

Comedy and Distinction

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I hereby declare that all work in the enclosed PhD thesis is my own and has not been used for publication anywhere else

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Abstract

Comedy plays an increasingly central role in British cultural life. Defying the recent economic downturn, it has grown into a booming multi-million pound industry, both on TV and on the live circuit. Despite this, sociology has traditionally afforded comedy little scholarly attention. Indeed, the art form has been largely omitted from large-scale sociological studies of British cultural production and consumption. Even in the most comprehensive assessment of British cultural tastes, Bennett et al's (2009) highly significant *Culture, Class, Distinction*, comedy was either ignored or defined problematically as a 'middlebrow' television sub-genre.

The central aim of this thesis is to plug this conspicuous gap in the literature. In particular, it aims to examine the patterning of contemporary British comedy taste and understand how this relates to general patterns of socio-cultural division and inequality. Drawing on a large-scale survey and in-depth interviews collected at the 2009 Edinburgh Festival Fringe, it argues that comedy now represents an emerging field for younger generations of the culturally privileged to activate their cultural capital resources. Using the innovative methodological instrument of Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA), it shows that such individuals carefully select and

reject forms of British comedy, favouring the most legitimate ‘highbrow’ items and deliberately snubbing the most ‘lowbrow’. However, unlike most studies of cultural capital and taste, the thesis finds that field-specific ‘comic cultural capital’ is mobilised less through taste for certain ‘objects’ of comedy and more through the expression of rarefied and largely ‘disinterested’ *styles* of comic appreciation. In short, it is the *embodied* currency of possessing a ‘good’ sense of humour, rather than certain *objectified* comedy preferences, that most distinguishes the privileged in the field of comedy.

Such evidence of comedy taste functioning as cultural capital is significant because it challenges recent suggestions that the British are becoming increasingly culturally tolerant and omnivorous. Instead, in the case of comedy, this thesis finds that taste acts as a powerful marker of cultural and class identity. Eschewing the kind of openness described in other cultural areas, comedy audiences make a wide range of negative aesthetic, moral and political judgments on the basis of comedy taste, inferring that one’s sense of humour reveals deep-seated aspects of their personhood. Reflecting on this, the thesis argues that future analysis of popular cultural consumption must be willing to examine not just taste for specific items of culture, but also the accompanying styles of appreciation that frame consumption. It is here, in the specific *way* culture is consumed, that it is possible to discern how contemporary cultural forms are implicated in the redrawing of class boundaries and the pursuit of distinction.

Introduction

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 the 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, Andrew Pettie in *The Daily Telegraph* wrote: ‘It is the quality that is important, not the category. The only meaningful yardstick by which a sitcom should be measured is whether it is funny’ (Pettie, 2011). 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 eight years, I couldn’t help but feel a little bemused by 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 not supported by any empirical audience research. Indeed, if anything, the critical acclaim enjoyed by TV comedies set in working-class contexts, such as *The Royle Family* and *Shameless*, indicated that these comedies were probably consumed as much by the middle-classes as the working-class.

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 idea of funny 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 function 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 eight years as a comedy critic it's 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 thesis. 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 thesis, I wanted to purposefully question such approaches. Echoing a multitude of literature highlighting the diverse ways audiences interpret cultural texts

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 laughter'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.

(Morley, 1978; Ang, 1985; Hill, 2007), my aim was to interrogate the parameters 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 whether certain social demographic variables may be related to this patterning of comedy taste. Indeed, the most central concern of this thesis 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

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 Death Us Do Part*. Although writer Johnny Speight intended Alf Garnett to be 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).

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 thesis 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 research act to challenge and dispute the findings reported by Bennett et al.

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 actually represents more of a social hindrance than a form of cultural capital.

In a further rebuttal to notions of widespread omnivorousness, the thesis 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 thesis 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 British cultural sociology. The layout of the work is organised as follows. Part I is broadly concerned with situating the thesis historically, sociologically and methodologically. In Chapter 1, 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 1 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 2 attempts to deepen this historical analysis by locating the thesis 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 thesis as both a *resource* accumulated via socialisation and an *asset* realisable through objectified and embodied expressions of taste.

In Chapter 3, I set out my research design and explain how this was influenced by the work of Bourdieu (1984) and Bennett et al (2009). In particular, it explains how my methodology echoes these authors in two important ways. First, in order to increase the scope and enhance the persuasiveness of the research, I employ a mixed methods approach for understanding comedy, incorporating both a large-scale survey and follow-up interviews. 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 thesis. 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 is 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 form of *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, the wider implications of comedy as cultural capital moves from symbolic boundaries to issues of legitimacy. In particular, the chapter 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 forms of cultural capital.

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 1: The Changing Field Of British Comic Production

Introduction

Comedy is currently enjoying unprecedented prominence in British cultural life. Following the recent resurgence of TV stand-up and the continuing growth of the live circuit, comedy has emerged as a ‘booming’ multi-million pound industry and an important staging point for understanding British cultural tastes and identities (Logan, 2010; Medhurst, 2007;)³. It also represents one of the few culture industries to experience significant growth in the recent economic downturn (Salter, 2009; Thompson, 2009).

Despite this, sociology – and indeed academia in general – has largely ignored comedy. The art form has been absent from all recent large-scale studies of British cultural consumption (see Goldthorpe and Chan, 2005; Skelton, 2007; Savage and

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).

Devine, 2011), including Bennett et al's (2009: 132-151) highly significant *Culture, Class, Distinction*, where it was only considered as a sub genre of the television field.

However, in order to understand the significance of comedy *consumption*, it is also imperative to examine the sphere 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 this has impacted the legitimacy of contemporary comedians.

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. Each actor has a relational position in this space and uses their access to specific forms of capital 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' 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 thesis 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 ‘mass sub field’ 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.

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 (1996:10) saw tragedy as an ‘imitation of all action that is admirable, complete and possesses magnitude’, 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.

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

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.

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 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 Grock (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 British 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 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 strongly working class, music hall was deliberately 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.

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

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 notion of '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 the music hall era was 'cheeky chappie' Max Miller. Miller was brash, mischievous and well-known for his risqué 'blue' humour. Indeed, his suggestive double entendres 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 banal and upmarket format for 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 basic physical formula. 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 *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 critics. 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 a laughter track 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 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’⁶ (Stott, 2005: 114). Comedians such as Bernard Manning, Frank Carson 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), *Love Thy Neighbour* (Thames, 1972-1976) and *The Black and White Minstrel Show* (BBC, 1958-1978), all of which relied on racial stereotypes, or even the use of ‘blackface’, for much of their humour. The most explicit examples,

⁶ 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.

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 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' and sophisticated humour was 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 *Hancock's Half Hour* (BBC, 1954-1961), *That Was The Week That Was* (BBC, 1962-1963), *Q* (BBC, 1969-1982) and *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (BBC 1, 1969-1974). The tradition also began to occupy an important position on the live comedy circuit, particularly during the 'Satire Boom' of the 1960s. Spearheaded by the Oxbridge Revue *Beyond The Fringe* (1960), political satire began to gain a growing public prominence. This was greatly aided by the success of Peter Cook's satirical London comedy venue *The Establishment Club* (1961-1964) and further fuelled by 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 Wilmot 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’ (Wilmot, 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 Elton (see Appendix 6 for full list). 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.

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 anti-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. For instance, it is possible to demonstrate that each of the 23 key actors in the movement 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 (see Appendix 6 [p.260]). 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 Wilmut, 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 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 usually took the form of long monologues of personal narrative, and the punch-line was either hard to predict or never came (Wilmot, 1989). Many alternative comedians also borrowed from high-art traditions to inform their style. 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).

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). The notoriously anarchic Malcolm Hardee was also 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 value it added to comedy’s cultural legitimacy. Certainly, it’s clear that the alt comedians 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). Dawn French, for example, was criticised for her role in the traditional sitcom *Vicar of Dibley* (1994-2007) and Keith Allen for his role in the *Fat Les* pop song ‘Vindaloo’ (1998). However, the most criticised Alt Comedian was arguably Ben Elton, who has been labelled ‘the biggest sell-out of his generation’ (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).

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, Frank Carson 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 and Frank Carson 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 comedies 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), *Two Pints of Lager and a Packet of Crisps* (BBC, 2001-Present) and *My Family* (BBC, 2000-2010), all use the form and narrative structure of the traditional sitcom. Likewise, a number of contemporary stand-ups such as Michael McIntyre, John Bishop, Jason Manford and Russell Howard are experiencing

unprecedented popular success, despite been criticised by critics for their ‘light’, ‘safe’ and ‘inoffensive’ material (Logan, 2010; Bennett, 2009).

However, whilst the renewed popularity of lowbrow 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 highbrow 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, Paramount Comedy and Channel 4. Notably, these channels often position themselves artistically against the main channels by claiming to provide more experimental comic content. BBC 3, for example, defines itself as ‘the UK’s leading digital channel for new comedy ideas and talent...committed to stimulating creativity and cultural excellence’ (BBC, 2008: 19) whereas Channel 4 (2007: 13) comments that ‘comedy is a rich source of innovation, and innovation is Channel 4’s life blood’. Additionally, this ‘splintering’ of comedy

production has also been aided by the asynchronous viewing possibilities offered by the internet and the growing DVD market.

In this new 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 a laughter track. The use of a laughter track has traditionally acted as a signal of the way TV comedy is intended to be understood (Mills, 2005: 51). By contrast, the abandonment of a laughter track 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 have largely prevailed. 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 highbrow arts and underpinned by a general ethos of experimentation, The Fringe has become 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, 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, the industry surrounding comedians has greatly expanded. This has yielded an ever-increasing array of cultural intermediaries, including most notably a network of comedy critics (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 2011 (Edfringe.com, 2011). These critical intermediaries are particularly important as they act as ‘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 the most ‘bankable assets in the economy of cultural prestige’ (English, 2005: 52).

Conclusion: The Cultural Position of British Comedy

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 primetime sitcom, 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 proliferation 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 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 thesis uses both survey and interview data to answer these questions. However, before doing so, it is important to situate the analysis and its research questions 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 thesis.

Part 1: Positioning The Research

Chapter 2: 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, before being activated in the social world in the form of 'legitimate' cultural tastes. In turn, he argued these expressions of 'high' 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 'high' taste as a tool of distinction, indicating instead that the middle classes have become 'cultural omnivores', grazing on both high *and* low culture (Bennett et al, 2009).

This literature review 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; British 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 cultural capital resources anchored in the *habitus*, and its realisation in social life via cultural tastes (objectified cultural capital) and aesthetic styles (embodied cultural capital). It also explains how such capital only takes on symbolic power, in terms of stratification and exclusion, when it is said to mark strong symbolic boundaries and is widely considered to be legitimate.

Turning away from theory and towards contemporary empirical measurement, the chapter goes on to explain how inflections in the cultural landscape 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 embodied cultural capital.

Finally, the chapter explains how these debates feed into the field of comedy and the research questions of this project. Representing the first ever study of British comedy consumption, it will outline questions aimed at measuring objectified and embodied cultural capital, symbolic boundaries, and the contemporary relevance of *habitus*.

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. Bourdieu argued that, stretching beyond purely economic factors,

‘cultural habits and dispositions’ inculcated via the family are decisive in achieving educational success (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979; 14). This represented a significant departure from previous sociological imaginings concerning culture, which generally emphasised its unifying ability as a source of shared norms and values.

Central to Bourdieu’s thesis was the idea that individuals from the ‘dominant classes’ (upper middle-class and middle class) inherit a set of dispositions and cultural ‘cues’ during primary socialisation. 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, however, this informal cultural schooling is not indiscriminate. It involves a very deliberate 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. Bourdieu argued this socialisation in ‘ways of seeing’ art is particularly important in terms of cultural capital formation. It involves inculcating a ‘disinterested aesthetic disposition’ that facilitates 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) termed ‘symbolic mastery’, will be further explored later in this review. However, in terms of initial formation of cultural capital, the main significance of this aesthetic disposition is its embodied role in constituting 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. It's important to note that this somewhat deterministic hold of the *habitus* is not absolute (Bourdieu, 1990c: 116). There is some room for agency, what Bourdieu called aesthetic 'improvisation', but this generally works alongside the *habitus*, helping individuals adapt their consumption 'practice' to the specific demands of a particular cultural field – to get a 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 132-135).

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 elites 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 review. 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).⁷

The virtual form of cultural capital, or what I refer to throughout this thesis as ‘cultural capital resources’, primarily concerns the ‘structured’ conditions of the *habitus* originally mentioned by Bourdieu. This begins with the process of elite cultural socialisation, whereby middle class children are inculcated with certain cultural ‘tools’, such as cultural knowledge and a specific aesthetic disposition, which they subsequently learn to embody with natural ease (Bourdieu, 1990b: 74).

However, this primary source of virtual 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 of familiarity between the elite *habitus* and the educational field. Children with strong resources of cultural capital feel like a ‘fish in water’, because teachers and other educational ‘gatekeepers’ interpret their embodied cultural resources as a sign of ‘grace’ and ‘natural talent’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 127).

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

⁷ 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).

embodied by middle class children are highly valued in educational settings. In particular, there is a homology between the disinterested aesthetic disposition and educational achievement (Bourdieu, 1977). Disinterestedness is not just helpful in decoding high art, it also encourages what Gouldner (1979: 28-29) described as a 'culture of critical discourse', enabling middle class children to employ a more generally reflexive and analytical orientation to all areas of life. In terms of education, this orientation gives them a clear advantage in areas such as the arts, humanities and social sciences that 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 (Cooksen and Persell, 1985).

Rather than seeing subsequent class-based disparities in 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 of education. In turn, through this process of achievement, these privileged students also accrue further cultural capital resources; they develop what Bourdieu termed a 'cultured *habitus*' (ibid). They obtain more cultural knowledge and their capacity for symbolic mastery becomes more sophisticated and nuanced.

Although not without its critics (these will be examined later), this theory of resource conversion (middle class socialisation to school 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, most working class children who do not possess this primary virtual capital and will never achieve such a 'natural' familiarity with culture - what Coulangeon (2007: 98) terms cultural 'Je ne sais quois' - are subsequently caught in a

spiral of negative cultural capital formation⁸. In the education system this means they are often penalised unfairly, as illustrated by Schubert's (2008: 260) example of the 'hard working' working class student who is always considered inferior to the middle class student who is 'naturally bright'. This process is epitomised in Skeggs (1997) study of white, working class girls in the English Midlands, which demonstrated how such young women feel like a 'fish out of water' in education and are subsequently disempowered by the system.

Moreover, I argue here that the accumulation of cultural capital resources is further perpetuated by the conversion of educational achievement into occupational success. Although Bourdieu (1984) did not include occupation in measurements of cultural 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 (the inclusion of 'occupation' is explained further in Chapter 3 [p.78-81]).

Seen through this lens, cultural capital is not a static asset but a resource that can evolve through the life course, particularly as a result of contact with the education system and certain occupational cultures. While one's cultural '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 complicate the dispositions that make up this habitus (Atkinson, 2009: 906)⁹.

⁸ 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)

⁹ It is important to note here that although 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

This cumulative and reinforcing process of accumulation completes what Bennett 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).

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 impact of cultural resources, this thesis intends to operationalise the three dimensions of acculturation as one dependent variable – ‘cultural capital resources’ (see Chapter 3 [p.78-81] for further details):

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

However, although elites 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)

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).

argues that elites must articulate their cultural resources in particular social fields. Only when virtual cultural capital is converted into ‘field-specific cultural capital’ will it become ‘socially consequential’ (Holt, 1998: 3-5).

Cultural Capital and Taste

In *Distinction* (1984), Bourdieu explains that one of the main ways elites 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 as 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 doing this, the dominant classes are able to employ a ‘pure gaze’ in their appreciation of cultural objects, stressing the virtue of form not function (Kant, 1987: 234).

However, rather than employ ‘disinterestedness’ in the appreciation of all cultural objects, the *habitus* of the cultural elite selectively consumes. It gravitates towards a certain pole of cultural production, the restricted sub-field, where ‘high’ cultural forms specifically demand this disinterested appreciation (Bourdieu, 1993).

The disinterested aesthetic is diametrically opposed to the aesthetic orientation of the working classes. Working class culture 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 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 profit¹⁰ (ibid: 41).

To illustrate the significance of these opposing orientations, Bourdieu (1984:191-192) uses the pertinent example of different forms 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 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

¹⁰ Bourdieu (1984: 318-365) also detects a ‘middlebrow’ aesthetic orientation, ‘cultural goodwill’, which will be explored later in the chapter under the heading ‘the problem of mobility’.

activates the profits associated with what Bourdieu (1986) terms 'objectified' cultural capital (see Research Question 1 [p.65-67]). However, before explaining the contemporary significance of objectified forms of cultural capital, it is first important to explain the wider sociological significance of Bourdieu's cultural capital theory.

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 in social life - either through consumption or through interactional expressions of taste - they acquire a symbolic power. They are converted into 'symbolic capital' (Bourdieu, 1984: 291).

Essential to the power of symbolic capital is the idea 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. As Skeggs (1997) notes 'legitimation is the key mechanism in the conversion to power' (8). 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 fields are best described by concepts such as Maffesoli's (1988) 'neo-tribe' or through the ethnographic fieldwork undertaken by Thornton (1996). Looking at the culture surrounding dance

music and nightclubbing in the UK, Thornton reveals that strong taste hierarchies govern access to power in this milieu. However, she labels the taste assets that operate in these groups as ‘sub-cultural capital’, as they confer status only ‘in the eyes of the relevant beholders’ and are non-transferable in other cultural domains (Thornton, 1996: 11).

In contrast, the most prestigious forms of culture in Western society, the ‘high’ 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; critics and the state.

