine publisher, (3) who has worked in the British comedy industry for the last ten years, I've always been fascinated by this struggle to define what is and isn't funny. Indeed, such observations acted as the main catalyst in my decision to start investigating comedy sociologically. Between 2008 and 2012 I carried out the first ever empirical study of British comedy taste, surveying 900 people at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe (the biggest comedy festival in the world) about their preferences for 16 stand-up comedians and 16 comedy TV shows, and then following up with 24 in-depth interviews looking at people's sense of humour in more detail.

And what I uncovered was striking. My survey revealed that there are very strong divides in what people find funny and these taste differences are strongly associated with socio-demographics. In particular, the strongest divide separates people who have different levels of what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called 'cultural capital'. By this Bourdieu referred to certain highly valuable dispositions and

Factual – Measured - Critical

knowledge that middle and upper-middle class parents tend to pass on to their children. For example, these parents might talk about cultural topics at home, or take their children to places of aesthetic interest, such as museums, theatres or art galleries. Moreover they do not just *introduce* their children to culture they also teach them to *look* and *listen* in specific ways. This means these children display a seemingly 'natural' and embodied capacity to talk authoritatively about culture and, in turn, this is frequently misrecognised by educators as a sign of innate intelligence.

My survey findings revealed that the most powerful comedy taste distinction separated people with high cultural capital (HCC), particularly younger generations, who tended to prefer critically-acclaimed comedians such as Stewart Lee, Mark Thomas and TV comedies such as *Brass Eye* and *The Thick of It*, from those with low cultural capital (LCC), particularly older generations, who tended to prefer comedy that was much less critically legitimate such as Roy 'Chubby' Brown, Jim Davidson and Bernard Manning. This taste division was important because it both contributed to, and reflected, the construction of certain comedians as 'special' cultural objects – tastes that communicate a sense of cultural distinction.

The main source of this power was the perceived rarity of these comedy items. Not only did my research show how each had been extensively legitimated by comedy critics and comedy scouts, but it was also fascinating to observe how my respondents themselves contributed to this process. During interviews I observed how those from *all* backgrounds seemed to accept the assumption that this comedy was somehow 'difficult' to consume, that enjoyment inferred a certain cultural aptitude. For example, the way respondents discussed Stewart Lee was particularly illuminating. Dale – a lawyer – described how attending a Lee gig was like 'sitting an exam', whereby one must possess extensive reserves of comedy-specific knowledge in order to decode the comedy. One must recognise the way Lee plays with form, he explained, or how he uses specific comic techniques of timing and repetition. 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 some comedians as carrying social stratificatory power. Whereas Dale (and other HCC respondents) not only reported enjoying the comedy of Stewart Lee but even admitted a smugness about doing so, many LCC respondents admitted puzzlement and failure in the face of Lee's comedy, reporting that the humour 'went over their head', that they simply couldn't 'get it'. Thus Stewart Lee (along with others) was revealed as a marker of cultural capital, a rare taste, a comedian whose perceived interpretative 'difficulty' bestowed special status on any 'successful' consumer.

However, although my analysis demonstrated that several comedians and comedy TV shows were associated with certain social groups, it is important to note that preferences for most comedy were relatively evenly distributed. Yet this underlined a particular limitation of trying to understand taste solely through survey analysis.

Factual – Measured – Critical

While questionnaires can tell you *what* culture people like (and dislike), it can only provide limited insight into *why*.

Remembering Bourdieu's work on cultural capital, it occurred to me that the social significance of one's comedy taste could be expressed as much through *how* one consumed as by *what* they consumed. Therefore, in the interviews, I set out to explicitly examine how respondents with different levels of cultural capital decoded comedy. Strikingly, I found that HCC styles of comic appreciation strongly foregrounded their *embodied* reserves of cultural capital. They knowingly attempted to set themselves apart. It became clear that for these respondents comedy should never be *just funny*, it should never centre purely around the creation of laughter, or probe only what my respondent, Frank, referred to as 'first-degree' emotional reactions. Instead, 'good' comedy should have meaning – whether this is a political message *or* an experiment with form. Either way, the consumer should have to 'work' for their laughter, and through carrying out this aesthetic labour, will reach a higher plain of comic appreciation.

Moreover, what was most important about this comic aesthetic, this embodied expression of cultural capital, was that its symbolic power was arguably far greater than preferences for 'valuable' comedians. This was because, crucially, it seemed to give HCC respondents the ability to express distinction through almost any comedy. This was demonstrated most acutely via 'crossover' comedians like Simon Amstell, Jimmy Carr and Eddie Izzard. Although these stand-ups were liked by nearly all respondents, I was amazed by HCC respondent's insistence that they could always 'get' more from this comedy, extracting what TV writer Trevor described as a 'whole other level' of humour.

Finally, I was struck by the way in which comic distinction was also frequently accompanied by overt cultural snobbery. Indeed, my interviews revealed that comedy taste functioned as a key resource in the policing of class boundaries. Eschewing the kind of cultural openness described in other recent studies of British cultural taste, HCC respondents made a wide range of aggressive judgments based on the comedy taste of others, inferring that one's sense of humour revealed deep-seated aspects of their morality and intelligence. Andrew's reaction to the comedy taste of an old school friend summed up the potency of such judgments. For Andrew, the knowledge that his friend still liked the comedian Kevin 'Bloody' Wilson was such an 'act of cultural awfulness' that he felt he could subsequently discern and reject everything else about their personality.

In fact, my findings suggest that comedy's capacity to mark social boundaries may be relatively unique, and bound up with its 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 Trevor neatly summed up, 'there's something fundamental about what makes you laugh'.

Factual – Measured - Critical

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 trust and intimacy, its absence often delineates an unbridgeable social divide. 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 a shared sense of humour can act as a very powerful marker of social difference.

Guy Stagg's lambasting of Stewart Lee may have been unduly personal and more than a little sensationalist, but he also seems to have inadvertently stumbled across a phenomenon with strong sociological grounding. Comedians like Lee may not *intend* their comedy to be used as a tool for expressing snobbery and distinction, but they are ultimately powerless in preventing audiences from moulding their art into cultural currency. Indeed it seems that by reading, talking and appreciating contemporary comedy in particular ways, comedy taste is becoming a key tool in the expression of British cultural distinction.

- (1) blogs.telegraph.co.uk/culture/guystagg/100055505/save-us-from-left-wing-comedy-snobs-%E2%80%93-and-especially-stewart-lee/
- (2) www.chortle.co.uk/features/2011/07/19/13653/stewart_lee:_what_i_really_think_about_michael_mcintyre
- (3) www.festmag.co.uk

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