Humour as 'social dreaming': Stand-up comedy as therapeutic performance

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Iain MacRury [E-mail: imacrury@bournemouth.ac.uk]

Abstract: Stand-up comedy binds dramatic cultural spectacle to ritualised, intimate exposure. Examining 'case' examples from live comic performance, this paper describes stand-up as a kind of social dreaming. The article proposes a theoretical frame drawing on Thomas Ogden's notion of 'talking as dreaming' and psychoanalytic accounts connecting humour and melancholia. Locating the stand-up comedian's propensity for humour in a specialist capacity to hone, display and process traumata, the paper characterises stand-up as a performative oscillation evoking paranoid-schizoid and depressive anxieties. A psychosocial gloss places stand-up as a cultural resource in the service of the popular-as-therapeutic. The paper articulates complementarities between Henri Bergson's formulations on the function of laughter and an emergent object relations account in order to help to recognise 'containing' and 'cultural-restorative' aspects of much stand-up, understood as contemporary psychosocial ritual.

Keywords: humour; stand-up comedy; psychoanalysis; Bergson; object relations

Introduction: Stand-Up Matters

"The theme of the comic is the integration of society, which usually takes the form of incorporating a central character into it".

Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*

Stand-up comedy makes a defining contribution to contemporary culture, providing a valuable locus for the affective and reflective interplay of public culture and private intimacy. Comedy features across media-cultural schedules, on screen, online, in arena-scale extravaganzas and in expansive global-local festivals, such as Edinburgh's annual fringe. A few performers become noted celebrities. Local comedy clubs retain a special appeal, even in the revised 'chain' formats familiar in many towns and cities. Live and DVD-recorded comedy is experiencing a creative-commercial heyday (Nikkhah, 2008; Chortle, 2010). This has developed on momentum gathered in the 1980s during the genre's 'alternative' phase (Cook, 2001), a resurgence following early-century origins in working-men's clubs and music hall (Double, 1997, 2005). Stand-up continues to develop contemporary cultural-commercial formats thriving in the distributed spaces and intersects of global late modernity, on- and offline, and emulates the forms and formats of the major culture industries in scope and scale (Chortle, 2010). Nevertheless, there remains something anti-industrial, not to say anti-post-industrial, in its ontogeny.

As a 'live' event, stand-up is open to and requires an analysis alert to the close, the sensate, and the communal. At its best, it evokes reciprocity and dialogue, hinting as much towards a sociality of the gift (Mauss, 1954) as towards the entertainment-commodity (Wolf, 2003). With all this in mind, the focus here is not

primarily on the contemporary comedy industry, as such, nor on histories, important as such background is. Certainly, stand-up performances depend on milieu and timing, and there is certainly a need for analysis of specific places and performers, as evidenced in some retrospective accounts (Limon, 2000; Cook, 2001; Medhurst, 2007). This paper, however, seeks to capture comedic intimacy by other means, through a combination of psychoanalytic and cultural theory as well as close empirical engagement with 'live' ethnographic material. Neither the commercial-communal nor the manifest politics, both to the fore in many daily and reflective engagements with comedy, are forgotten here. Instead they are temporarily placed 'in brackets' as part of an attempt to disinter and foreground some additional underpinning psychosocial dynamics of stand-up.

Framing Stand-Up: A Public Zone of Cultural Intimacy

> *We live in a zone midway between things and ourselves, externally to*
> *things, externally also to ourselves.*
>
> Henri Bergson, *Laughter*

Early stand-up artist Victor Borge observed, 'Laughter is the shortest distance between two people'. Better grasping the character and constitution of that notional distance is the task here. So, stand-up is examined initially as a kind of informal space, a quasi-ritual place, inviting and retaining touch with what Roland Barthes (1983) described as its 'private portion' (p. 32). The conjunction made in the title of this paper, between 'stand-up comedy' and 'social dreaming', aims to understand humour as intimacy and as performance. Psychoanalysis has a standing preoccupation and an evolved perspective on the dynamics of humour (Poland,

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1990; Bollas, 1995). From the start, Freud (1905) found jokes to be a major vehicle in his early theorising and illustration of the dynamics of unconscious mental processes: jokes and dreams are connected. They share unconscious patterning, notably in the semiotic dynamics of condensation and displacement. Freud, however, was careful also to distinguish joking from dreaming, on two major grounds.

First, intelligibility is at the heart of the joke; typically 'sense' is wrapped within a linguistic-symbolic envelope of circumlocution and detour – but we 'get' the joke. Conversely, it is part of the psychic-symbolic function of dreaming to evade understanding: the surreal unresolved mystery. We 'don't get it'. Second, the dream is a 'completely asocial mental product' whereas the joke is 'the most social of all mental functions that aim at a yield of pleasure' (Freud, 1905, p. 238). An audience is required for humour. However, and as 'social dreaming' seeks to relay, in their distinctness the two types of unconscious 'work', dream and joke, converge: 'Dreams serve predominantly for the avoidance of un-pleasure, jokes for the attainment of pleasure; but all our mental activities converge in these two aims' (p. 238).