Agents of Legitimation: Cultural Critics 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 institutionalised 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)¹¹.

One group of intermediaries, cultural critics, are particularly powerful in the production of cultural value. They 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, such critics have only operated in the realm of high culture and therefore, according to Bourdieu, have only further acted to legitimate the disinterested aesthetic (Bourdieu, 1993: 72).

Symbolic Boundaries, Social Exclusion and Symbolic Violence

Once one’s cultural capital resources (in the form of taste for high culture) 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

¹¹ 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.

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 and enjoy high cultural objects and are therefore prohibited from participating in the 'legitimate' sub-field of culture.

To illustrate this with a notional example, imagine two people regarding a Jackson Pollock painting in a prestigious New York gallery. Person A has high cultural capital resources and person B has low cultural capital resources. While person A looks at the painting and talks at length about how Pollock's style of abstract expressionism is akin to chaos theory, person B sees nothing but pointless squiggles. Although her decoding is different, person B is frustrated that she cannot see what person A sees. She knows that the painting must be more significant than squiggles, as its legitimacy is institutionalised through a prestigious public setting and a government funded exhibition. However, because the accumulation of cultural capital resources is a veiled process and the expression of cultural competence is widely considered 'idiosyncratic' or 'god-given', person B subsequently defers to the superior 'inner sensibility' of person A (Bourdieu, 1993: 219). She is a 'fish out of water' in this field and accepts her exclusion, even though person B's 'legitimate' interpretation of the painting is, according to Bourdieu, normatively meaningless. This symbolic boundary is further intensified by a process of what Bourdieu calls 'self-elimination', whereby person B internalises a feeling of alienation and inferiority in the face of legitimate art, and consequently excludes herself from future settings where she is not familiar with specific cultural norms (Bourdieu, 1984: 379).¹²

Although the above example is fictional, Bourdieu argued that such instances of exclusion occur frequently in the field of culture. Those with high cultural capital

¹² 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).

resources have the power to ordain certain cultural practices as ‘more legitimate’ and then have the additional power to institutionalise these claims (Bourdieu, 1984: 247-256). As a result, the legitimacy of their tastes becomes accepted as standard while still at the same time ‘shrouded in a cloak of neutrality’ (Lamont and Lareau, 1989: 159). Furthermore, 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. According to Bourdieu, 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).

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 Bourdieu (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 (Schubert, 2008). For instance, Bourdieu argued that those without symbolic capital experience: ‘dehumanisation, frustration, disruption, anguish, revolt, humiliation, resentment, disgust, despair, alienation, apathy, fatalist resignation, dependency and aggressiveness’ (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 cultural differences 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 has 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 this qualitative process that she believes 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, this thesis will not take for granted any comedy taste differences it uncovers. Instead, it will seek to explicitly examine whether such divides constitute meaningful symbolic boundaries (See Research Question 3 [p.68-69]).

‘High’ Culture and Objectified Cultural Capital

Having explained the potential symbolic power of cultural capital, it is now useful to return to explaining 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 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 virtual 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). As Bourdieu noted, the ‘high’ cultural good 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, through the instruments of cultural and economic appropriation (1984: 227)’¹³.

¹³ It is important to note, however, that the activation of objectified cultural capital is not just dependent on an embodied understanding of disinterestedness. For instance, the exclusionary power of certain high cultural forms may well rest on the economic capital required to access it, rather than a

It is significant to note that since the publication of *Distinction* (1984 [1979]), nearly all subsequent studies concerning taste have focused their attention on this ‘objectified’ form of 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).

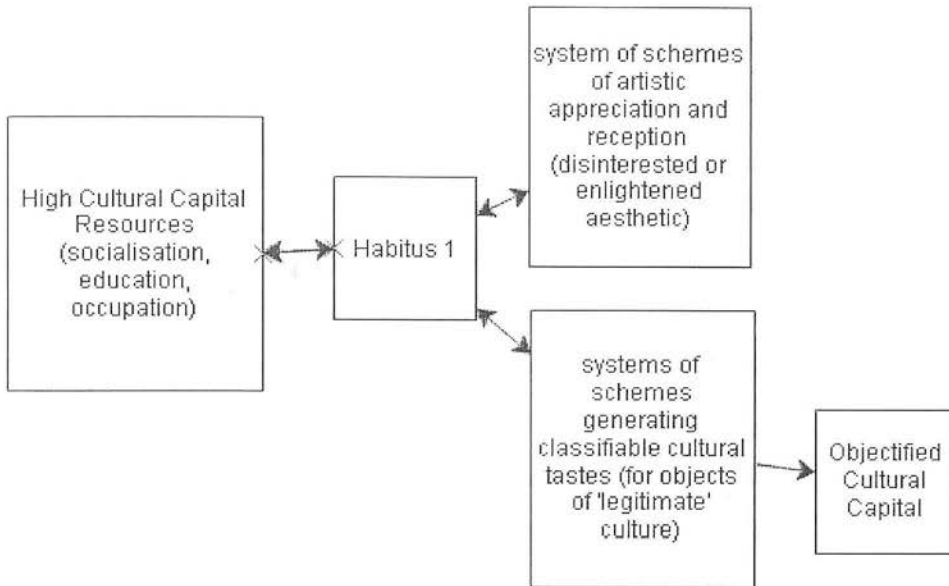


Figure 1: Objectified Cultural Capital (Adapted from Bourdieu, 1984: 171)

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,

disinterested disposition. This form of objectified cultural capital is generally referred to as ‘snob’ culture where the mechanism of exclusion is more overt.

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 have 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 assimilate 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, it becomes increasingly difficult for individuals to 'cash in' their cultural capital resources. In other words, their assets have lost their value. 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.

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 still possess social stratificatory power. For example, the taste

diversity reported in omnivore studies does not necessarily presuppose that elites are now indifferent to aesthetic hierarchies (Coulangeon, 2004).

What such studies fail to acknowledge is that the pursuit of distinction is not just based on the consumption of high cultural ‘objects’. Indeed, in *Distinction*, taste for the high arts only constitutes one domain where cultural capital resources can be successfully mobilised. As Holt (1998; 5-6) notes, tastes can serve as a resource for social reproduction in any field ‘which elites have invested the requisite time and psychic energy to convert their generic cultural capital assets into field-specific tastes’. Therefore, what many recent research 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). Elites therefore may 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) calls ‘embodied’ cultural capital. As Figure 2 demonstrates, culturally privileged individuals use the scarcity of their ‘disinterested’ aesthetic disposition to consume cultural objects in a manner inaccessible to those with less cultural capital resources. This allows elites to diversify into multiple fields of consumption but uphold claims to distinction by adapting their embodied aesthetic disposition to accommodate the ‘feel for the game’ required in new settings. 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). However, although Bourdieu himself coined the phrase

‘embodied cultural capital’, he rarely referred to it in the context of popular cultural consumption. Rather, for Bourdieu, embodied cultural capital was more a means of explaining how elite groups used their bodies to communicate distinction (i.e. posture, gesture, accent, pronunciation); how they expressed their bodily *hexis* (Bourdieu, 1984: 193)¹⁴. In contrast, in the realm of taste, he talked little about embodied cultural capital and instead focused on the expression of objectified cultural capital.

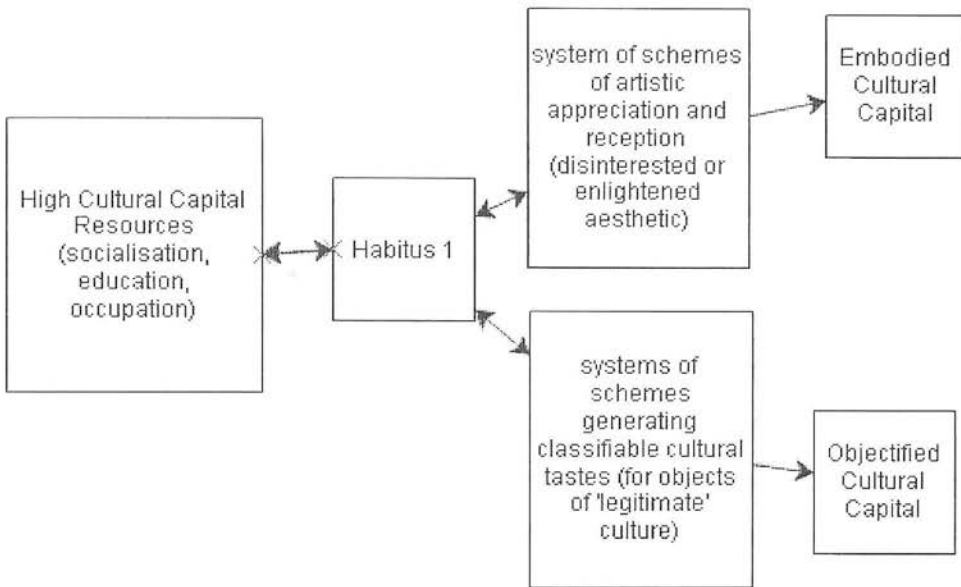


Figure 2: Embodied Cultural Capital (Adapted from Bourdieu, 1984: 171)

This, then, is arguably the point where the theoretical grounding of this thesis begins to depart from the rigid boundaries of Bourdieu’s social theory. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Bourdieu was sceptical about ‘paradigm change’ in relations between the sub fields of restricted and mass production and failed to examine how forms of popular culture may be implicated and incorporated into distinction strategies (Prior, 2005). Although his theory stressed agency through ‘improvisation’ and therefore the contingency of field positions, he himself seemed to espouse a

¹⁴ 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.

peculiarly static and one-dimensional view of mass culture (Fowler, 1997; Shusterman, 2000). Indeed, during his career he afforded 'low' culture very little empirical attention, in later work even deriding it as alienating (Bourdieu, 1996).¹⁵

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 and even rap music have experienced upward mobility in recent years, gaining increased legitimacy and recognition (Regev, 1994; Baumann, 2001; Rocamora, 2004; Shusterman, 2002). 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). 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 on traditional objectified tastes (See Research Question 2 [p.67-68]).

In particular, two theorists have been instrumental in furthering the empirical significance of embodied cultural capital. In his qualitative examination of American consumption practices, Holt (1997, 1998) argues that cultural capital has gone 'underground'. Among his respondents, he argues 'distinction is more and more a matter of practice', with those possessing high cultural capital resources exhibiting a clear confluence in styles of taste, including a propensity for 'decommodification, connoisseurship and cosmopolitanism' (Holt, 1998: 12-16). Holt is critical of the majority of existing cultural consumption literature, which he argues relies too

¹⁵ 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.

heavily on simply measuring cultural preferences and participation. These studies generally assume that entire art forms or genres have ‘single invariant meanings’ and ignore that different ‘interpretative communities’ use and interpret these cultural categories in different ways (Holt, 1998: 20-23). He argues that future studies should therefore focus on more qualitative analysis, where the meanings of ‘cultural objects can be measured at a level of specificity that allows for inferences regarding embodied tastes’ (ibid).

Another influential theorist who has indirectly alluded to the increasing significance of embodied cultural capital is Coulangeon (2005, 2007). Looking specifically at musical taste in France, Coulangeon (2007) largely corroborates Peterson’s ‘Omnivore’ thesis. However, like Holt he argues that the rise of the omnivore does not necessarily imply that culture is being democratised.

Instead, Coulangeon (2005: 126) argues that social differences are increasingly being expressed through ‘modes of appropriating works and styles’. He argues that this use of embodied cultural resources actually constitutes a much more audacious affirmation of elite cultural domination. Through ‘borrowing forms of expression from outside the perimeter of highbrow art’, elites showcase their ability to ‘culturally empower’ forms of popular art (ibid). Drawing on the work of Bourdieu’s colleague Passeron, Coulangeon further notes that this rehabilitation of popular culture simply illustrates how the dominant exercise their symbolic ‘droit du seigneur’ (‘The [Feudal] Lord’s Right’) in the field of culture. Such a process, he argues, only reinforces the certainty of their legitimacy and only helps to ‘radically distinguish’ them from ‘lower status class members’ (127).

Coulangeon therefore concludes that symbolic boundaries ‘are becoming more complex without growing fainter’ (147) and finishes by introducing the useful term ‘enlightened eclecticism’ to help nuance the notion of the contemporary cultural omnivore. The enlightened eclectic, he argues, may combine a taste for both traditionally high and low art, but is perhaps more discriminating in his or her consumption than omnivore theorists imply. He or she may, for example, consume

only the most legitimate objects within popular art forms, or employ a distinctly ‘enlightened’ aesthetic approach (ibid).

Contestations over Habitus and Cultural Capital

While this review has outlined the theoretical and empirical grounds on which it plans to operationalise cultural capital, 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). Indeed, in 2006 the percentage of working class students in UK universities was 28.2% (Reay et al, 2009). 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.¹⁶

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 ‘significant badge of honour’ (Bennett et al, 2009: 186).

¹⁶ 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.

Considering these criticisms, Bennett et al (2009) decide to disaggregate the various assets of cultural capital resources in their influential study of British cultural tastes. Rather than broadly accept the unity of the *habitus*, as I do in this thesis (see p.78-80), they prefer to explore the effect of social origin, education and occupation separately, finding out which, if any, may be pertinent sources of cultural privilege.

The Problem of Mobility

The significant critiques of *habitus* outlined above also fold into another set of relevant literatures concerning the socially mobile or ‘new middle class’ (Wynne, 1998; Van Eijck and Mommas, 2004). For instance, if we are to follow Bourdieu (1984: 75) in assuming that the successful deployment of cultural capital depends on the unity of *habitus* across social groups, what happens when this unity is disturbed on a large scale? According to many British sociologists, this is exactly what has occurred in the last 40 years through widespread social mobility. Indeed, ever since Goldthorpe’s (1980) Nuffield mobility studies, there has been a renewed acceptance among researchers that late modern British society is characterised by a high level of particularly upward mobility (Marshall et al, 1997; Heath, 2000). In particular, as mentioned, Halsey’s (1980) work illustrated how the growth of higher education has significantly expanded the social origins of today’s dominant classes. As Savage (2000: 80) has summed up, ‘class mobility has become the norm, not the exception, for both men and women in Britain.’¹⁷

The existence of the socially mobile thus presents important implications for cultural consumption and the expression of distinction. Bourdieu (1984: 318-365) only really addressed upward mobility in his discussion of the ‘petite bourgeois’, where he depicted such individuals as pretenders in the elite domain – ‘called’ rather than ‘chosen’ (339). These individuals were constantly attempting to ‘borrow aspects of the intellectual lifestyle’ and therefore were still firmly entrenched within the circuit of cultural reproduction. A somewhat similar theory, ‘the status anxiety hypothesis’ has also been developed by Goldthorpe and Chan (2007:1116), who argue that the

¹⁷ However, a recent government report (Cabinet Office, 2011: 16) suggests that current rates of social mobility are much lower.

upwardly mobile are likely to be insecure about their newly acquired status, and therefore shun the taste culture of their socialisation in order to embrace newly obtained highbrow tastes.

However, this characterisation has been challenged by a number of more recent studies directly examining the socially mobile. Rather than exhibiting ‘status anxiety’, Erickson (1996) argues that the socially mobile are more accurately described as highly skilled ‘culture-switchers’, whose *habitus* reflects some elements of their new cultural milieu, but also retains aspects of their background environment. Van Eijk (1999) echoes these findings, locating the Dutch socially mobile not just as ‘culture switchers’ but going further to characterise them as the most likely social group to display cultural omnivorousness. However, significantly, both Erickson and Van Eijk argue that mobile individuals defy and devalue the notion of cultural capital, reaping social benefit not from having ‘legitimate’ tastes but through the ability to *successfully switch* between cultural modes. It is this cultural versatility, Erickson notes, that constitutes the most pertinent cultural resource.

In Britain, these findings have also been somewhat corroborated by the recent research of Reay et al (2009) and Oliver and O’Reilly (2010). Exploring the experiences of British working class university students and British working class lifestyle migrants respectively, these authors find that individuals are able to refashion parts of their lifestyle to adapt to their new cultural setting but at the same time also preserve important aspects of their working class identity. However, notably, they are less certain about the social benefits associated with such culture switching. Indeed, many socially mobile respondents in both studies appear to suffer from a ‘*habitus* divided against itself’ (Bourdieu, 1999: 511), pushing and pulling their tastes in different directions.

Research Questions

The main aim of this literature review has been to outline the theoretical backbone of this thesis 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. It has also explained that such cultural capital realisation also rests heavily on the symbolic power of external legitimation and the strength of symbolic boundaries.

Before connecting this valuable body of literature to my specific research questions, it is important to reiterate the importance of the initial analysis of comedy production outlined in the previous chapter. Although traditionally discredited, comedy has experienced significant upward mobility since the 'Alternative Comedy Movement'. Pioneering formal innovation and borrowing themes from high art, the alt comedians expanded the field of comedy and introduced new styles intentionally skewed towards the restricted field of cultural production. Contemporary British comedy is therefore best understood as highly diverse, with some producers occupying 'high' positions in the cultural hierarchy and some 'low'.

However, while there might be strong evidence indicating a transformation in the paradigm of British comic *production*, there is little understanding of how this change has been reflected in patterns of *consumption*. Although a Bourdieusian approach would assume that such a shift has profoundly affected the class profile of comedy consumers (and therefore had a significant impact on cultural capital formation), such developments remain unexplored.

This thesis therefore aims to address this gap in the literature. In particular, it seeks to explore whether changes in the production of comedy have attracted new audiences with high cultural capital resources and, if so, whether these audiences are using their comedy taste to express new forms of distinction. To address this key problematic, the thesis is structured in terms of four main research questions.

Research Question 1: Investigating Objectified Cultural Capital

As the literature review has highlighted, cultural capital resources can be instantiated in social life in two different ways. The first method is through the consumption of

certain, traditionally 'high', cultural objects that are somehow 'difficult' to consume and considered widely legitimate. This constitutes the expression of *objectified cultural capital*, and is the resource most thoroughly investigated by Bourdieu and his subsequent interlocutors.

However, as outlined, the contemporary significance of objectified forms of cultural capital is highly disputed. Recent investigations of British cultural consumption indicate that those with high cultural capital resources now consume both high and low forms of culture and therefore the stratificatory power of high art objects has weakened (Goldthorpe, 2006; Bennett et al, 2009).

However, it is also possible to argue that the cultural omnivore thesis does not necessarily imply a large scale disruption to symbolic hierarchies. Whilst I do not dispute the empirical findings of this extensive literature, it must be noted that such empirical findings are usually predicated on large statistical surveys. Within these surveys, art forms or artistic genres are usually coded invariantly as either high or low art forms. These cultural categories are arguably far too large and amorphous to effectively capture the intricacies of modern British 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 1, have all pointed to the fact that popular cultural forms such as comedy can no longer be coded solely as lowbrow categories.

One of the main questions this thesis aims to answer, then, is how these changes in the field of production are reflected in trends of comic consumption. By looking beyond the boundaries set by most studies, and examining tastes for *individual* comedians and comedy TV shows, I aim to examine in closer detail how cultural capital resources affect comedy taste. For instance, if consumers with higher cultural capital resources are carefully consuming only 'highbrow' comedy and eschewing lowbrow forms, this may signify that certain assertions of the cultural omnivore thesis are inaccurate. Elite consumption of highbrow comedy would surely not indicate omnivorous tolerance but instead a trend much closer to Coulangeon's 'enlightened

eclecticism'. It may also signify that forms of objective cultural capital may be shifting away from traditional areas of high culture and towards popular forms of culture.

Research Question 1, therefore, asks whether consumers with higher cultural capital resources prefer and consume comedians widely considered to be 'highbrow' and legitimate, while rejecting comedians considered to be lowbrow?

Research Question 2: Investigating Embodied Cultural Capital

In problematising the cultural omnivore thesis, this research will also deliberately look beyond objectified cultural capital towards notions of *embodied cultural capital*. In particular, this will entail examining the nature of comedy consumption itself. As the literature review illustrates, popular fields such as comedy are in a state of constant change. Consumers cannot rely on individual comedians to possess stable cultural value and therefore it is unlikely that much cultural capital will reside in any one comic performer.

In these cultural fields, then, a strong body of literature suggests that the pursuit of distinction is increasingly becoming a matter of practice, with cultural capital resources activated via the use of distinct aesthetic styles (Holt, 1997). Those with high cultural capital resources therefore may be constructing symbolic boundaries by consuming objects in a distinguished manner which separates them from other consumers of the same object. The second research concern of this thesis therefore aims to examine whether there are significant differences in the way social groups consume comedy, and if so, what strategies they enact by doing so.

Mindful of Lamont (1992) and Bennett et al's (2009) findings concerning the diminished significance of the Kantian aesthetic, this will not be a straightforward Bourdieusian analysis equating embodied cultural capital automatically with disinterestedness. Instead, analysis will attempt to understand all the possible dimensions of people's aesthetic styles, and which ones, if any, act as grounds for the drawing of symbolic boundaries.

Particular attention will also be paid to the ‘legitimacy’ of different aesthetic styles. I will examine the role played by critics and other cultural intermediaries in the comedy field, who have the power to generate belief in the value of particular comedians and to disseminate a discourse communicating certain aesthetic criteria for evaluating comedy.

Research Question 2, therefore, asks whether consumers with higher cultural capital resources employ a distinct aesthetic lens when evaluating comedy, which, in turn, is both externally legitimated by cultural critics, and beyond the aesthetic reach of those with lower cultural capital resources?

Research Question 3: Honing in on Symbolic Boundaries

Although research questions 1 and 2 aim to examine divisions in comedy taste and style, it is important to remember that such differences do not necessarily imply symbolic violence, in the manner posited in *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984). Indeed, as Lamont (1992) found in her research on the middle classes in the U.S, such aesthetic boundaries can vary greatly in strength. For example, comedy taste boundaries are unlikely to lead to inequality and exclusion if people on either side are tolerant of each other’s preferences, or if there are large-scale disputes over what constitutes ‘legitimate’ comedy. In Britain, for example, the latest research on cultural consumption (Bennett et al, 2009: 189) notes that boundary-making has all but disappeared.

Considering these developments, this thesis will not assume the presence of symbolic boundaries but instead will *explicitly* examine any taste divisions it uncovers in the empirical data. In particular, it will pay particular attention to respondents’ comedy dislikes and the audiences they associate with these dislikes. It is hoped that through this in-depth qualitative enquiry, the thesis will be able to uncover both the *strength* and the *type* of boundaries being drawn on the basis of comedy taste.

Research Question 3, therefore, asks whether respondents with high cultural capital resources use comedy taste as a means of claiming social distance from other social groups, and if so what is the strength and character of these symbolic boundaries?

Research Question 4: Interrogating the Habitus

Although mindful of the far-reaching criticisms of Bourdieu's habitus already outlined in this chapter, I have nonetheless decided to tentatively retain the notion of *habitus* in this thesis. It is the mechanism that purports to unite one's cultural capital resources and without it the concept of cultural capital seems 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. 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', he also argues that in certain instances the *habitus* can adapt and change (Bourdieu, 2005). There is some room, then, for the permeability of the *habitus*, for it to be continually modified according to one's encounters with the outside world (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 134).

However, it is important to add that the use of *habitus* in this thesis will be critically orientated. As Bourdieu himself noted (1993: 86) *habitus* is fundamentally 'linked to individual history' and therefore to interrogate the validity of the concept (as a dependent variable) it is vital to examine the individual histories of respondents. I will therefore explore, in particular, where there is a coherent homology in respondent's descriptions of their cultural upbringing, their education and their work history.

Furthermore, Bourdieu argues that adaptations in the *habitus* are most likely to occur when individuals encounter unfamiliar fields. Here the *habitus* can be 'restructured, transformed in its makeup by the pressure of objective structures' (2005: 47). In the context of this thesis, this process of restructuring is most likely to occur among respondents who do not fit neatly into the groups of those with 'high' or 'low' cultural capital, instead possessing mixed cultural capital resources. This project will

therefore pay particular attention to the comedy taste of these mixed respondents, and particularly those who might be said to be upwardly or downwardly socially mobile. It will examine whether the 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).

Research Question 4, therefore, asks what the comedy tastes and consumption styles of those with mixed cultural capital resources reveal about the position of the socially mobile in the cultural hierarchy, and additionally, what do they imply about the utility of Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*?

In the following chapters, this thesis aims to empirically address each of these research questions. However, before doing so, it is first important to consider how the theoretical concerns of the thesis were translated into research design. The following chapter thus addresses the methodological components of the thesis.

Part 1: Positioning the Research:

Chapter 3: Methodology

Research Design

As the theoretical underpinnings of this thesis are rooted in the work of Bourdieu, it follows that the research design is also somewhat influenced by his methodological approach. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984) employed mixed methods to investigate cultural taste, using survey analysis alongside interviews, textual analysis and photo analysis. However, he received sustained criticism for his methodology, particularly for the way he manipulated ‘weak’ and ‘unreliable’ survey data (Silva et al, 2008). Indeed, most subsequent work on cultural consumption has centred on interrogating Bourdieu’s work via the use of more representative surveys of cultural participation and taste (Peterson and Kern, 1996; Goldthorpe and Chan, 2005; Bennett et al, 2009; Skelton, 2007). It is argued that such quantitative methods provide the best means of acquiring ‘extensive’, ‘systematic’ and ‘generalisable’ data on contemporary cultural practice (Bennett et al, 2009:3).

Yet, although these studies have claimed to measure the entire field of ‘cultural consumption’ or ‘cultural taste’, none has so far included any measures of comedy

consumption or taste. The primary component of my research design, a large-scale survey, therefore sought to address this hole in the literature. In particular, it aimed to examine whether or not there was a relationship between an individual's cultural capital resources and their comedy taste.

Although this survey did not use a probability sample, and therefore is not able to claim robust representativeness, diffuse generalisation was not its aim. Instead, it formed part of a general research design that aimed to achieve 'moderatum generalisations' (Williams, 2000; Payne and Williams, 2005) about comedy taste. By this, I mean that the survey certainly aimed to produce both externally valid and unambiguous generalisations, but that these generalisations were tempered by a pragmatic and explicit awareness of their explanatory power. They did not intend to make sweeping statements about comedy taste that claim to stand good over time, or across different cultures. Instead, they should be understood as fundamentally moderate and subject to confirmation or refutation by further enquiry. However, having said this, I also believe they possess a unique value. As the first statistical data on comedy taste ever collected in Britain, they arguably make an original and timely contribution to the overall research field of cultural consumption. Indeed, it is hoped the findings will be useful not only to those interested in comedy, but to all sociologists of culture.

Furthermore, if one is seeking to engage with Bourdieu on his own terms, as I am here, it is important to remember that as well as survey data he also employed a range of qualitative methods that were central to the 'theoretical picture he was able to paint' (Silva et al, 2008: 2). The principle of employing mixed methods was thus a key component in my research design, and my methodology triangulated survey findings with data from interviews and textual analysis.

In making this decision, I was heavily influenced by the recent work of Bennett et al (2009: 36-39). These authors argue that mixed methods are necessary for understanding complex research areas like taste, because here researchers are usually engaged with multiple research questions which require specific types of evidence

that can only be generated by using certain analytical techniques. Put simply, to use only quantitative or qualitative methods would have prevented me from addressing all dimensions of my research questions.

For example, in order to realise my research goal of understanding British comedy tastes, and the taste divisions that exist between groups, at a ‘moderately generalisable’ level – the large-scale statistical representation offered by a survey arguably provided the most adequate method. To have used interviews to achieve this aim would have resulted, as Silva (2006: 1177) notes, with individual interviewees ‘illegitimately standing in for whole social groups’. However, once I had established broad trends in taste, interviews not only acted as a check on such findings but also provided a significant means for elaboration, to help probe how people classified their taste and how they classified those with different tastes¹⁸.

It is important to note, however, that my desire to use mixed methods was not undertaken with the intention of somehow claiming increased validity for my findings. Although there may have been strong correlations in results from different methods, I am aware that the possibility of error was maintained across methodologies and therefore ‘both sets of results may be right or wrong in the same way’ (Kelle, 2001:7). Thus rather than using one method to check the *accuracy* of another, my intention was to check the *plausibility* of interpretations from one method to another. As Silva et al (2008:12) note, this combination and comparison of data sources was most useful in making ‘interpretation more secure’. It aimed to increase the scope and amplify the complexity of my findings, as well as enhancing the overall persuasiveness of the research (Bryman, 1988; Lockyer, 2006)¹⁹.

¹⁸ According to Mulkay (1988) and Lockyer (2006) mixed methods are also particularly useful in research on comedy and humour. Lockyer (2006: 55) notes that humour is an inherently complicated social phenomenon, characterised by ‘interpretative diversity’ and ‘ambiguity’, and therefore it is unlikely to be adequately understood through mono methods.

¹⁹ Furthermore, I am also conscious of recent and influential arguments documenting how different methods not only produce different kinds of data, but also fundamentally help to ‘enact different social realities’ (Law and Urry, 2005: 397). It should be made clear at the start, then, that to some extent my different methodologies did not produce one unique picture of the ‘reality’ of comedy taste, but instead investigated different levels and aspects (Flick, 1992).

This chapter aims to give a chronological outline of the research carried out in this thesis. It begins by explaining the main elements of the research design – the survey and the subsequent semi-structured 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.

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 largest arts festival in the world (August 4th-31st). The Fringe was chosen primarily because it represents the focal point of the British comedy industry, drawing 940 comedians and comedy acts every year from across the country (edfringe.com). More significantly, the Fringe also attracts over 1.5 million visitors a year, by far the largest concentration of comedy consumers in any one place at any one time in Britain (ibid). Considering the size of this audience and the diversity of comedy tastes catered for, I believe the Fringe represented the best single site to carry out a survey of British comedy taste.

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 out²⁰. The overall survey response rate was

²⁰ 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.

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 900 (46 spoiled surveys were discarded²¹).

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 (Arts Council, 2007, 2009). 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)²². 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 therefore under represent British comedy consumers with less cultural capital resources²³.

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	LowCC	281	31.2
	MixedCC	268	29.8
	HighCC	351	39.0
	Total	900	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.

²¹ These surveys were either covered in graffiti or only partially completed.

²² The ways these groups were constructed is discussed in the next section.

²³ 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	Male	454	50.4
	Female	422	46.9
	Total	876	97.3
Missing		24	2.7
Total		900	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).

		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	12-24	236	26.2	28.0
	25-34	342	38.0	68.5
	35-44	142	15.8	85.3
	45-54	75	8.3	94.2
	55-64	38	4.2	98.7
	65-90	11	1.2	100.0
	Total	844	93.8	
Missing		56	6.2	
Total		900	100.0	

Table 3: Age of Survey Respondents

Unfortunately, the survey did not record respondents' ethnic backgrounds. 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. Similarly, the survey did not record respondent's place of residence, but again my anecdotal recollections indicate that the survey underrepresented those from outside Scotland and those from outside London. This skew may have been particularly considerable in terms of LCC respondents from outside Scotland. For example, it is reasonable to assume that those from LCC backgrounds may have less economic resources, and therefore are less likely to travel

to the Fringe from other parts of the UK. Finally, it is also worth noting that the probability element of the sample was undermined by the fact that audiences varied according to the size of the venue, popularity of the show and time of day. This meant that there were often large differences in the amount of people sampled at each performance.

Questionnaire Design

The main intention of the Edinburgh Fringe 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 Dan Pursey, owner of *Mobius*, a prominent comedy PR company, Laura Solon, a Perrier award-winning comedian and Edd McCracken, an experienced comedy critic for The Sunday Herald Newspaper. 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 (see Appendix 3 [p.254] for an example of the final questionnaire)²⁴.

²⁴ Although attempts were made to avoid bias in item selection, it must be noted that such a process was still subjective and many other comedians and comedy TV shows could have been chosen.

It is worth noting that 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). This pilot acted as a useful testing ground for questions relating to comedy taste. For example, it trialled a number of questions concerning the aesthetic criteria respondents used when evaluating comedy. Respondents were asked '*What do you consider important when deciding on the quality of a comedian?*'. They were then asked about the importance (on a four point Likert Scale from 'very important' to 'not important at all') of a selection of statements such as '*The quality of the writing*' and '*made me feel good*'. However, this and other similar questions proved largely unsuccessful, as respondents in the pilot continually expressed uncertainty at the question. 'It depends on the comedian,' was the stock response from the many respondents who refused to answer the question. It was therefore decided to drop questions relating to aesthetic criteria from the final questionnaire.

Finally, 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 2 [p. 44-45] for more detail on this).

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. For example, Finn described the 'physical' sense of humour he had developed from working as a tree surgeon:

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.

Similarly, Frank explained how working as a manager in the arts sector had affected his taste for comedy:

Working for Scottish Ballet, 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.

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 is a scale adapted from Bourdieu (1992).

'Occupation' was computed on a scale of nine corresponding to the jobs which most emphasise 'cultural skills' (See Appendix 4 [p.257] for details of the scale). 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)²⁵. 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.

²⁵ It is worth noting that although these respondents were grouped together, this does not mean they necessarily had static positions in social space. Instead, HCC and LCC respondents often had upward or downward occupational and educational trajectories, but these trajectories rarely radically altered their cultural capital resources.

Finally, 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). The majority had been brought up by parents with minimal qualifications and low-status occupations, but were themselves university graduates or employed in professional areas, or sometimes both (See Appendix 1 'Cast of Characters' for a fuller description of all interviewees).

It is also important to note that many empirical assessments of Bourdieu's theory of taste, including Bennett et al's (2009) recent study, use social class as the independent variable with which to compare variations in cultural taste. However, in this project I have deliberately opted to use 'cultural capital resources' instead of social class. Although the two variables are inextricably linked - and researchers such as Devine and Savage (2005) have been instrumental in placing issues of cultural identity at the heart of recent class theory - I still believe both concepts have distinct meanings. In particular, many measures of class include measures of income (Eriksson, 1996). Although economic capital may well be related to comedy taste, I was more interested in identifying culturally-determined forms of capital. In this way, I wanted to interrogate whether taste could be implicated in an 'implicit process of positional inequality' (Bottero, 2004: 1000) rather than one framed in specifically economic terms.

Other measurements of class have used *only* occupation (Bennett et al, 2009). However, if I had included only income or occupation, rather than focusing on 'cultural capital resources', I may have glossed over potentially important findings. For example, using income or only occupation would have resulted in many of my upwardly mobile respondents being problematically categorised as 'middle class'. However, using my preferred cultural capital variable, which foregrounded the working class social origin of these respondents rather than their income, these respondents were invariably grouped as having 'mixed' rather than 'high' cultural capital resources – a categorical difference that, as Chapter 5 demonstrates, proved very significant in the eventual findings.

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)²⁶. 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 these. 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)²⁷.

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 together²⁸.

As Bennett et al (2009: 44) note, there were 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

²⁶ 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.

²⁷ The results from the MCA constructed in this thesis are detailed in depth in Chapter 4

²⁸ 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).

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 are associated with comedy taste. This meant that ‘supplementary categories’ such as cultural capital resources, age and gender, could be overlaid onto the comedy taste maps (see Chapter 4[p. 110-116]).

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 type of individuals (i.e. male vs. female, HCC vs. LCC) were located close to each other in the map. Finally, as Figure 3 illustrates [p.94] , 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’. The methodological advances gleaned from this dialogue will be explained in the next section.