For Freud, dreaming is a predominantly intra-psychic process, whereas jokes depend on inter-subjective play. I propose that stand-up takes place at this interstice. As a personal-performative genre, it lives or dies in the embodied history of the performer. Not just delivery of jokes understood as linguistic devices, the performance 'opens up' and tantalises individual and group. Stand up stages and frames both inter- and intra-subjective social space: the genre lies in an oscillating convergence of play and pain, insight and evasion, self- and (iterative) public-symbolisation. 'Social dreaming' marks another convergence, a 'public' zone

between the therapeutic and the cultural, between standing up on stage and lying down on the couch. In mind here is Thomas Ogden's (2009) conception of talking-as-dreaming. Ogden describes 'unanalytic' and random talking between patient and analyst, for example, about 'etymology, the speed of light, the taste of chocolate', not free-association as such, but a means to allow analyst and patient to 'begin to dream together' (p.15). I propose that 'social dreaming' in comedy frames stand-up talk in analogous terms, as nonanalytic discourse that, nevertheless, shares some of the analytical/reflective/affective qualities of 'dreaming together' (pp. 14–17) – not as patient and therapist, but in a bounded public/intimate psychosocial/conversational space: the comedy club (Mintz, 1985). As comedians Jimmy Carr and Lucy Greeves (2007) note, echoing Bollas (1995),

> The audience's laughter is essential to the rhythm of the comic's set; although they aren't talking to him (except for the red-faced drunk in the front row), for the set to be successful it must still function with the to-and-fro rhythm of a conversation. (p. 115)

The rhythmic to-and-fro is explicit, but it evades reading as such. This primitive element in comic engagement invites psychoanalytic examination. Certainly stand-up is an evasive object. Sonorous yet mute, articulate yet embodied, immanent but shared; the laughter echoing around a stand-up club invites a commitment to understanding the resilience and integrity of the cultural intimate-affective in the character and constitution of stand-up as a genre.

Captivating Intimacy: Theoretical and Material Laughter

Theoretical exploration of such evasive and distributed intimacy is best informed and guided by analysis of empirical material – akin to a psychoanalytic case study. Working analytic conceptions are refined here, extended in reflections on

some short stand-up comedy sets. These sets – 'bits' – were staged as part of a seminar event1 at a London comedy venue, specifically designed to explore the conjuncture at hand: comedy, culture and psychoanalysis. Excerpts from recordings made on the day and transcribed, alongside notes from this event are used to illustrate key theoretical propositions and provide anchoring for emergent conceptions. The aim is to reconnect abstract-sounding analytic concepts to the fine grain of stand-up performance. Needless to say, abstraction is not fully overcome on the page, even if examples provide feel. The live materiality of comedic performance will always exceed attempts to pin it down through theoretical analysis. Insightful in this regard is Bergson's (1911) poetic image of a child by the seashore – grasping foam. In this paper, where a conjunction between object-relations psychoanalysis and Bergson ideas is a background motif, the image should be read with Winnicott's (1973) citation of Tagore in mind: On the seashore of endless worlds, children play. Bergson (1911) warned the zealous philosopher, comparing laughter to the foam from a seaside wave:

> From time to time, the receding wave leaves behind a remnant of foam on the sandy beach. The child, who plays hard by, picks up a handful, and, the next moment, is astonished to find that nothing remains in his grasp but a few drops of water, water that is far more brackish, far more bitter than that of the wave which brought it. Laughter comes into being in the self-same fashion. It indicates a slight revolt on the surface of social life. It instantly adopts the changing forms of the disturbance. It, also, is afroth with a saline base. Like froth, it sparkles. It is gaiety itself. But the philosopher who gathers a handful to taste may find that the substance is scanty, and the after-taste bitter. (p. 200)

Stand-up, the laughter it evokes, and their connections to underlying psychosocial and cultural dynamics are effusive and elusive in just these ways. Stand-up mocks the analytic grasp. However, there remain some traces in the

performance: elements connecting stand-up and laughter back to theoretical accounts of experience – scanty and bitter. The remainder of this article has three tasks: first, to elaborate on and contextualise one strand of theoretical work, object-relations psychoanalysis. This approach has been infrequently applied in considering humour (but see Bollas,1995); second, to explore this in relation to some 'live' empirical material; and, third, to propose and flesh out a theoretical conjunction, between object relations psychoanalysis and Bergson's (1911) non psychoanalytic account of humour.

Transforming Pain: Stage-Managing 'Loss'

> Thus does a sense of humour trade on our origins. It dips into a prior age. Something from the back of beyond, the above and below, the 'far out', it plays with our reality.

Christopher Bollas, *Cracking Up*

What are the stand-up's capacities and motives in sharing and producing communal laughter? Humour emerges, Freud (1927) suggested, from the successful and timely assertion by an individual, and on behalf of the witnessing group, of a kind of narcissistic carapace – triumphant and invulnerable to pain, yet fully cognisant of it. This performative assertion and display depends upon and mobilises some resource of protective (parental) feeling, linked, in Freud's terminology, to the idea of a benevolent superego, 'genetically heir to the parental agency' (p. 164). The humourist is able to retain this capacity, this calling up of atavistic, good internal objects, an expansive mantel in the face of the threat of loss. As the audience, we share in and recognise the comic's abjection (Limon, 2000) but are energised in the

presence of some (greater) good, some bigger thought. There is a concrete mobilisation of (parental) consolation – a redistribution of objects and energies stabilising a new 'position', a 'philosophical' overcoming of loss and threat. This happens in performance, too.