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. On the original questionnaire, respondents were invited to leave their contact details if they were interested in being interviewed for the project. Approximately 30% (n = 280) 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.

As 'location' was not a variable collected in the survey, this geographical spread was not necessarily an attempt to represent the survey sample accurately, but instead a modest attempt to tap into some of the diversity within Britain. Indeed, as Holt (1997: 6) and Bennett et al (2009:185) note, geographical location is often a highly significant factor in studies of cultural consumption, as differences in cultural-capital-structured taste tend to be larger in urban areas where the population of 'symbolic manipulators' tends to be larger.

Contact with interviewees was first made via email and then by telephone immediately prior to the interview. 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. All interviews were conducted in quiet cafes, usually chosen by the respondent so that they would feel comfortable in the interview environment. A few days before each interview, I also emailed each respondent with a list of YouTube clips that gave brief examples of every comedian and comedy TV show on the survey²⁹. 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 interview³⁰.

Interview Schedule

My semi-structured interview schedule³¹ focused on six main themes:

- 1) Exploration of comedy taste items included in the survey
- 2) Exploration of comedy taste items not included in the survey
- 3) Exploration of aesthetic criteria underpinning comedy taste
- 4) Importance of comedy reviews to taste judgments
- 5) The drawing of symbolic boundaries on the basis of comedy taste
- 6) Respondents background, career and lifecourse

Questions in Theme 1 were deliberately similar to those asked in the survey, as I wanted to compare and 'check' the data gleaned from both sources. In Theme 2, interviewees were invited to talk about comedy items that were not included in the survey. Again, this was an important means of 'checking' the validity of the survey findings. For example, it allowed respondents to introduce other comedy preferences that may have altered the way their comedy taste was classified.

Theme 3 focused on respondent's aesthetic preferences. However, here I resisted asking direct questions about aesthetic subjects such as importance of writing, meaning, laughter etc, and instead let respondent's aesthetic preferences emerge without my prompt. Rather than getting responses to the criteria I thought was important, I wanted to know 'what they believed to be relevant' (Bryman, 2002: 268).

²⁹ URL addresses for each of the comedy clips are included at the end of the bibliography

³⁰ After interviews I kept in touch with respondents and in July 2011 emailed them a brief summary of the research findings, along with the opportunity to read the whole thesis if they wished.

³¹ The full interview schedule is included in Appendix 5 [p.257].

Most questions were therefore standardised but open-ended. For example, I usually began with the question:

Recalling the survey you filled out, which of the comedians would you say are your favourites?

Depending on the answer, I would then follow up with a number of specific questions that aimed to indirectly reveal aesthetic preferences, such as:

What is it about he/she/the show that you like so much?

Or:

Can you recall any favourite jokes/skits/sketches?

Or:

What is it about this joke/skit/sketch you like so much?

Questions in Theme 4 looked at comedy reviews, examining in particular their impact on respondents. This was tapped directly by asking whether respondents usually *agree* or are *influenced* by reviewers' judgments, but also indirectly by seeing whether references to reviews and critics were mentioned in more general conversations about taste. A similar strategy was initiated to tap Theme 5, with most respondents indirectly revealing how they draw boundaries when discussing the comedy they disliked. However, I did follow up expressions of vehement dislike by asking respondents how they might *characterise* people who liked the comedy they disliked.

Finally, Theme 6 asked a range of questions about respondents' backgrounds and lifecourse. These questions were particularly useful for checking, validating and elaborating on the demographic survey data used to calculate the cultural capital score. It also allowed me to ask respondents more directly about the influence that family, school, university, job, friends and partners had on their comedy tastes.

The Issue of 'Flow'

My aim during the interviews was to establish a conversational style, whereby a relaxed exchange could ensue. As many researchers have noted, the ability to develop

rapport is pivotal in generating the best qualitative data (Seidman, 1998; Lamont, 1992). However, I found that the 'flow' of conversations varied significantly between different types 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. In particular, as I hope to explain now, the success of the interview was strongly affected by the cultural capital resources of the respondent.

Perhaps not surprisingly, HCC respondents were most comfortable in the interview setting. In a manner similar to that extensively described by researchers such as Gilbert (2001) and Skeggs et al (2008), 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 self-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 et al, 2009), I instead found that HCC respondents were often happy to draw very aggressive boundaries on the basis of comedy taste (see Chapter 7 [p. 183-192]). This may be partly explained by the unique and divisive power of humour in general, but I also felt it was somewhat the result of a cultural affinity many HCC respondents assumed they shared with me. Although I hadn't intended to engender this sense, it was something that these respondents perhaps implied from my body language and non-verbal communication. My interview with HCC Dale, a journalist, demonstrated this evolution. Early on in the interview, Dale's attitude towards comedians he didn't like very much, such as Michael McIntyre, seemed to portray a somewhat conciliatory omnivorousness:

I don't think you can get to that level unless you're good at what you do. Whether what you do is good in a wider sense is different, but there's no doubt. It's like Michael McIntyre is a good comedian. I mean I don't like him, but he's got a certain rhythm to his speech and a way of pulling people in.

Yet later in the interview, Dale's attitude changed dramatically. In relation to Michael McIntyre, for instance, he revealed what were very strong negative judgments:

McIntyre is everything I hate about comedy wrapped up in one little funny talking bundle. I hate the way he turns comedy into an X-factor style comedy. I hate the way he panders to the lowest common denominator.

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. After all, they offered far less in quantitative words than HCC 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). As Hollway and Jefferson (2002: 26) note, LCC respondents may have not heard questions 'through the same meaning frame' as I, the interviewer, and 'may not know why they experience things in the way they do'.

It is therefore important to acknowledge that the methodology used in this project may not have represented the best means for understanding LCC comedy taste. In order to redress this problem, it may be preferable in future to use the 'text-in-action' approach championed by Wood (2005). This method aims to capture the 'dynamic interaction' between cultural product and viewer 'as an event taking place in a particular moment in time' (Wood, 2005: 122). It involves the researcher observing a respondent as they watch a cultural text, such as a TV comedy clip, and then reflecting on data from the viewing 'event'. Skeggs et al (2008: 12) argue this method may give groups such as LCC respondents the space to 'perform' their relationship to a cultural text in a more 'affective' way that is less dependent on linguistic resources.

It must be noted, however, that the stilted flow of interviews with LCC respondents was as much to do with my 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 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 researcher. This was particularly evident in relation to preferences for comedians Bernard Manning and Roy 'Chubby' Brown, both well-known for their provocative sexist, racist and homophobic material. For example physics teacher Patrick, who said in the survey he liked Bernard Manning, smiled and looked at me before describing his thoughts on Manning. He eventually said in a defensive tone:

I think the likes of those comedians, I wouldn't pay to go and see one of their shows, I find them quite hit-and-miss, but they were very much of their time. Especially if you think of someone like Bernard Manning. The obvious response is y'know 'oh he's a racist whatever' and maybe he was in real life. But those were the jokes that were being told, and still are being told in pubs, to this day. And not all Bernard Manning jokes are racist jokes. And there's the whole mother-in-law joke thing (laughs). And you get into the whole argument of the PC brigade, and it's all got too PC now. Bottom line is I think that comedy was popular at that time and it's just jokes. That are still told.

Although on the surface such 'discrepant' taste statements may be problematic due to their potential distortion, they can also represent highly valuable pieces of data. Lamont (1992:13) argues that such 'impression management' on the part of respondents reveals their implicit understanding of the cultural hierarchy and their attempts to separate themselves from tastes that they know carry low status.

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. As Hodge and Tripp (1986) note, interviewers may unconsciously censure subjects with their use of certain unconscious glances, laughs or grimaces. This was particularly evident 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 me any more jokes.

Similarly, in some cases my predispositions and non-verbal communication may have also acted to signal the comedy I *do* like. This may have been most obvious in relation to the YouTube clips I sent to interviewees, which they obviously knew I had watched and selected. For example, although I never stated my preferences, a number of HCC respondents assumed - presumably from my demeanour - that certain clips were my 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.

Coding

All the interviews were recorded on a Dictaphone and then transcribed by hand and anonymised. The vast array of data generated was then inputted and organised using Nvivo (Version 8) software. Analysis of the interview data involved a two-step process of coding (Charmaz, 2006: 47-60). Initial coding revolved around both summarising and categorising each element of the interviews in order to understand 'what was happening in the data'. This involved a time-consuming process of line-by-line coding whereby codes were given to each segment of the data. The goal here was to stay as open as possible to all analytical directions and stay close to the data. One

strategy I used frequently to realise this goal was to use ‘in-vivo’ codes, such as ‘you’ve got to laugh’ and ‘you get out what you put in’. These codes were phrases used by respondents but also acted to neatly sum a particular opinion or perspective they held. The main advantage of this was that it helped to preserve participants’ meanings of their views, rather than imposing my own labels (Charmaz, 2006:56).

Table 5 illustrates this initial coding process used to analyse a quote from HCC Andrew, a IT Consultant, about being at a Brendon Burns gig:

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.

Initial Codes
Confronting the audience
Feeling disorientated
Feeling uncomfortable
Reflecting Post-gig
Virtue of challenging comedy
Negative emotion as positive aesthetic
Focused Codes
Negative emotion as positive aesthetic
Virtue of Challenging Comedy

Table 5: Example of Initial and Focused Coding

Initial coding was then followed by a second step of more ‘focused’ coding. This involved finding the most significant or most frequently occurring initial codes in order to identify the most salient categories in the data. Focused codes also often synthesised initial codes and organised them using more conceptual terms. Of course, the focused stage also involved shelving many codes that had seemed promising at the beginning of the coding process. For example, in a number of early interviews, the data seemed to suggest a link between comedy and forms of intoxication such as

alcohol and drug consumption. However, although this was very interesting, it became clear from looking at the initial coding from all interviews that this was not a significant analytic category.

Again, Table 5 demonstrates how this ‘focused’ coding emerged from Andrew’s passage of data. After looking at this passage more closely and comparing it to data from other interviews, I realised that the codes ‘negative emotion as positive aesthetics’ and ‘virtue of challenging comedy’ not only captured the main themes of Andrew’s comment but were also reiterated by other HCC respondents and therefore were potentially significant to wider HCC modes of aesthetic appreciation (see Chapter 5 [p. 131-132]).

Triangulating Quantitative and Qualitative Data

As mentioned, using mixed methods was a key component of my research design. There are multiple ways in which I believe this design 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 3 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. In short, interviewees who shared similar styles of comic appreciation, also appeared from the survey to have consonant comedy tastes.

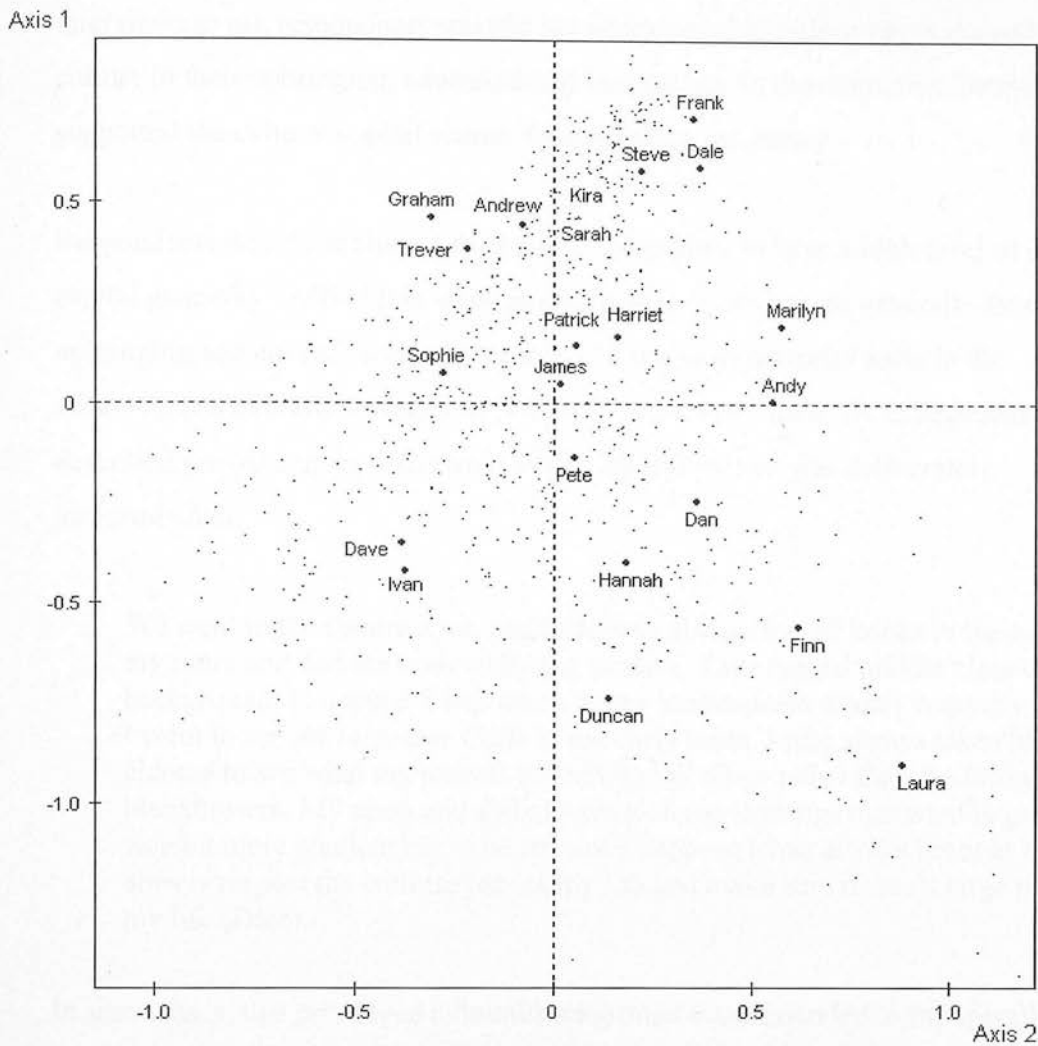


Figure 3: Distribution of Interviewees, Axes 1-2

The Real Meaning of Cultural Capital ‘Scores’

Interview data was also useful for checking the validity of cultural capital ‘scores’ detailed in the survey. As outlined, I generated these scores by measuring respondent’s family upbringing, formal education and occupation. However, such variables could not necessarily guarantee an accurate measurement of an individual’s 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 resources more effectively, then, I used interviews to ask respondents specific but 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 HCC 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, my mum and dad are both really big readers. Your typical middle class cultural background, I suppose. I was taken to see Shakespeare when I was very young, I went to see *An Inspector Calls* in my early teens. I 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 suppose 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, art and culture was a really big priority and always in the house. 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, TV writer).

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” stand-up comedy nights at their university student union. Graham, a photographer, explained that it was through university friends that he first became interested in comedy. 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:

Interviewer: 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 also 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 like certain types of certain genres. 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, will you get a person 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 respondents' '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 also 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.

Capturing Messiness

As well as a tool for rooting out methodological dissonance, interview data also acted to 'complement' survey findings (Erzeberger and Prein, 1997). In particular, it was a useful means of re-elaborating on quantitative data that had over-simplified research subjects (Silva and Wright, 2007). For example, the survey often constructed very coherent pictures of respondents that were subsequently revealed to be much more messy, inconsistent and contradictory during interviews. Hannah, for instance, noted a dislike for a number of highbrow comedians such as Stewart Lee, Hans Teeuwen

and Brass Eye in her completed questionnaire. However, during her interview she revealed that these preferences were less to do with her own personal taste and more to do with her husband. Although she quite liked 'darker' or 'strange' comedians, she explained that she rarely gets a chance to see them:

My husband has had major depression in his life. And anything that touches a sensitive subject for him, I don't mean his depressive reasons, because it's all to do with work. But it means we don't go and see things, y'know, that are a bit strange or sad. There's things that I want to see but we just don't see them. I've accepted that. These things are affected by who you're with.

What was clear from this interview with Hannah was that the survey had failed to generate a reliable and authoritative version of her comedy taste. A more complete picture was constructed only when the survey picture was 'coloured in' with more biographical interview data. Such candid qualitative testimony added an extra level of complexity to the social determinants of her comedy taste. In particular, it illustrated how 'multiple socialisations' (Lahire, 2008) can affect people's comedy taste. In Hannah's case, then, it was not cultural capital resources that largely determined what comedy she consumed, but contextual factors such as her husband's influence³².

Hannah's interview also provided a good example of how interviews were able to capture important lifecourse events and biographical data unachievable in the survey (Erzeberger and Prein, 1997). This proved particularly useful in understanding the taste profiles of respondents from mixed cultural capital backgrounds. From the survey findings, this group appeared to resemble archetypal 'cultural omnivores' (Peterson, 1996) - holding preferences for the comedy items that most split HCC and LCC respondents. However, the biographical data gleaned during interviews added significant texture to most of these taste profiles. Rather than resembling open omnivores that wilfully transgressed the cultural hierarchy, such mixed tastes appeared to be intimately connected to the lifecourse. As mentioned, most of these respondents had come from low cultural capital backgrounds but had acquired higher

³² In line with the work of Bennett et al (2009), a further methodological strategy that may have strengthened this project would have been to interview all respondent's partners to see the impact of this socialising influence on comedy taste.

resources through achievements in education or employment. Significantly, their comedy tastes had often followed a similar trajectory. Examples of this are discussed in more depth in Chapter 6 [p. 157-178]. However, methodologically, what these aesthetic trajectories demonstrated was that respondents were not always what they seemed from the 'static' picture painted by survey data. Adding biographical texture not only gave a more complete picture of taste profiles but often also dramatically changed the direction of analysis. In the case of many MCC respondents, then, biographical data shifted my perception of these respondents from open cultural omnivores to individuals precariously stuck between two contradictory taste cultures.

Linguistic Textual Analysis

As well as the central triangulation of survey and interview data, the thesis 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.

My 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 implications of this connection are discussed in more depth in the introduction. 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.

Ethical Considerations

It should be noted that there were no major ethical concerns with a project of this kind. However, as with all research, issues of consent and confidentiality were very important. At all times I followed the code set out by the BSA stating that ‘research relationships should be characterised, whenever possible, by trust and integrity’ (BSA 2002 no. 14). Negotiating consent, for instance, relied on respondents believing and trusting my explanation for what I was doing. When approaching survey and interview respondents, I therefore gave a clear and concise summary of my research. I also emailed an executive summary of the research to all respondents in May 2011 after I had completed writing up.

For some people, stating cultural tastes publicly is a sensitive issue and therefore survey and interview data was kept strictly confidential. Survey respondents were only invited to include contact details if they were interested in taking part in an interview. Interview tapes and notes were transcribed onto computer, encoded and anonymised as quickly as possible to ensure confidentiality. I have subsequently replaced respondent’s names with pseudonyms throughout the thesis.

One ethical problem that should be considered, however, was the bodily state of survey respondents during the Edinburgh Fringe. Many Festival-goers drink considerable amounts of alcohol and this introduced a potential problem in terms of the validity of consent. During survey collection, I took a common-sense approach to this issue and tried to avoid respondents who appeared heavily inebriated. However, the issue did affect the reliability of some of the data. In the end, I had to discard 46 questionnaires which had either been spoiled, decorated in graffiti or only partially filled in.

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

Chapter 4: Comedy Taste and Objectified Cultural Capital

Introduction

In chapter two, I identified four research questions that represent the key concerns of this thesis. To briefly recap, first, I seek to examine whether those with high cultural capital resources seek to distinguish themselves via the careful consumption and rejection of certain British comedy; second, I investigate whether these same respondents also mark their rarity via certain *styles of comic appreciation*; third, I analyse whether such tastes and styles are used to draw symbolic boundaries; and fourth, I examine how the tastes of socially mobile respondents may problematise the notion of a zero-sum comedy taste hierarchy.

This chapter focuses on Research Question 1, examining in particular the patterning of British comedy taste and to what extent certain clusters of taste are associated with, or distinguished from, each other. Comedy taste was explored, primarily, using a survey ($n = 900$) distributed at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in August 2009. In

particular, the survey asked respondents to indicate their preferences for 16 comedians and 16 TV comedy shows. Responses were then analysed using MCA (see Chapter 3 [p. 82-84] for further detail).

This chapter therefore proceeds 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 by largely HCC respondents, and lowbrow comedy tastes, preferred mainly by LCC respondents. It is argued that this finding illustrates that, to some extent, certain highbrow comedy items have become imbued with socially meaningful 'objectified' cultural capital.

However, the chapter closes by illustrating that as well as cleavages, there are many comedy tastes that appear to connect cultural capital groups. These uniting tastes may at first seem to undermine cultural capital activation, but if one uses qualitative data to examine how such tastes are expressed, it is possible to detect key ways in which 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) 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 6: Eigen values and rates of cumulated variance

Figure 4 displays the coordinates of the 41 (of 115) comedy taste modalities that contributed significantly to Axis 1³³ (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. 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 and Jim Davidson, and TV shows *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. '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

³³ 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.

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).

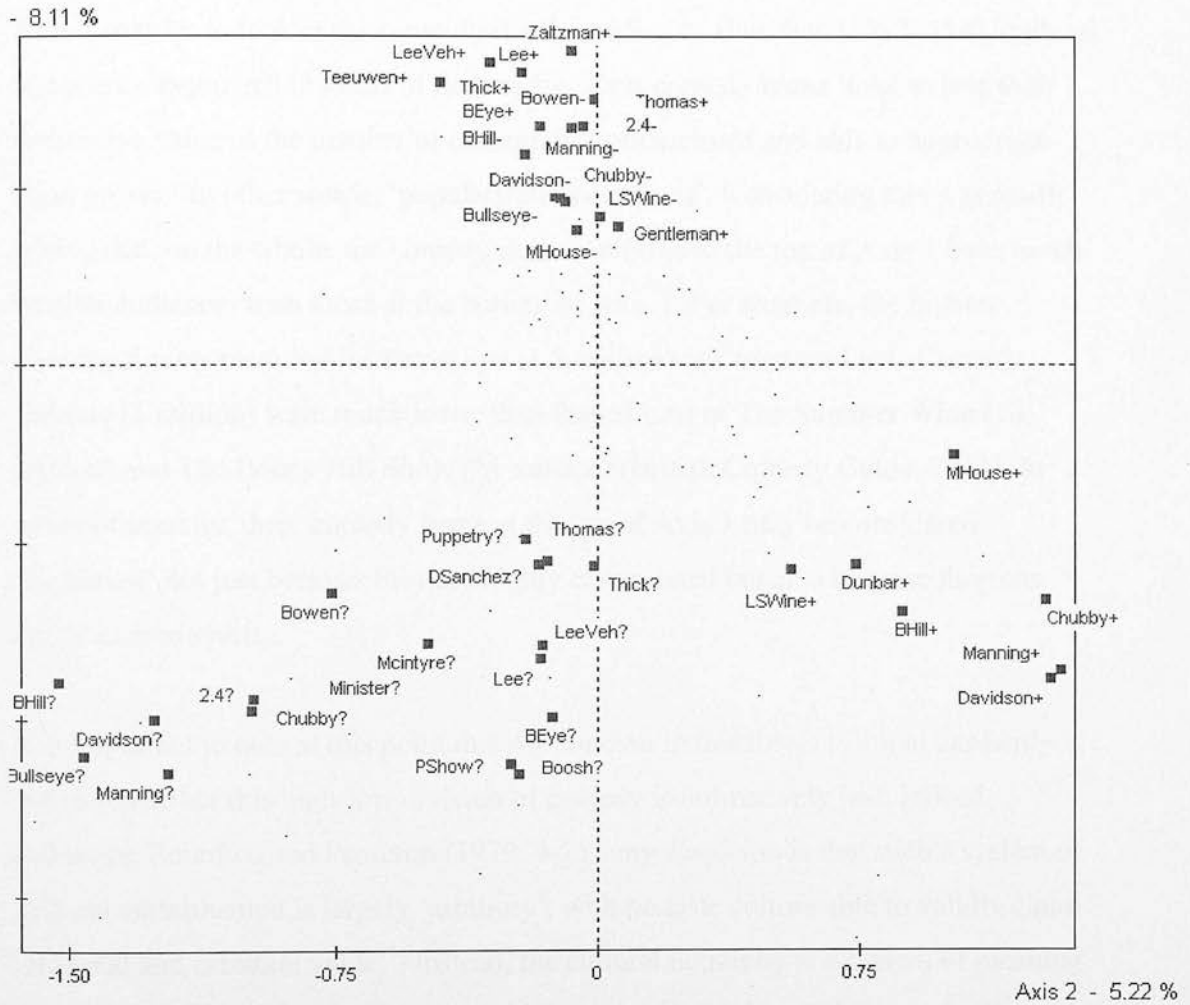


Figure 4: Axis 1 and 2, indicating modalities contributing to Axis 1

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; Leggott, forthcoming). 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 thesis 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 value³⁴. 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

³⁴ 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.

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. 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 5 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.

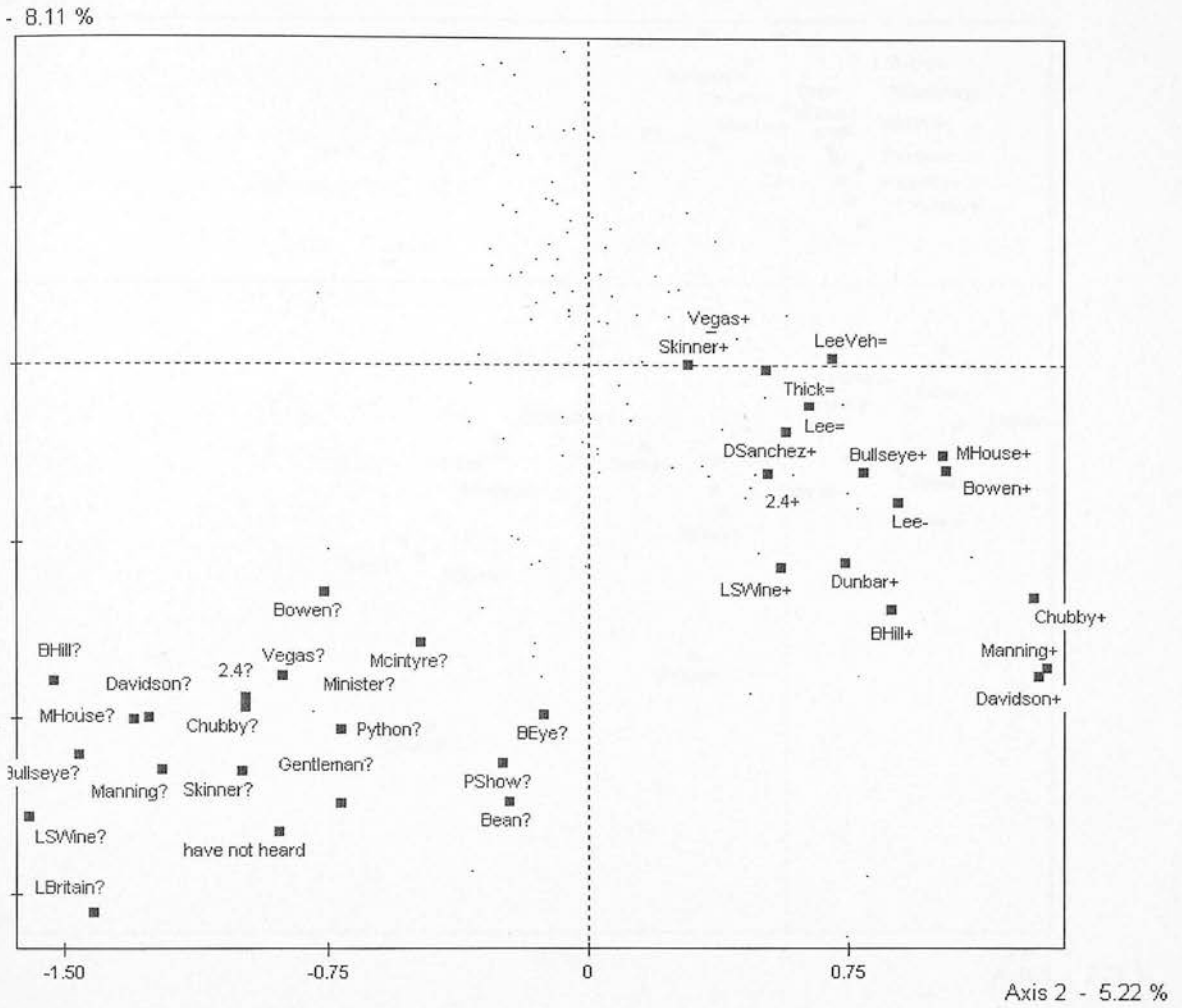


Figure 5: Axis 1 and 2, indicating modalities contributing to Axis 2

Finally, Figure 6 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.

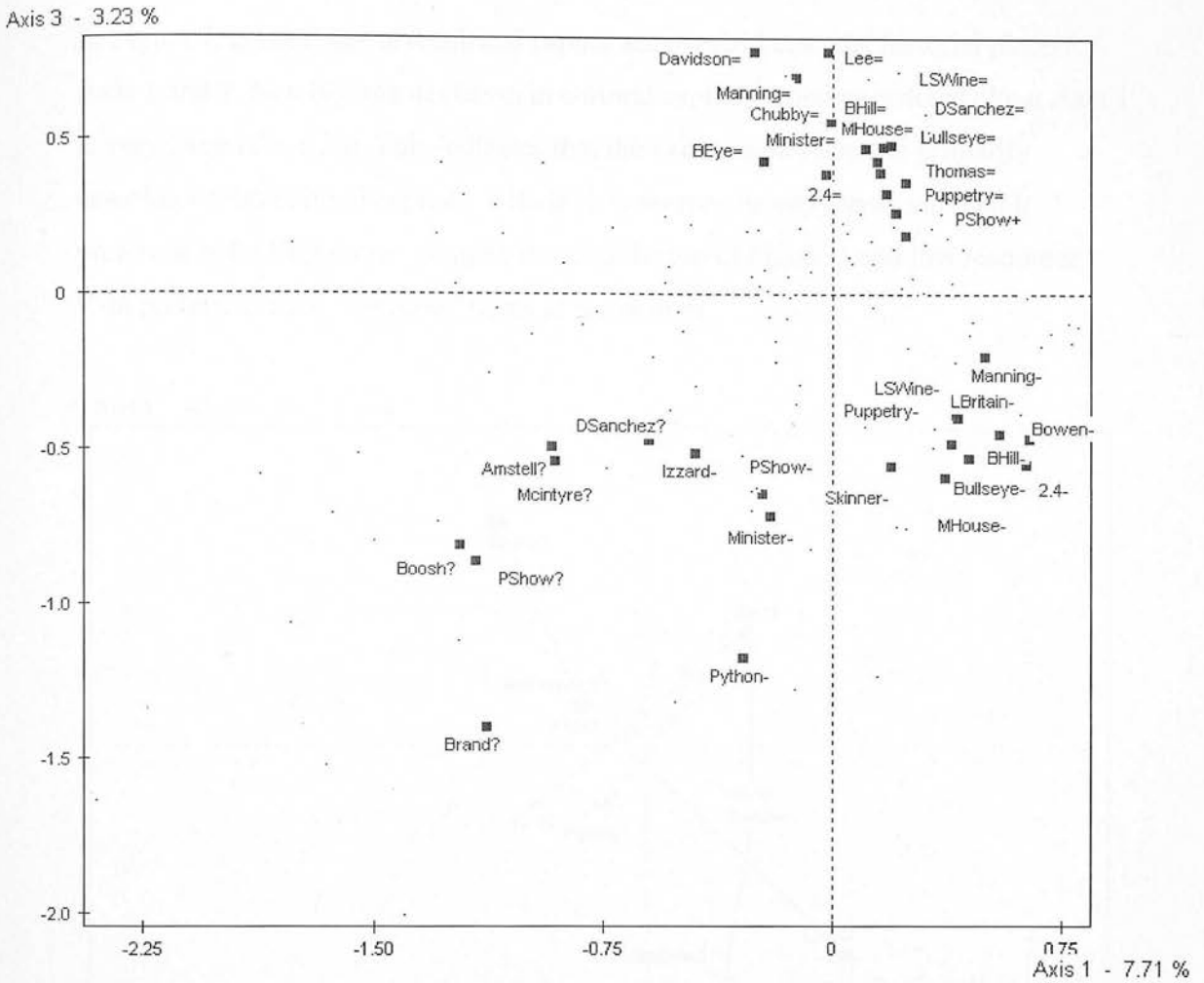


Figure 6: Axis 3 and 1, indicating modalities that contribute to Axis 3

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 7, 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.

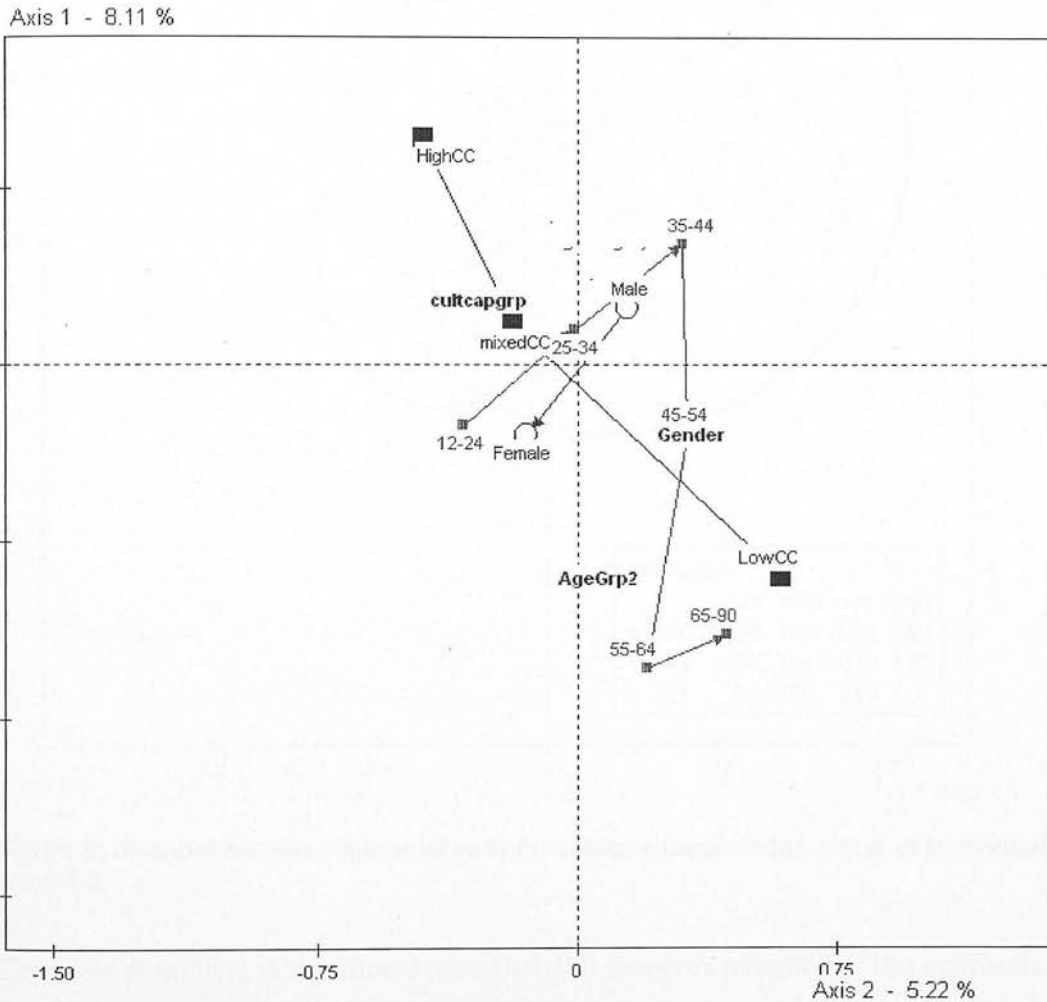


Figure 7: Gender, age and distribution of cultural capital, Axes 1-2

This partition of cultural capital resources is also illustrated in Figure 8, 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.