On stage, the background noise of everyday pain and existential dread is turned and tuned by the humourist for his audience and by them and thus evokes both loss and its overcoming: laughter, smiling, a shared shrug; the silently intoned underscore that says, 'Always look at the bright side of life'. Internally, imagined-memorial parental protection undermines and distances everyday distresses, insults and their objects. 'Look at the big picture. Life's OK, we're in this together'. Meanwhile, offstage, as is well documented, comedians are frequently involved in addictions to alcohol and to narcotics and in the display of other depressive symptoms and evasions of loss. Ordinarily, stand-ups can triumphantly turn the tables on psychic pain, in their art, at least. Stand-ups represent losses and deprivations, including the real and imagined traumatic frustrations of life, such as a flight missed, social rejection or a bad-hair day, in which the existential psychic clutter of everyday struggle is at once grasped tightly, then overcome, let go and shared. Stand-ups exercise and exorcise this routinely. On stage they can create from the private, intrasubjective management of loss, narcissistic injury, disconnection and distress a compelling, personal, social, cultural-aesthetic performance. The humourist takes up and creates a paradoxical place, a place at once closely acquainted with elements of 'manic delusion' (Freud, 1927) and yet concurrently able to skewer flights of fancy midflow. We are tied right back onto a performer's acute and comprehensive grasp of the moment, here and now. Laughter

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in the group is both reward and gratitude in respect of this dynamic play of 'delusion'

and realism – repeated serially within the comedian's set.

A Propensity for Humour: Precariousness Assured

How does this creative capacity emerge? Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel (1988),

drawing directly on Freud's analysis, has talked about the triumphant nature of

humour. She captures the underlying dynamic in a telling phrase: 'The humourist is a

person trying to be his own loving mother' (p. 205). Chasseguet-Smirgel's hypothesis

ties this dynamic back to a narrative of early trauma:

> [I]t is a precocious lack of maternal care that explains the relation between
> humour and depression. The humourist is a person trying to be his own loving
> mother, the 'good enough mother' he has not known and who assures the child in
> a state of dereliction that he still is, who pretends 'it is nothing, you'll be better
> soon'. y It can be supposed, however, that the child has furtively been able to
> catch a glimpse (a nurser, a grandmother) of what the 'loving mother' might have
> been, and thus has motives for having prefigured the satisfying narcissistic state
> (or a return to it). Thus, situations of helplessness will provoke a splitting of the
> ego. Part of the ego recognizes the situation of helplessness and another part
> denies it, or rather plays at denying it. (p. 205)

Chasseguet-Smirgel highlights an incomplete disturbance in attachment that

produces, in turn, disturbances in the internalisation of a (maternal) containing

function and in eventual relations connecting child, family and the outside world. With

a more positive emphasis, Bollas (1995) touched on similar ground. He contended

that the mother, in her active sense of playful destabilization and humouring, takes

on a fundamental role in building and energising internal parental good objects –

'cracking-up' baby and laying the ground for (adult) laughter (see also Wilkie and

Saxton, 2010). Whatever the aetiology in detail, the configuration of the early holding

environment underpins the humorist's capacity, drives his or her need to apprehend

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traumata assertively, and, as in stand-up, to publicly display, engage, evoke and process 'loss', abjection, failure: to overcome and relay for us the conspiracy of events against 'everyman or woman'. Stand-ups act out overcoming 'a pathological condition in which the individual is cluttered up with persecutory elements of which he has no means of ridding himself' (Winnicott, 1973, p. 139). Joking and performances allow for the improvisation of such means.

Humour: Sharing and Containing 'Dangerous' Objects

The humorist's internal world reflects a partial failure of the holding environment and a subsequent narrative of improvised and adept repair. It is recovery ongoing. As Ogden (1992) puts it, 'When the failure of the holding environment is less severe, the infant may be able to develop a defensive personality organisation that takes over the care-taking function of the mother. This organisation is developed in a state of perceived danger' (pp. 177–178). With paranoid acuity the stand-up notices everyday pain and seeks out 'risk', the risk of performance, of being out there, of (reprised) confrontation with dangerous, forbidden objects, humiliations, hunger, frustrations and wounds, past and present, real and imagined. These populate the world of the set, symbolic objects on day-release from the concrete inner world of the stand-up. Comic material is enriched by a paranoid take on the world, scripting coincidence as fate, the world as threat and belittlement, the ordinary as insult. To put it another way: the (partial) failure of the holding environment leads to a subjectivity oscillating artfully between what Melanie Klein called the 'paranoid-schizoid' and 'depressive positions' (PS-D). The holding environment and 'ordinary' capacities for containing, processing and mourning traumatic loss are partially attenuated. Such attenuation drives comedic capacities and propensities, often

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feeding dramatic verbal, semiotic and motor dexterity. This manner of 'compensation', often manifest in an accented and enlivened semiotic process, does not connote ill health. Instead it marks a talented, extraordinary style of engaging and relaying experience. 'Ordinary' subjectivity (also) necessarily oscillates between paranoid schizoid and depressive functioning, with the self, symbol and thought constituted in the various means and modes of coping with and managing a 'dialectic', as Ogden (1992) describes: 'One does not leave the paranoid-schizoid position behind at the threshold of the depressive position; rather, one establishes more or less successfully a dialectical relationship between the two, a relationship in which each state creates, preserves and negates the other' (p. 67).

The depressive position describes subjectivities that are more fully able to generate and inhabit the world of symbols and objects with developed intentional capacities and a nuanced grasp of meaning, to feel 'free to make choices' and to feel more fully human. This describes a developmental goal for much object relations psychoanalytic practice – an ordinary sanity.

Conversely, illness is evident in a preponderance of paranoid-schizoid experience. Here, there is a tendency to automatism, to impersonality, to splitting the world and its objects into rigidly, categorically dangerous and safe elements, good or bad. There is a proneness to a sense of vulnerability, experiencing the self-as-object and the world and others in it as 'part-objects'. There can be deference to or insistence on inevitable and brutal logics, compulsions. The paranoid-schizoid position 'involves a non-reflective state of being; one's thoughts and feelings are events that merely happen' (Ogden, 1992, p. 68). There is little 'self' able to interpret and guide experience; the self is 'it' not 'I'. One does not interpret one's experience;

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one reacts to it with a high degree of automaticity (pp. 64–65). Stand-up is an art that takes place between our sense of ourselves as person and as thing, subject and object, thinking and thoughtlessness, matter and memory, 'I' and 'it'.

Between People and Things: 'I' and 'It'

A primitive version of the comedic 'scene' can be illustrated in the notion of being 'It'. The stand-up scenario offers an echo of the familiar children's game 'It': to be 'It' is to be excluded from the group and to remain at its centre – as abject or as ideal object – split off as 'cursed' or as a 'blessed' (damaged) hero. The chase game aim is to capture someone, to pass on being 'It' - and so be reintegrated into the group. Some children like being 'It' for a time, as it places them at the centre of things and with the challenge and thrill of the chase and restoration. Stand-ups play a similar game. They begin their sets and are 'It'. They end by passing 'It' on to victims and hecklers in the interim phase of the set (the peril in the boundary between stage and performer is hinted at here. (See Bollas, 1995.). More benignly, as the set ends, the aim is to 'share' being 'It' within 'the group': I'm 'It', you're 'It', we're all 'It'. And, of course, when we are all 'It', no one (exactly) is 'It'. PS gives over to D. The comedic affirmations of idiosyncrasy and the audience's admission of commonality are both captured in such dynamics. Another version of this comedic it-ness is found in the performance of comic characters (overly vain, posh, or macho) who 'think they're 'It''. Here self-deprecation and deflation achieve a similar, staged, dynamic reintegration. Observing performed 'thing-ness' in stand-up subjectivity – comic 'It-ness' – assists in framing a conjunction. There is a psychoanalytic conception of subjective (PS) automaticity: an impersonal element of the self, without thought and deadened.

There is also Bergson's (1911) philosophical-aesthetic identification of an unalive, mindless rigidity censored by laughter:

> The comic is that side of a person which reveals his likeness to a thing, that aspect of human events which, through its peculiar inelasticity, conveys the impression of pure mechanism, of automatism, of movement without life. y The rigid, the ready-made, the mechanical, in contrast with the supple, the ever-changing and the living, absentmindedness in contrast with attention, in a word, automatism in contrast with free activity, such are the defects that laughter singles out and would fain correct. (p. 87)

Bergson was writing explicitly about humour and laughter, but both Bergson and psychoanalysis identify a kind of rigor mortis of the self, a subjectivity where the self takes on the character, predominantly, of 'the self as object'. The self exists primarily as an 'It' that can merely do things and be done to, a state in which the capacity to experience self-as-subject, as the author of desire or the interpreter of events is impaired (Bollas, 1993; Ogden, 1992, p. 103). Both accounts echo the Bionian language of the 'unthought' (Ogden, 2009).

Stand-ups take a psychic risk (exposure) in order to enjoy and to share (in) the rewards of overcoming. They participate in a revelling that touches both the profanity of everyday pain and the consolation of imaginary transcendence – the audiences' imagined 'love' and a memory of ritual restoration. The to-and-fro of movement and banter, motion and emotion, between performer and audience echoes a shuttling back-and-forth across the fringes of PS-D; humour flirts with energetic concreteness, between community and abandonment, between self and nonself, between triumph and abjection. A sense of humour is an emergent capacity, universal, but developed to a special intensity in some people. Its roots lie in a psychological precariousness.

It is manifest in the improvised and highly developed capacity to manage such precariousness – to notice, to acknowledge and to perform, to reframe and

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symbolise minor frustrations and existential dramas. Jokes and laughter are energised by concrete elements of experience figured in and through the granular details of the everyday. Comic performance tests an audience into recognition and a kind of containing 'love'. The stand-up comedian is able – even compelled – to communicate, to figure, to embody risky, concrete-fantasy material (shock, profanity, unease). Performers work to provoke and prod, to share, to display and (together with an appreciative audience) to overcome the traumata, inconsistencies and glitches that make up experience of the everyday world.