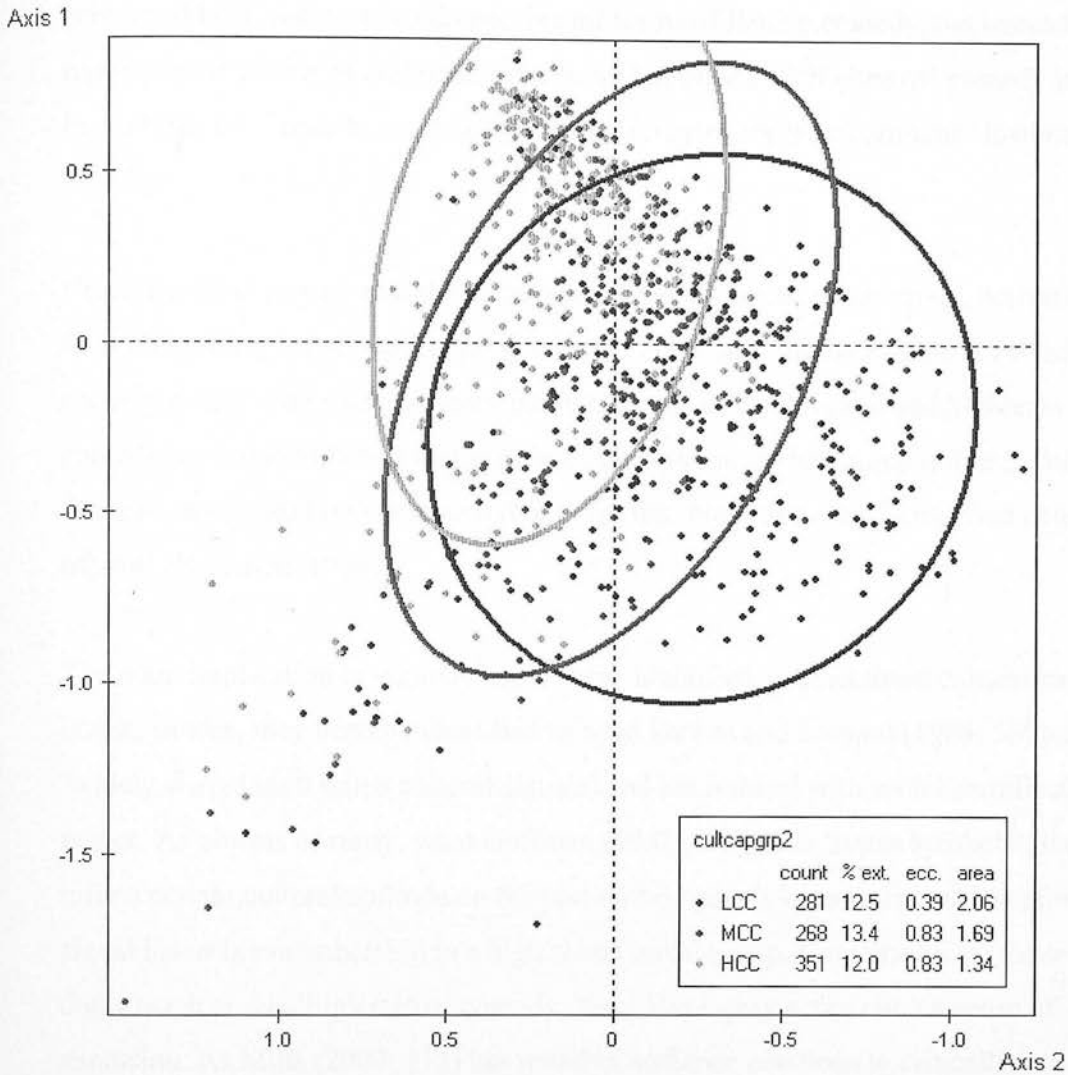


Figure 8: distribution and ellipses of cultural capital groups in the cloud of individuals, Axes 1-2

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 comedy items. 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 objectified 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, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance of the taste of others.’ Explaining the social significance of these ‘distastes’, he continued: ‘Aesthetic intolerance can be terribly violent. 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 6 [p.183-192]). 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 1 [p.28-35] 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 7 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 thesis, particularly in relation to the young. Whereas among older generation 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). This is significant, as it suggests that rather than focusing solely on the social significance of holding legitimate vs. illegitimate comedy taste, another meaningful axis of inequality may be the marginalisation and social exclusion of those LCC respondents who do not engage in comedy at all. As Savage, (2000) and Skeggs, (2004) have noted, the supposed deficit and cultural lacking of these individuals may render them socially invisible.

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 the objectified

cultural capital available to those from more culturally knowledgeable backgrounds (This is discussed in further detail in Chapter 5 [p. 145-148]).³⁵

Finally, Figure 9 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 5, comedy tastes are more likely to be undecided and flexible, 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.

³⁵ 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.

Axis 3 - 3.23 %

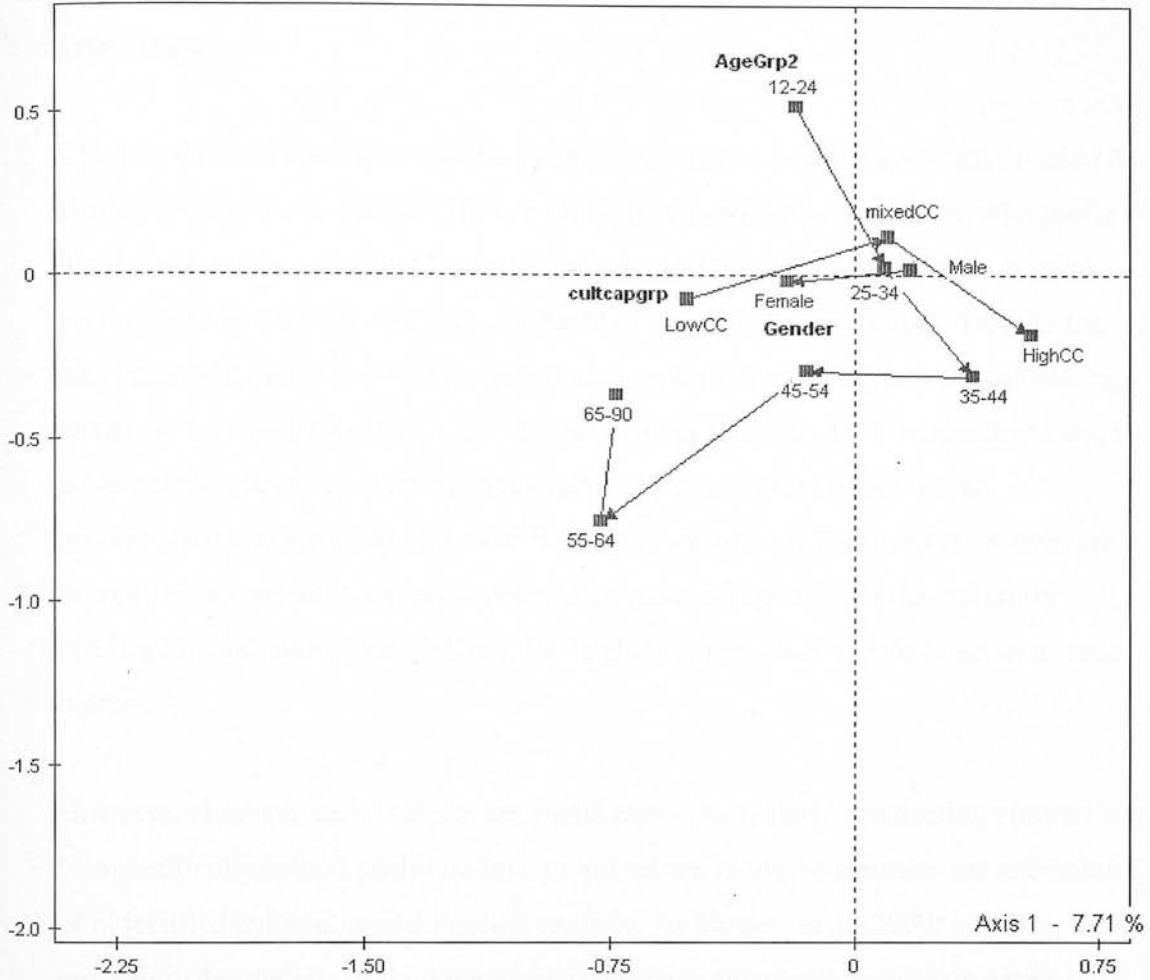


Figure 9: Gender, age and distribution of cultural capital, Axis 3

Discussion

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. Despite the non-probability sample used, this data does nonetheless offer a relatively convincing answer to Research Question 1. In particular, it 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 forms of 'objectified 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). 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 7 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.

	High Cultural Capital	Low Cultural Capital
Like all ‘highbrow’ comedy items	3%	0%
Like at least 1 ‘highbrow’ comedy item	95%	31%
Like at least 2 ‘highbrow’ comedy items	92%	21%
Like at least 3 ‘highbrow’ comedy items	77%	17%
Like at least 4 ‘highbrow’ comedy items	62%	7%
Like all ‘lowbrow’ comedy items	0%	1%
Like at least 1 ‘lowbrow’ comedy item	32%	83%
Like at least 2 ‘lowbrow’ comedy items	5%	62%
Like at least 3 ‘lowbrow’ comedy items	1%	44%
Like at least 4 ‘lowbrow’ comedy items	1%	29%

Table 7: Consonance and Dissonance of HCC and LCC comedy tastes

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 8 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 [p.157-178] 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, therefore, that the legitimacy and rarity of comedy items may change over time and this may greatly affect their currency as objectified cultural capital. For example, examining the recent trajectory of comedian Michael McIntyre (who was included in the survey) it is possible to argue that he has lost considerable legitimacy in recent years. 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 6 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 8 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 10 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.

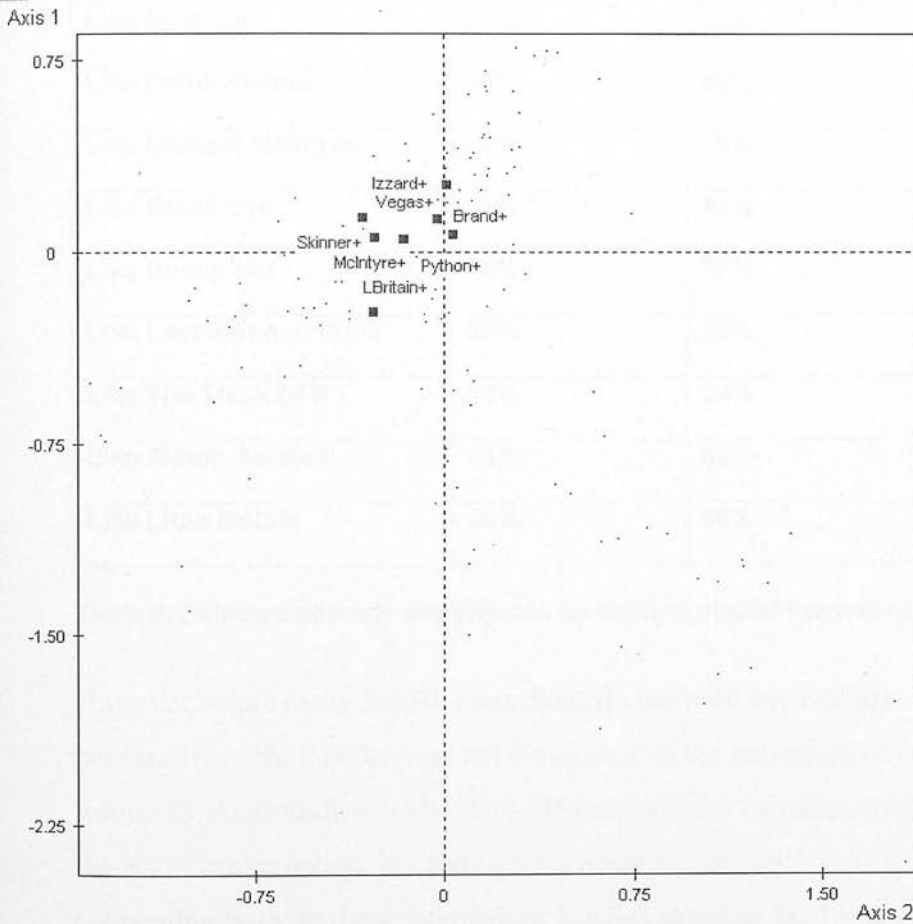


Figure 10: selected comedy taste modalities, Axes 1-2

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 8 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%	45%	77%
Like Bernard Manning	31%	5%	2%
Like Eddie Izzard	58%	72%	77%
Like Russell Brand	44%	46%	41%
Like Monty Python	75%	83%	85%
Like Mr Bean	52%	35%	44%
Like Frank Skinner	56%	48%	43%
Like Michael McIntyre	64%	59%	58%
Like Brass Eye	22%	46%	77%
Like Benny Hill	48%	19%	5%
Like Last Summer Wine	35%	28%	14%
Like The Thick Of It	10%	24%	59%
Like Simon Amstell	44%	60%	69%
Like Little Britain	65%	50%	35%

Table 8: Selected comedy preferences by cultural capital resources

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 8 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, hairdresser³⁶).

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 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 (Trevor, 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 Trevor and Graham seemed to be aware that Izzard's comedy was open to other readings, phrases such as 'cuddlier stuff' and

³⁶ For more detailed information on the demographic characteristics of interviewees see Appendix 1: 'Cast of Characters'.

‘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 consumers. 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.

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’. 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 thesis 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: Comedy Styles and Embodied Cultural Capital

Introduction

While my survey data revealed that the consumption of some British comedy has become a status marker, it also showed that the majority of comedy appears to be free from such symbolic baggage. However, what surveys tend to miss is that the pursuit of distinction is not just a matter of *what* objects are consumed, but also the *way* they are consumed (Holt, 1997). Hence respondents may not immediately distinguish themselves by *which* comedians they like, but following the hypothesis of Research Question 2, they may mark their distinction through the way they explain *why* they like the comedy they do.

Mindful of the inability of survey data to explore the *way* people consume comedy, I therefore conducted 24 in-depth interviews that examined in detail respondents' aesthetic orientation to comedy. Figure 3 (repeated from Chapter 3) shows the locations of the 24 interviewees chosen from the main sample, positioned in relation

to Axis 1 and 2. These respondents were chosen primarily to reflect the demographic distribution of the survey sample (see [p. 84-86] for further detail). Figure 3 suggests that, broadly, these interviewees represented a satisfactory spread of the main sample, with at least two respondents located in each quadrant of the comedy taste map.

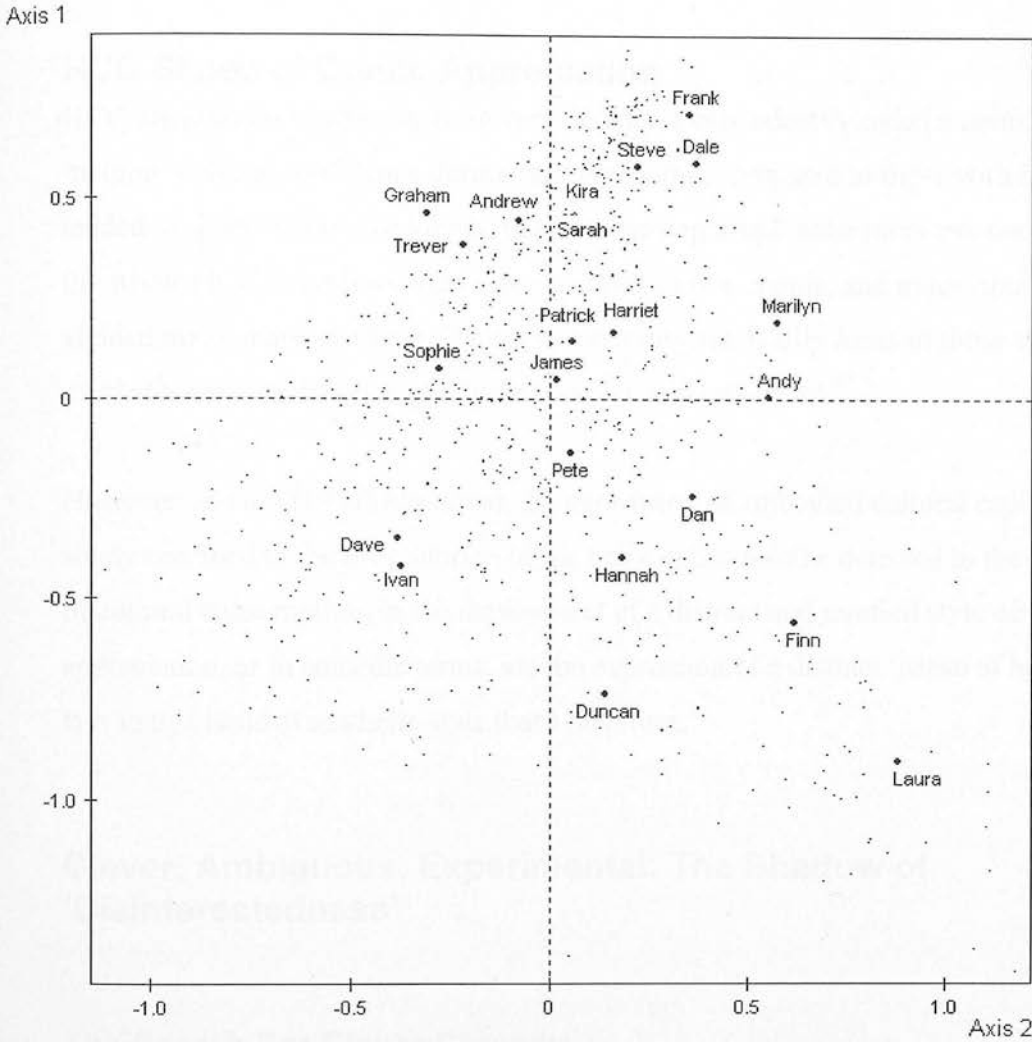


Figure 3 (repeated): Position of interviewees in main comedy taste map, Axes 1 and 2

This chapter proceeds by analysing the interviews with HCC and LCC respondents (MCC respondents are examined in Chapter 6). In particular, it argues that underpinning HCC and LCC taste judgments, it was possible to identify two clear and contrasting *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. Furthermore, the chapter argues that these different styles of appreciation are not valued equally in the cultural field. Instead, HCC styles contain a diffuse and widely recognised legitimacy that translates, to some extent, into a symbolically powerful ‘embodied’ cultural capital.