Stand-Up Material: Three 'Bits'

> Let us now give a wider scope to this image of the body taking precedence of the soul. We shall obtain something more general – the manner seeking to outdo the matter, the letter aiming at ousting the spirit.
>
> Henri Bergson, *Laughter*

To illustrate these points better, to gloss and bring back down to earth some abstract 'foamy' conceptions, it is helpful to turn to some empirical material and draw out some vignette illustrations. I present stand-up material in short 'bits' (not jokes as such) and contextualise them with a brief introductory description.

Each 'bit' is followed by a theoretical-analytical comment. I have selected just one passage or incident from each set, as space allows, to illustrate and explore a limited number of key points. The comedians, each interviewed after the set, were highly articulate and reflective about comedy, psychoanalysis and the meaning of their work. I have not explored their reflective accounts in this analysis. I have focused instead on the illustration of some theoretical conceptions to exemplify some of the psychodynamic properties attributed in theory to the stand-up form.

Performer 1: Self-as-object: 'Yeah, 30 years ago my mum gave birth to this'

Scene: The performer entered the stage-area and, after commenting on his discomfort in the setting, the time of day and the unusual make-up of the audience – 'Not my demographic', he paused. He seemed confident in his ability to provoke laughter, but anxious in himself. A large and burly man, he left his body open, briefly inviting contemplation, the set repeatedly playing on his hefty masculine frame, notably in jokes about a career as a drag artist. Early in the set he drew direct attention to his size; tall and large he stood out as a 'big fella'. The set went through an extended series of jokes and reflective anecdotes and was met with appreciative applause. The performer built a section of his routine around the banality of the insults routinely cast at him in everyday life;

he noted the overly obvious and presumptuous character of those imagining that his unusual physical size legitimated commentary and scrutiny. The comedian mocks his 'attackers', repeating their insults, reframing their jibes in his space, exposing them to the derision of the audience. Obviously I'm a big guy, when I'm in the street, people shout at me: 'Were you brought up in a greenhouse?'y'What did your mother feed yer? food [of course] what do most mothers feed their kids? Dynamite and sawdust? Have you always been this big, yes, 30 years ago my mum gave birth to this. (Comedian, Male, 30s)

Performer 1: Analysis

I am linking analysis to a history of comedic preoccupation with 'the body'. A straightforward Bergsonian (1911) analysis might lead us to expect laughter at the hefty performer – or a bland, predictable self-mockery:

> When we see only gracefulness and suppleness in the living body, it is because we disregard in it the elements of weight, of resistance, and, in a word, of matter; we forget its materiality and think only of its vitality, a vitality which we regard as derived from the very principle of intellectual and moral life. Let us suppose, however, that our attention is drawn to this material side of the body; that, so far from sharing in the lightness and subtlety of the principle with which it is animated, the body is no more in our eyes than a heavy and cumbersome vesture. (p. 50)

Such assertion of material embodiment is a major source of Bergson laughter. However, 'live' performance turns the tables on such a hackneyed comic strategy and asserts the comedian's vitality and subtlety against the mechanical application of mockery and insult. The performer is able, here and throughout the performance, to identify a particular kind of concrete, mechanical thinking in his various attackers/targets. Thus he mocks the rigid logic of too-obvious joking: 'Have you always been this big? [deadpan irony] Yes, obviously I was born 6'3'' tall'. *Reductio ad absurdum* is a common trope in this type of comedy. The routine reprises the insults but exposes their mechanical rigidity, their PS-toned literalness. The comedy asserts the human against brutalising jibes: thus, he is man not vegetable ('born in a greenhouse'), he eats food not sawdust and his mother feeds him properly, not with 'dynamite'. The internal world of inhuman and threatening objects and persons is immanently evoked. But the humorous pattern is to share and detoxify concrete and persecutory elements in the emergent zone of audience affection and in their parallel recognition of deft, flexible and witty defence against thoughtless, stale and PS-toned attacks. The performer exposes the laughable in others, not in himself, finding in formulaic taunting evidence of their mechanical and limited logics. In Bergson's

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(1911) terms, he frames their inelasticity: 'How many comic scenes can be reduced to this simple type: a character following up his one idea and continually returning to it?' (p. 185). His remembered attackers are reduced to their monomaniacal ridiculousness. In the account I have set out, there is another narration, PS to D, thing-to-person. The set began with the comedic self-presentation as 'thing', as this, in the form of hefty and awkward embodiment – 'My mum gave birth to this'. But through a process and processing of jokes and anecdotes, the comedian left the stage to applause, applause marking acknowledgement of mindful and humane engagement and marking also the comedian's playful overcoming pain and threat – anecdote by anecdote – rising above and containing numerous attacks and persecutory anxieties. In object relations terms, the stand-up performance lies in the staged dynamic oscillation between PS and D, the display of self-as-object but framed by the triumphant self-as-subject – within anecdotes and as a narrative, ritual whole.

Performer 2: Negotiating diaspora – Words-as-things

Scene: The performer entered the stage area wearing a comedic mask, which, as was revealed once it was removed, seemed to resemble closely some of his features. The joke enlivened the audience, enjoying the play of mask-as-thing and revealing the comedian-as-person – and that sharp interplay. The anecdotal style of delivery opened up a narrative of a displaced young man growing up in a number of international settings in quite different parts of the globe, and enjoying both the freedom offered by a kind of multiple-cosmopolitan identity, as well as some of the anxieties connected to displacement – being from everywhere and nowhere. He made an object of his voice/accent in two ways, mainly, by inviting the audience to consider his accent, which was inflected with some Far Eastern tones and devoid of

readily recognisable regional markers. Not of ethnically Chinese origin, the stand-up was fluent in Chinese. A major part of the act was to tell a joke in that language:

Q: 中国的网页

本模板用於當某一僻字在同一

條目中出現多次的時候，

A: 透過全文轉換方式把該僻字框起來[2]

Stand-up laughs - end.

The joke performed in Mandarin seemed not to be understood in the largely London-based and non-Chinese-speaking audience. It was, of course, appreciated as a witty and creative play on the stand-up genre and the audience's usual work of interpretation and communal-linguistic sharing. The end of the joke produced a pause – and then laughter – although there was no commonality of rhythm and punch-line to hint at the ending: just a stop. The joke of the incomprehensible was realised as a joke about joking, reframing expectations about performance, intelligibility and audience-as-community. The joke split the performer between his Western and Eastern parts, and split the room between comprehension (his) and incomprehension (the audience's). Laughter at the 'joke' opened and filled a space for thought and feeling linked to these elements (comprehension and incomprehension) being put back together again.

Performer 2: Analysis

Scene: This is another instance of comedy emerging from the 'exposure' of the part of the self played with as object but framed, couched, in the space of the

subject. Again, the performer comes on stage as 'thing' – as mask – and plays with the concrete-symbolic ambiguity of mask and face/mindfulness and matter.

In response to a similar situation, Bergson (1911) cites Pascal: 'Two faces that are alike, although neither of them excites laughter by itself, make us laugh when together, on account of their likeness' (p. 34). Similitude is another marker of mechanism and compartmentalization. The framing narrative across the set was transition from thing to person, split to integrated, concrete (mask, strange words) to supple (interpretation, empathy): PS to D.

For a bilingual comic, whose history and development were multiply fragmented by language and geography (English and Chinese in Hong Kong), the joke lightly and playfully enacts a ritual marking and embodying of the vicissitudes of cultural integration/non-integration. The Chinese-language joke enabled the audience to sense and comprehend the performer's early experience of 'incomprehensibility', the peculiar qualities, even the isolating virtuosity of connection – disconnection and belonging – not belonging afforded to and by the comedian as a child. His signature spiel lay in his seemingly 'placeless' and globally distributed origins/history and the linguistic facility and struggles entailed by that history. The joke enacts the drama of overcoming the fragility of an early, place-based holding environment/culture – a moving and re-moving from place to place and between languages. Analytically, the point is this: the joke replicates the structure I have identified, of a performance that displays a particular aspect of the self-as-object, while framing that self-as-object in a reflexive narration. Such narration (in parallel) asserts the self-as-subject throughout the storytelling. This produces psychodynamic interplay towards integration and laughter. Here, the incomprehensible 'joke-object' is reframed in the comic narrative.

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The body, and here too, the embodied-linguistic performance, become the stage and interface for play – with comedic effect. The further point about the Chinese performance is the transformation of words to things, a pattern that corresponds both to Bergson's (1911) analysis of laughter and to Ogden's (1992) psychoanalytic conception of the limited use of words and symbols in a person displaying characteristics associated with paranoid-schizoid experience. The 'words' approximate and feign language- as-concrete as opposed to language as fluent carrier of meaning. The performance humorously transforms the threat, incomprehensible words, and attendant anxieties about disconnection and separation into a virtuoso performance – in the context of the stand-up set and the laughing theatre – integrative and triumphant.

Performer 3: The therapeutic journey: Love, hate and…er.. reparation

Scene: The performer, a woman in her late 20s, entered the stage. Like the previous performer, she drew attention to her voice, noting she had recently returned from the US, where she had picked up a mid-Atlantic accent. Again there was a play on uprooted anxiousness and an enjoyment of cosmopolitan glamour. A good part of the set was based on anecdotes about a former career as a model and on related trans-Atlantic experiences. The comedian was keen to exploit the opportunity to play on the presence in the audience of a number of therapists, enabling her to replay a number of stories about therapy for this peculiar audience – appreciatively mocking therapy and both exploring and resisting identification as and with the role of the patient. The performer talked about trying to 'not disappoint' her therapist, 'manufacturing her own misery' and 'thinking of some sick shit to tell her' because 'most of therapy is really getting to grips with saying, being comfortable saying, 'My

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mum's a bitch and she fucked up y well that's what my therapist thinks and you know I would start sort of trying to [pauses, breaks off, feigns rue] no, she's [my mother's] not really a bitch she's lovely really [pauses, gestures, contrarily, silently to get more laughs] yes, she is' She talked about ending therapy .. and joked, 'I would, you know, rather spend my money on drugs.. than go to therapy!'