HCC Styles of Comic Appreciation

HCC orientations to comedy were very distinct. Respondents exuded a seemingly ‘natural’ cultural confidence during interviews and, compared to those with LCC, tended to speak louder, for longer, need less prompts and make more eye contact. On the whole HCC interviews were more seamless, more supple, and transcriptions yielded many more words. In Bourdieusian terms, the bodily *hexis* of those with HCC exuded a sense of deeply embodied assurance and self-belief.³⁷

However, as Holt (1997) has noted, the expression of embodied cultural capital is not solely confined to the *presentation* of the body. It can also be detected in the manner of cultural consumption, in the deployment of a distinct and rarefied style of appreciation, or in comedic terms, via the expression of a distinct ‘sense of humour’. It is to this issue of aesthetic style that I now turn.

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

The Search For Clever Comedy

Above all, HCC respondents 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

³⁷ It is worth noting, however, that I felt noticeably more comfortable interviewing HCC respondents and this may have affected the quality of interviews (see Chapter 3 [p.86-91] for further discussion of this).

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. If someone tickles my funny bone then fantastic, but if I’m overwhelmed because I’m giggling and I’m also overwhelmed because there’s so much, and my brain can’t assimilate it all, then that’s as good as it gets for me (Frank, arts professional).

Another way in which HCC respondents explained their desire for ‘clever’ comedy was through a preference for comic styles that they considered inherently complex, such as satire, parody, pastiche and irony. Comedians that successfully deploy irony, for example, were valued particularly highly. Steve, a postgraduate student, explained what he referred to as Stewart Lee’s ‘delicious’ use of irony:

So in his comedy he will constantly posit statements that you know are absolutely counter to what he really believes, so you can see how ridiculous they are. And he does so in quite a subtle way, in quite a clever way and interesting and very funny way.

Arguments for ‘clever’ comedy were often couched in the intellectual idiom of philosophy and art criticism. For instance, Frank frequently referred to the philosopher Nietzsche when justifying the ‘moral’ dimension of his aesthetic judgments on comedy and Steve referred to art-historian Zizek when explaining the ‘lack of autonomy’ most people have in their enjoyment of comedy.

What appeared to unite accounts concerning ‘clever’ comedy, however, was the notion of ‘difficulty’. As Frank illustrated, HCC respondents were looking for more than ‘cheap pleasure’, comedy that was not *just* funny. They sought to interpret comedy for its messages or meanings. In this way, HCC respondents framed comedy in a manner that echoed the ‘established ideology of art (as a form of communication

between an artist and audiences)’ (Baumann, 2001: 59). Such styles also resonated with academic notions of comic ‘quality’ explored in the thesis introduction. 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).

‘You get out what you put in’

Fundamental to the HCC 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' 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, HCC 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'³⁸.

³⁸ 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.

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 on every time you go and the ones that'll stick with you will be 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:

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 HCC dislikes 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 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. He's just a posh Peter Kay. 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. Each one might get a little laugh out of it. They know it's not going to offend. 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 was the notion of authenticity. HCC respondents saw such comedy as mass produced, as contaminated by the homogenising effect of the free market. In this sense, it was inauthentic, 'lowest common denominator', 'prosaic', and highly removed from HCC aesthetic ideals that revolved around aesthetic autonomy. 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 a laughter track. In most accounts, this objection was connected to the notion of autonomy in aesthetic experience. HCC respondents were particularly critical of comedy which 'manipulated' their emotions; where they felt they were 'being played' (Marilyn, actress). A laughter track 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 comedy gigs that they 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 1 [p.20-22]) and by Bourdieu's (1984) French elites in *Distinction* (See Chapter 2 [p. 47]). 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. It can even make a difference, dare I say. 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 HCC respondents tend to mark their distinction through the disinterested rejection of emotion and pleasure.

Significantly, though, HCC accounts of comic pleasure still implied a Bourdieusian exclusion mechanism. Although respondents reported passionate reactions, these emotional feelings 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 disinterested HCC taste criteria, frequent political and moral judgments of comedy were more questionable. Significantly, though, HCC respondents tended to hide these kind of distinctions behind what they presented as purely aesthetic preferences. For example, most HCC respondents expressed a preference for ‘alternative comedy’, which was usually defined as a particular ‘style’ or ‘form’ of critical comedy. Yet,

although this satirical persuasion was presented as politically neutral, it was often bound up with a distinctly liberal and secular worldview. 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 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).

These comedians might challenge dominant norms, but their subversion conflicts with political and moral norms supported by HCC respondents such as anti-racism and feminism. It’s also worth noting the confidence of HCC respondents in expressing these vociferous objections. 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. However, what was perhaps most significant were the terms of rejection, which were not always based on ‘disinterested’ aesthetic criteria, but sometimes also on moral and political grounds. In these cases, HCC appreciation was not ‘morally agnostic’, as Bourdieu 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 was tightly knitted into the fabric of wider cultural tastes. Thus, for many, the aesthetic style employed to appreciate comedy was easily transposed to other more legitimate 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 that comedy show. 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.

Interviewer: 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 used her comedy taste, in conjunction with taste for other art forms, as a form of cultural capital. 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 cultural knowledge 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. However, 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

Interviews with LCC respondents were very different to those conducted with HCC respondents. Responses tended to be shorter, less reflexive and less detailed³⁹.

Respondents were also much less confident about talking beyond the strict confines of the questions asked. However, despite the sometimes sparse content of the interviews, there were some clear themes in the comic styles of LCC respondents.

'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

³⁹ The stilted flow of LCC interviews may also have been caused by my inability to create rapport with these respondents. (See Chapter 3 [p. 86-91] for more detail).

make them laugh. There was a sense that comedians were paid to produce laughter, and had a duty to meet this expectation⁴⁰. 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!

Comedy = Pleasure

The importance of laughter was closely linked to the main function of comedy – ‘to make you feel good’ (Sophie, retired). 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, 2000⁴¹). 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 or enhance their mood, such as Laura using it to ‘relax’ after a stressful day at work, or to complement their frame of mind, such as Ivan watching only when he’s in a ‘great mood’.

⁴⁰ 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).

⁴¹ 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.

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' 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, that I get enjoyment out of. 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 LCC 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 LCC respondents tended to dislike much less comedy items than HCC respondents, and many lacked knowledge of highbrow comedy rather than disliking it. However, the interviews again 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, 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, bookish, individualized, 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 Nuttall 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 9) nor that HCC respondents recognised its legitimacy. Indeed, the legitimacy of LCC aesthetic styles appeared to be confined to the personal networks of these respondents, imbuing them with more subcultural than cultural capital⁴² (Thornton, 1996: 20).

Moreover, despite notable instances of LCC defiance toward highbrow comedy, it must be noted that the majority of LCC respondents 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 about 'highbrow' comedy. 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

⁴² 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.

the case of Ivan and Dave, this status anxiety stemmed from a feeling of not having adequate knowledge, of being uneducated:

Mainly because 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).

These accounts demonstrated what Bourdieu termed the 'misrecognition' of cultural value among some 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 'arbitrary' comic styles and aesthetic principles. As Bourdieu (1984: 386) noted, they 'imply a form of recognition of the dominant values', a sense of 'cultural goodwill'. Furthermore, by doing so, they also simultaneously recognised the superior embodied capital of HCC respondents, who have the interpretative ability to decode this 'legitimate' comedy.

Challenging The Politically Correct

As shown in Table 7 of Chapter 4 [p.120], 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 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 may be socially problematic. This 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]). 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 the theme of defiance vs. deference emerging again in LCC appreciation. Whereas respondents like Dave often described comedians like 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 comedy. Yet, these moral counter-repertoires still arguably upheld some sense of a cultural hierarchy. For example, LCC indignation seemed to contain an element of class resentment: 'we' are decent but are not allowed to tell certain jokes; whereas 'they', with 'some sort of degree' laugh freely, *and* at the same time try to keep 'us' from doing so.

These findings echo Lamont's (2000) study of repertoires of evaluation among French and American working class men. Lamont's informants mainly drew on moral repertoires to evaluate themselves and others. For these people, with relatively low societal status, morality was an important, often the only, 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, LCC styles seemed to function more as 'subcultural capital' with little currency beyond one's own social group (Thornton, 1996).

Style Variations

As with specific comic 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). Respondents' comic styles were therefore inevitably less consistent and messier than I have so far 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, it is important to note that 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. Furthermore, some HCC and LCC respondents committed 'cultural errors' (Lahire, 2008) by combining elements of both taste cultures. Although such dissonance was largely the exception rather than the norm, it is nonetheless important to report. LCC respondent Laura, for instance, strongly disliked politically incorrect humour, whereas HCC Graham stated that he enjoyed comedy that related to his everyday life.

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. As outlined in the methodology chapter, 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 comedy 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.

Finally, it is 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 comedy⁴³.

⁴³ 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.

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 the 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:

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 5 [p.109]), 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 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 a site for cultivating new tastes and exercising distinction. Significantly, this indicates that the transferability of comic cultural capital indicated earlier in the chapter (‘Comedy *is* Art’) may only be confined to the young. While I do not have sufficient data to examine this age difference further, it is undoubtedly an interesting area for future study.

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 does 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 the superior resources of cultural capital that are embedded in their habitus, HCC respondents exercise a distinctly disinterested 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 fact, I argue here that it represents an 'embodied' form of cultural capital that enjoys widespread legitimacy in the comedy field. This legitimacy is derived from three main factors. First, it is validated, consecrated and disseminated by comedy critics (see Chapter 8 [p.212-220] for further discussion of this). Second, it draws upon 'pure' theories of art that themselves have a historical and institutional legitimacy. For instance, the notion that comedy consumers should reject the immediately sensual pleasures of comedy - like laughter - and instead search for darker themes, is clearly reminiscent of Kant's (1991) notion of 'disterestedness'. Similarly, the idea that irony and satire are superior forms of humour, because they call the powerful to account rather than parody the already vulnerable, echoes the humour theories of Adorno (1944) and Critchley (2004).

Above all, though, the main legitimacy bestowed upon the HCC style derives from the fact that, on the whole, LCC respondents 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. This fundamental misrecognition of

embodied capital among LCC respondents is important because, as Bourdieu noted, it highlights a symbolically significant boundary between different social groups.

It is also important to note that the power of this embodied form of cultural capital is potentially far greater than that of objectified cultural capital. Objectified cultural capital relies on a diffuse and accepted notion of where a particular comedian stands in the field, which as we have demonstrated, is uncertain and can change quickly. Moreover, in the case of comedy, objectified cultural capital is also largely 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 HCC styles of appreciation may lie in the fact that they can be transposed to other forms 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 may in turn be particularly powerful because it returns the power of distinction back to the consumer. By activating a general predilection for 'enlightened eclecticism', then, the culturally privileged may be potentially cultivating new forms of distinction in myriad other fields of popular culture.

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

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

Introduction

Although the social game of distinction may be detectable when contrasting the 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= 268) of respondents reported 'mixed' cultural capital resources (MCC). Some of these were intergenerationally stable members of the 'intermediate class'⁴⁴, but significantly the majority were better described as socially mobile. Typically, this mobility was intragenerationally upward – with respondents brought up by parents with low cultural capital but then accumulating their own cultural resources by attending university and/or gaining professional or higher-managerial employment.

⁴⁴ 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).

These respondents were significant not just because of their significant number, but also because their mobile trajectories posed many questions about how they may or may not fit into HCC or LCC comedy taste cultures. Furthermore, following the discussion raised by Research Question 4, the very existence of respondents whose capital resources had changed so dramatically over the lifecourse arguably offered a challenge to the validity of Bourdieu's concept of the habitus, and the way I have so far deployed it in this thesis.

Although Bourdieu did not completely rule out mobility (he preferred to use more limiting terms like 'trajectory'), it did – in its strongest form - appear to conflict with one of the founding principles of his social theory, namely what Bennett (2007: 202) has termed the 'singular unity of class habitus'. 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)⁴⁵.

This process of habitus formation is therefore the pivotal stage in establishing what I refer to in this thesis 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). Indeed, this unified conception of the habitus chimes quite clearly with the consonant resources of HCC and LCC respondents reported in the first few chapters of this thesis.

⁴⁵ 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).

Yet, as mentioned, the dissonant demographic characteristics of upwardly mobile MCC respondents seemed to somewhat challenge this notion of a temporally unified habitus. In the main, these were individuals whose socialisation and subsequent habitus initially inculcated low cultural capital resources, but who were seemingly able to defy these conditions of existence and accumulate cultural resources later in life.

Indeed, the identification of a large group of socially mobile persons is nothing new in British sociology. 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). Furthermore, such mobility has not just been confined to the petit bourgeois, as Bourdieu seemed to argue in *Distinction* (1984: 318-335), but has propelled many from working class backgrounds⁴⁶. 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, cultural consumption and, of particular interest to this thesis, cultural capital. Outside of Britain, though, there have been striking findings in this area. Following an initial suggestion by Peterson (1992: 255), Van Eijk (1999) found that

⁴⁶ It is important to note, however, that social mobility in Britain has decreased rapidly in recent years (Cabinet office, 2011).

the Dutch socially mobile are the most likely social group to exhibit 'cultural omnivorousness'. Far from rejecting the culture of their origin or exhibiting a 'reverence for legitimate culture', as Bourdieu (1984: 319) asserted, this group instead combined tastes for both 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' forms of culture. Similarly, examining French cultural practices, Lahire (2008: 174) argued that mobility tends to 'translate into a heterogeneity of cultural preferences'. These individuals, he noted, are likely to retain a range of cultural dispositions that reflect the variety of 'socialising agents' they have come into contact with.

Moreover, these findings become even more significant when they are added to existing work on the cultural omnivore. For example, many have argued that the 'open' and 'eclectic' nature of omnivorousness 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, 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 upwardly mobile MCC respondents, it attempts to

understand how such mixed 'conditions of existence' may have impacted these respondents' comedy tastes and styles of appreciation. It begins by explaining the taste profiles of all MCC respondents, showing that at first glance they seem to closely resemble the reflexive 'cultural omnivore' currently prevalent in sociological literature. However, closer qualitative examination reveals a more complex picture, with MCC omnivorousness appearing less the result of a new individualised freedom to disembed oneself from HCC and LCC taste cultures, but instead stemming from a biographical trajectory that has left these respondents with affinities to both (rather than neither) traditional comedy taste cultures. It goes on to argue that although such a unique social position is associated with privileged insights into the 'rules of the game', it also leaves MCC respondents in strikingly precarious social positions. Stuck between two different cultures, they appear as ontological outsiders, nostalgic but not wholly comfortable with the comedy of their upbringing, yet lacking the linguistic confidence to convert their new, more legitimate, comedy tastes into embodied cultural capital.

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 8 (repeated) 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.

Comedy Item	Low Cultural Capital	Mixed Cultural Capital	High Cultural Capital
Like Stewart Lee	15%	45%	77%
Like Bernard Manning	31%	5%	2%
Like Eddie Izzard	58%	72%	77%
Like Russell Brand	44%	46%	41%
Like Monty Python	75%	83%	85%
Like Mr Bean	52%	35%	44%
Like Frank Skinner	56%	48%	43%
Like Michael McIntyre	64%	59%	58%
Like Brass Eye	22%	46%	77%
Like Benny Hill	48%	19%	5%
Like Last Summer Wine	35%	28%	14%
Like The Thick Of It	10%	24%	59%

Table 8 (repeated): Selected comedy preferences by cultural capital resources

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 omnivorous 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 the 'TV was always on and my Dad did like comedy'. His dad introduced him to *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 thesis. 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's 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 eloquently 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:

Interviewer: 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.

Interviewer: 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.

Interviewer: 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. As Bourdieu noted of the Petit Bourgeoisie: ‘As self made men, they cannot have the familiar relation to culture which authorises the liberties and audacities of those who are linked to it by birth, that is, by nature and essence’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 331).