Performer 3: Analysis

Her performance elicited laughter and admiration. Again, the set followed the proposed narrative: thing to person. In this case the set was framed by an introductory anecdote tracing the performer's biographical transition from model to stand-up. This opened up a reflective space contrasting an identification with (bodily) objectification, as model (thing), with 'normal' people. Here the comedy splits identity between now and then. The performer placed her model-self in the frame, as object and humorously jibed at her former self and at the stereotype of the model – an object to look at, not a person able to 'be oneself'. This narrative of thing-to-person, this oscillation between PS and D was also enacted in the stories around therapy. The performer outlined various kinds of 'madness': addiction, eating disorders and 'sick shit', some seemingly experienced or witnessed close up, some feigned and largely connected to modeling. But the performance reframed these, placed them at a distance as properties of a past, or another person. In a reflective interview post the set the significance of her transition from model to comedian was underlined:

Q: What was it that made you decide that you wanted to become a practitioner of comedy?

A: For me it was that because I was a model, because I modeled for so many years and was a model for about 9 years, I started to get a chip on my shoulder about that and sort of what makes me, me and so I just wanted to do something that was the complete opposite of modeling, I wanted to do something different and you know it is quite therapeutic doing stand up, I think you get to get over a lot of stuff 'cos you get to make jokes about it y and, you know, it's maybe like your most brutal feelings about it, you get to make it funny.

That reflective gloss captures and spells out much that has been proposed around humour and stand-up in this paper: to paraphrase Bergson, the stand-up now laughs at 'the model encrusted upon the living'. It should be added that the event ended with an affirmation of the contribution made by the comedians to understanding their craft, skill and their lives, opening up, as the sets did, some intimate reflections on common key themes: isolation, anxieties about belonging, fragile subjectivities, and the pleasures and dread that accompany dislocation and 'growing up'. The comedians, the analysts and the speakers, all variously cast as foreign to and outside the process of the event at the start, ended very much with an affirmed connection, a group-feeling developing – and with an attendant deepening of thought, recognition and understanding. The humorists' performances began, variously, by embodying the 'mechanical-inhuman', evoking 'the automata-within', but flexibly and reflexively. They figured and refigured, again and again, joke by joke and anecdote by anecdote,

the transition between human and nonhuman; matter and memory; automata and vitality. The audience provided both stage and affirmation for this containing manoeuvre, the restorative assertion of the human and the humane.

However, the laughter provoked by stand-up is precisely the reverse of Bergson's (1911) censorious laughter: 'especially in the coarser forms of the comic, in which the transformation of a person into a thing seems to be taking place before our eyes' (p. 61). Bergson emphasised the corrective power of laughter – as punitive and censorious. It may be useful instead to consider a therapeutic, restorative function, as applied to the stand-up – a performer who has invited laughter as transformative and who enacts the transition between person and thing on behalf of the group. Laughter at the comedic moment, or at the stand-up portraying it, has a corrective function. But it is not punitive as such. It is a reminder and an assertion of the move to flexible and versatile subjectivity – groupwide – to admit paradox and complexity and, as it were, to recover the person from the thing, the subject from the object, the lively from the rigid (Durant and Miller, 1988, p. 16) and to reintegrate this 'humanity' into the group's apprehension of the comic and his or her objects. On stage, in the performative oscillation of PS-D, we see the staged narrative transformation of 'It' to 'I'. In this regard, stand-up comedians enact a restorative cultural function, in anthropological terms, posited by Northrop Frye (1957): 'The theme of the comic is the integration of society, which usually takes the form of incorporating a central character into it' (p. 43).Contemporary stand-up comedians present this narrative, joke by joke and through their 'sets'. When successful, they enact a transformative journey from 'thing' to 'person', from outside to inside, from 'out-there' to 'here' and from PS to D. Thus the stand-up enables and opens up a restorative cultural space

that invite an ordinary, everyday but nevertheless potent and shared sense of integration and enjoyment.

Stand-Up Trauma and Transformation: Talking-as-Dreaming

Stand-up comedians should not be automatically understood as especially fragile or disturbed, as implied in part by Chasseguet-Smirgel's (1988) analysis. As Ogden (1992) notes, helpfully in this context, all experience is potentially toned with aspects of paranoid subjectivity and is linked, when encountered in extremis, to states somewhat resembling elements of pathology and disorder. As Ogden counsels, 'It must be kept in mind that all y levels of psychopathology are present in every individual' (p. 104). Stand-up is an outgrowth not of pathology as such, but of a style of effort, in health, to maintain a precarious-seeming, though non-necessarily pathological self, functioning in and managing perhaps dramatic oscillations between PS and D. As part of this work, stand-up, as an intimate quasi-ritual, enacts and re-enacts such oscillation, such intrapsychic realignment – often in an aesthetically honed but loosely scripted format – to the benefit of the audience. The communication going on in the theatre is not therapy proper, nor is it madness. A better approximation is, perhaps, to see humour as a kind of talking-as-dreaming (Ogden, 2009, p. 14): 'Like free association (and unlike ordinary conversation), talking-as-dreaming tends to include considerable primary process thinking and what may appear to be non sequiturs (from the perspective of secondary process thinking)'. When Ogden describes talking-as-dreaming, he is careful to distinguish it from psychoanalytic-talk or the discourse symptomatic of pathological states. Instead there is the idea of talk, of a kind of stream of consciousness resembling some

stand-up sets in particular, for instance Eddie Izzard's monologues. This performative style assists in the processing of what Ogden calls the 'undreamt' – split-off parts of the self, ideas, feelings that are troublesome in some way. As Ogden puts it, in a way that echoes the discussion of precarious holding in the aetiology of humour: Undreamable experience may have its origins in trauma – unbearably painful emotional experience, such as the early death of a parent. But undreamable experience may also arise from 'intrapsychic trauma' – that is, experiences of being overwhelmed by conscious and unconscious fantasy. The latter form of trauma may stem from the failure of the mother to adequately hold the infant and contain his primitive anxieties or from a constitutional psychic fragility that renders the individual in infancy and childhood unable to dream his emotional experience, even with the help of a good-enough mother. (p. 16)

In this staged talking-as-dreaming, the stand-up performer seeks to open up and preserve the evolving set as an affective and alive space; a proto-communal, inter-subjective space encompassed by the individual comedian's (introspective and intra-subjective) exposition and exposure of dream-thinking. It is a space inviting contemplation, excitement, risk and engagement. In psychoanalytic argot, the stage becomes a place where transitions are performed and oscillations between PS-D are momentarily and provisionally figured (out) and folded into the flow of performance, PS-D, repetition and narration, achievement and collapse. The concrete becomes abstract, the abstract becomes more concrete, the persecuting parent becomes mum or dad, the 'thing' becomes the 'person', the 'thing' confronts the person; dream-logics unfold. Sign becomes sense and sense becomes sign. Words and things jangle and jut. The body is re-minded and everywhere there are rude reminders of the body-at-large. Nightly sharing of such casual dramaturgy among the

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private, the intimate and the intimidating points to oscillations on the surface of paradox. As Bergson (1911) puts it, echoing the conjunction 'social dreaming', 'It is something like the logic of dreams, though of dreams that have not been left to the whim of individual fancy, being the dreams dreamt by the whole of society' (p. 41).

Stand-Up: A Popular Therapeutic Resource

Stand-up, at its best, enlivens the textured 'surfaces' of the everyday. It punctuates 'slower' rhythms of going-on-being, of embodied anxiety and desire, the self as and in its idiom. Bollas's (1993) concept of 'idiom' (p. 19) provides a helpful intersection in attempts to grasp humour as a generic phenomenon – as a defining human characteristic and as a particular personal characteristic. A suggested integration is that it is the vitality and flexibility of idiom that is restored and enlivened in comedy and laughter. Bergson's (1911) notion of laughter as corrective should be seen in these terms, as correcting us back to our idiom and reminding us about the containment and interplay of idiomatic differences across a group. The burgeoning contemporary heyday of stand-up indicates a hunger for connection, engagement and collective-restorative intimacy. Stand-up should be cherished in this regard, in its specificity and its potential. However, it is difficult not to mention two risks. First, stand-up might collapse under the pressure of contemporary commodity-logics into cycles and formats that, in form and function, humour-as-intimacy and quasi-ritual should resist: the formulaic and the abstract. In abstraction, intimacy is lost and the comic form relinquishes its therapeutic moment and its capacities to enliven and disturb too-settled feelings and thoughts. Second, stand-up's fertile and fluent links with the processes and emotional tones approximating the paranoid-schizoid

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elements of cultural experience might meet a culture wide psychosocial hunger for raw affective engagement and become diverted from positive therapeutic roles.

Instead stand-up becomes linked to a tendency to extend and amplify the impact of the unthought and the unthinking – splitting and projective identification – into everyday culture, places and groups where splitting, denigration and hate are bound to race, gender, sexuality and nation. This negative tendency towards splitting and disintegrative thinking is evident in some contemporary comedy – as it often was in traditional stand-up in the 1970s. Nevertheless, as evidenced in popular culture and in the sets explored briefly in this article, some stand-up contributes to the assertion of an engaging, reflective and therapeutic sociality, marrying the intrasubjective performativity of the comedian's set with the affective sociality of the group. The suggestion is that a part of any explanation of the recent expansion of this popular form lies in the value of live comedic interventions within a culture characterised in part by contemporary anxieties associated with disaffection. Stand-up supports people seeking after retreats from the pervasive abstract-impersonal and populations suffering a precarious sense of belonging-in-place. Stand-up is amongst the small means available to redress such disconnections. This paper has sought to underline the value of stand-up as an everyday cultural intervention able to re-infuse thought and feeling in public and media 'space' and has linked that capacity to a detailed account of psychosocial and cultural dynamics

Notes

[1] This event was organized as part of the AHRC funded Media and the Inner World seminar series by Directors Candida Yates and Caroline Bainbridge. The

event took place in a London comedy venue and included participation by performers, analysts, a specialist panel and an audience engaged in enjoying comedy – and thinking about it. The comedic sets were filmed and audio-recorded with the full permission of the participants and have furnished material for detailed analysis. The author was present at the event as both participant and observer.

[2] These characters are selected at random and have no coherent meaning. They stand here – in ideographic form – to relay the approximate impact of the staged incomprehensible joke – with 'words' as 'things'.

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