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. Bourdieu (1984: 336) argued that the ‘collective social trajectory’ of the upwardly mobile transforms their habitus towards a durable inclination and ‘propensity to accumulation in all forms’. This new habitus therefore orientates these individuals not only to renounce the culture of their origin, but furthermore to ‘break the ties, even the family ties, which hinder [their] individual ascension’. Such ties of kinship and friendship, Bourdieu continues, ‘are merely hindrances, which have to be removed whatever the cost, because the gratitude, the mutual aid, the material and the symbolic satisfactions they give, in the short or long term, are among the forbidden luxuries’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 337). A variation of this theory, the ‘status anxiety hypothesis’, 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 this and Bourdieu's description of the upwardly mobile jars 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.'

Interviewer: 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 Chan's 'status anxiety hypothesis', then, the data presented so far seems to suggest that MCC 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.

Interviewer: 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 interviewer, 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...

Interviewer: 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 contradict most of the existing literature concerning the cultural omnivore thesis. For MCC respondents omnivorous comedy taste was not associated with an enhanced ability to communicate with

diverse groups, as Erickson (1996) has suggested, or a new marker of distinction or ‘cool’, as Warde et al (1999), Van Eijk and Bergeman (2004) and Bellavance (2008) have argued.

Instead most MCC omnivores 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, MCC 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 in *A Sketch For a Self Analysis* written shortly before his death, MCC respondents displayed a fundamentally divided habitus - a *habitus clivé* - ‘torn by contradiction and internal division’ (Bourdieu, 2000: 161).

Of course, the main conceptual difference with Bourdieu’s formulation is that far from being ‘exceptions to the rule’, the destabilised habitus clivé of upwardly mobile MCC respondents constituted a significant percentage of the overall sample. Rather than isolated ‘blips’ in the otherwise durable notion of habitus, then, these findings suggest that the contemporary British habitus may be more flexible than Bourdieu originally conceived. In particular, he underestimated the sheer numbers of the underprivileged 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 on the value of certain critically consecrated comedians, Harriet displayed an obvious 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.

Interviewer: 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, and then all the 'chavs' start liking them, 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. Analysing the survey findings, it found that MCC respondents appear to have much less coherent taste profiles than HCC or LCC respondents, often displaying omnivorous preferences for comedy items that span the cultural hierarchy.

However, like previous chapters, further qualitative analysis revealed that such statistical data only tells half the story. In particular, when survey findings were mixed with biographical data from semi-structured interviews, the image of MCC respondents as cultural omnivores was problematised. This is not to say that MCC taste did not traverse the comic hierarchy - it did - but only that this form of culture switching did not seem to yield the social benefits assumed by many other studies of cultural omnivorousness. Indeed, there was little sign that diverse comedy taste enhanced the ability of mobile respondents to reach out to multiple social groups, and even less evidence that it was consciously adopted as a means to cultural distinction.

In contrast, the chapter illustrates that MCC omnivorousness was largely the by-product of individual trajectories, whereby LCC comedy tastes were established in childhood but these were then added to as respondents established new cultural capital resources and were introduced to/sought out more sophisticated styles of

comic appreciation. Significantly, though, qualitative data demonstrated that this combination of comedy tastes appeared to have many more negative than positive implications for MCC identity and social position. In a field of consumption they felt was still dominated by contrasting HCC and LCC taste cultures, these respondents were stuck in the middle. While they 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 LCC tastes of their youth were largely socially unacceptable and aesthetically inferior. In short, then, these MCC respondents appeared to be less culturally omnivorousness and more culturally homeless. Uncertain of their position in the field, their attempts to 'fit in' presented many social hurdles, including most notably a sense of ontological insecurity and uneasiness.

Finally, the findings of the chapter also have ramifications beyond the realm of comedy. In particular, they may add some complexity to the, as yet, theoretically under-developed cultural omnivore thesis. Primarily, they indicate that rather than assume from statistical analysis that omnivorous taste is both consciously adopted and socially beneficial, it is important to interrogate these taste patterns 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 made up of the upwardly mobile whose diverse taste reflect the upward trajectory of their cultural capital resources. Indeed, closer analysis of the way these individuals deploy and communicate their tastes in social life may also reveal the pitfalls associated with occupying this liminal position in social space.

Part 3: Comic Cultural Capital: Strength and Legitimacy

Chapter 7: Comedy Taste and The Drawing of Symbolic Boundaries

Introduction

Thus far I have identified two key divisions in British comedy consumption. First, in Chapter 4, I showed that the most significant taste cleavage separates the highbrow comedy preferences of HCC respondents from the lowbrow preferences of LCC respondents. However, looking at the entire field of consumption, it was then explained that these systematic differences only concerned *some* of the 32 comedy items surveyed. Preferences for the majority of comedy items were actually evenly distributed among cultural capital groups. I then demonstrated that although these items did not hold *objectified* rarity, they may still be being used in the activation of *embodied* cultural capital resources. In particular, Chapter 5 and 6 illustrated that while HCC respondents may be consuming much of the same comedy as other social groups, they are still able to preserve their rarity by employing a style of comic appreciation that LCC and MCC respondents perceive as out of their aesthetic reach.

Yet, as Research Question 3 enquired, what is the sociological significance of these aesthetic differences? Drawing on Bourdieu, it is possible to argue that such high vs. low distinctions are important because they function as signals of social position; in other words they imply a symbolic boundary separating HCC and LCC comedy tastes. According to Bourdieu, the cultural hierarchy ensures that different tastes and styles necessarily negate one another and therefore to express ‘one’s own values...implies condemnation of all other ways of being and doing’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 223).

However, since the publication of *Distinction* many have questioned whether the contemporary cultural field resembles a zero-sum Bourdieusian hierarchy (Halle, 1992; Bryson, 1996; Erickson, 1996). Lamont (1992), for example, has argued that the process by which taste differences produce inequality is more complex than Bourdieu implied. She noted that boundaries can only be said to generate inequality and exclusion when notions of cultural legitimacy are ‘widely agreed upon’ (Lamont and Lareau, 1988: 152). Although in her own research she echoed Bourdieu in reporting strong aesthetic boundaries in France, Lamont found cultural divisions were much weaker in the US. This was because, she argued (1992: 174-178), Americans were largely tolerant of cultural difference and notions of cultural value were often contested⁴⁷.

Following Lamont’s lead, many cultural sociologists have supported this critique of Bourdieu, arguing that contemporary cultural boundaries have significantly weakened. In particular, most posit that symbolic hierarchies are now being replaced by more open, tolerant and *omnivorous* cultural orientations, with the dominant classes now readily consuming both high and low cultural forms together (Peterson and Kern, 1996; Featherstone, 1996). Some even argue that contemporary markers of distinction or ‘cool’ actually involve *refraining* from drawing boundaries, and

⁴⁷ Lamont (1992: 181-88) has therefore argued that it is necessary to look more precisely at the notion of symbolic boundaries, and examine in detail ‘the lines that include and define some people, groups and things while excluding others’ (2007: 1).

embracing cultural diversity (Warde et al., 1999; Eijck & Knulst, 2005; Van Eijck & Lievens, 2008; Belleavance, 2008). Indeed, such eclecticism has been connected to a number of socially beneficial outcomes, such as an enhanced ability to communicate with diverse groups (Erickson, 1996) or greater cultural and political tolerance (Bryson, 1996).

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; Hayward and 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 Research Question 3’s commitment to explicitly interrogate symbolic boundaries, this chapter aims to hone in on the boundaries separating comedy tastes and styles. Whilst drawing heavily on the major cleavages identified in previous chapters, it will also use interview data to deal explicitly with respondents’ perception of their comedy *dislikes* and the audiences they associate with these dislikes. In a strong rebuttal to the findings of Bennett et al (2009), 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 more laissez faire approach to comedy taste, combining both a moral commitment to openness and hesitancy about 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 the previous chapter 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 reveals (laughs). You've got to see him delay the punchline. You have to see him bring about comedy through 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 that's an awful thing to say, but it makes you look down on the people who don't get him, and that's such a horrible thing to say, but it's absolutely true.

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’ certain comedy 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’ Lee.

As well as humour-specific knowledge, 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.

Interviewer: 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 other characteristics such as newspaper readership, regional accent and linguistic choice. Moreover, in Frank's case, these assumptions were arguably class-based, drawing on largely derisive and stereotypical parodies of working class taste and values.

Although aesthetic boundaries were often implied in the way HCC explained comedy preferences, they were even more marked in discussions of comedy they disliked. As I have explained in previous chapters, HCC rejection of certain comedy items 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’s particularly striking about this passage 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. It’s about reading *The Sun* and seeing what’s recommended and thinking (feigns a thick Scottish accent)

‘alright then’, or if something’s been on TV or if so and so person’s been on a panel show, then that means I should go rather than trying to seek out anything different, or taking a risk to see what’s out there.

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 (2010: 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. In particular, this kind of distancing normally involved the ‘trad’ comedy of artists like Bernard Manning, Roy ‘Chubby’ Brown and Jim Davidson. However, in contrast to the data presented in the previous chapter, political and moral concerns with this kind of comedy were often directed at audiences rather than the comedians themselves. Indeed, even though most HCC 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? (Trever)

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 political 'views' or 'points of view'. Again, the coupling of such political opinions with certain social class 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 the 'trad' comedians, for example, the first weapon of denigration among most HCC respondents 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). Indeed, as explained in the previous chapter, what was significant about this moral rejection of transgressive comedy was that, in some ways, it was contradictory. Thus HCC respondents had no moral qualms with hostile comedy aimed at politicians or celebrities, but were vehemently opposed to ridicule that was 'politically incorrect'. Furthermore, moral judgments of those that enjoyed this 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. With those guys I think it mainly comes down to their views on things like immigration policy. I mean I think there are a lot of people in the UK who have very strong views on immigration, it's what my wife calls 'Middle England'. (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 socially mobile, 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 and Lamont (1992) in the US, my findings indicated that HCC respondents frequently drew hierarchical taste boundaries on the basis of morality.

Yet, as Lamont (1992: 178-179) has noted, 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 moral norms were often in direct conflict with those of HCC respondents

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. Indeed, HCC informants made it quite clear that they were unlikely to seek out or enjoy interactions with people with LCC comedy taste. 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. They saw those with lowbrow comedy tastes as fundamentally 'flawed consumers' (Bauman, 1998: 2).

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).

Significantly, though, such personal expressions of condemnation and disgust were not necessarily extended to consumers of other areas of culture. Instead, as the following quotes illustrate, comedy's unique boundary-drawing power seemed to be linked 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 not going to be friends with someone who has different interests, and different things make them laugh, different things stimulate them.

I think it's the same if someone says their favourite show is *Les Mis* and they read *Jilly Cooper*. I just wouldn't bother hanging around (*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.

Interviewer: 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 both pointed to the importance of comedy 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 just 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 interactions⁴⁸.

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. Sharing laughter is arguably the strongest marker of closeness people have. For this reason, many scholars have also remarked on the exclusionary effect of laughter (cf.

⁴⁸ 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.

Bergson 1900). The discovery of shared taste in humour may be taken as a sign of similarity; and similarity breeds emotional closeness, solidarity and trust. 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, that it also had 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 the previous chapters, 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, but I don't. It doesn't bother me either way. Just don't make me go to a gig with you (laugh). When I meet someone I take them at face value. I mean somebody might tell you oh he's really not a nice person' but I say thanks very much but I'll make up my own mind. And maybe you don't get on with them, but I will. I just take people at face value (Laura).

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 at the end of the day if I don't understand it. If I don't get it, and it makes you laugh, I'm not going to try and sway you away from it. Keep enjoying it. I'm glad it's making somebody laugh. If people are getting something out of it, fair enough (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.

However, 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 also 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 in Dan between seeing taste as trivial preference and a simultaneous awareness of having a lower position in an externally powerful cultural order. The passage also obviously marked a stark contrast 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, maybe more a result of necessity, rather than ideology.

It's 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:

Interviewer: Do you see a connection between working class life and comedy?

Finn: Oh aye. A lot of it stems from the working class. I think the main thing that makes people laugh is people 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. But the thing with the middle class, they're not going to have these episodes in their life, where extreme things happen. So I think their comedy might suffer from that.

Interviewer: So are you saying middle class people are more reserved when it comes to comedy?

Finn: 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, 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 of their HCC counterparts. 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 their *legitimacy*. 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 consecration has come from two main channels; via the state and from the authority of certain cultural intermediaries. In the case of British comedy, the first of these agents of legitimation - the state - remains aloof, assigning no public funding and omitting comedy from school and university curricula. However, the influence of cultural intermediaries is arguably much stronger.

The term 'cultural intermediary' refers to those working in occupational areas that come 'in-between' creative artists and cultural consumers, such as publicists, advertisers, marketers and critics (Hesmondhalgh, 2007: 54-65). As cultural products

are produced, these intermediaries become pivotal generators of meaning in what Bourdieu (1996: 229) calls the ‘science of cultural works’ – producing and generating belief in their value and legitimacy.

In the comedy industry, a wide range of cultural intermediaries operate, including producers, critics, venue owners, promoters, managers and publicists. However, one group, comedy critics, 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 thesis, critics are also important because they act as brokers in the process of cultural capital formation. They have the potential to legitimate both objectified 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. In particular, 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 is being absorbed by HCC respondents and displayed publicly as a form of 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 control 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 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 imbuing them with an 'objectified' 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).

To illustrate, consider this fictional example. Comedy consumer Robert goes to see the comedian Eddie Izzard perform live. After the show, Robert is in two minds – he

liked some elements of Izzard's comedy but equally disliked just as much. The next day, while waiting to meet a friend, Robert finds himself reading a review of the Izzard gig in *The Guardian*. The critic loved the performance, awarding it five stars. Considering Robert normally reads *The Guardian* and agrees with their reviews, he finds himself deferring to the authority of *The Guardian* critic. When Robert's friend, Alice, arrives, she asks 'How was the Eddie Izzard gig?'. 'It was excellent,' Robert replies, knowing that although this may not be his own opinion, it is a judgment that has been validated by the authority of the critic. 'Yeah I thought he would be, he's been getting really good reviews,' Alice says, showing that she too acknowledges that Izzard is now an object that carries a certain cultural prestige.

However, although audiences like Robert 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 gives 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.

Again, to illustrate, let's return to the example of Robert. As explained, Robert had mixed thoughts after seeing Eddie Izzard. However, having read the review in *The Guardian*, he found himself swayed not just by the critic's judgment but even more by the way Izzard was described. For instance, whereas Robert had found Izzard 'bizarre' and 'clever', the critic communicated this as 'surrealistic, with scattershot musings'. Again, where Robert remembered thinking Izzard's style was a bit 'all over the place' the critic described this as 'rambling, whimsical monologue, a form of self-referential pantomime that betrays the divinity of comic genius'. Therefore, when Alice asked Robert why he liked Izzard he found himself adapting elements of this critical discourse into his speech: 'I just found it brilliantly surreal, it was almost like a pantomime at times', he said, and later added: 'I just think he's a bit of a comedy genius'. Although Robert didn't necessarily intend to mimic the aesthetic language of *The Guardian* critic, it happened unconsciously, as he wanted his judgments to appear considered, articulate and - above all - competent.

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 about musical meaning and value, and their terms and judgments are inevitably less consistent, less coherent, and less self-conscious than I have so far implied. In conversational terms we certainly use terms which draw on articulated discourses, which deploy assumptions about art, 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 publications (Shrum, 1996: 125-143).

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 voices⁴⁹:

⁴⁹ However, it's worth noting at this point that, as Logan (2007) has argued, online forms of comedy criticism are yet to impact the British comedy industry in the manner they have in other art forms like film and theatre.

The role of the media gatekeeper has gone for good. The days of unquestioned authority by a cadre of professional critics are over; even highbrow newspapers supplement reviews by their most esteemed film critics with a selection of 'vox pop' opinions from apparently random members of the public (Jennings, 2007: 93-94).

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 that 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 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. Through their prominent journalistic practices, these critics were gradually able to 'construct the accepted truths about rock music' which they and subsequent generations of rock critics could then preside over as gatekeepers (ibid).

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 thesis has already demonstrated how the field of British comic production has altered significantly since he conducted his research in the mid 1980s. In particular, the artistic movement initiated by the 'alternative comedians' has established strong standards in the field that place a premium on aesthetic principles like originality, criticism and intellect. 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. To understand whether the judgments of comedy critics can be considered 'widely shared status signals', it first analyses survey responses concerning whether or not respondents read comedy reviews. These findings are then supplemented with interview data that examines in more detail what impact reviews have on comedy consumers, and whether they affect aesthetic judgments.

In order to answer the second question, relating to the role of critical discourse in legitimising embodied cultural capital, 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 particular, it seeks to examine whether there is any homology between the styles of appreciation communicated by critics and the styles articulated by respondents with high cultural capital resources.

In terms of criticism, the study 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. Although this was a small non-probability sample, the comedians were nonetheless chosen to reflect the diversity of British comedy and the different taste communities uncovered in the survey. In addition, in order to engage with the internal 'field' of comedy criticism - and to interrogate Shrum's observation that critics possess varying levels of legitimacy - reviews of the comedians were examined in five different publications; *The Guardian*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Daily Mirror*, *Chortle*, and *Fest Magazine* (see Chapter 3 [p.100] for further methodological 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 indicated that comedy criticism was '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 different 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 and somebody else has written a very positive review it does make me think twice.

Interviewer: 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 and 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. As Sophie says: ‘you think, well I thought it was funny, maybe there’s something wrong with me (laughs)’. 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’ (full quote in Chapter 6 [p.169]).

Although most LCC and MCC respondents accepted the authority of critics, it is worth noting that two MCC interviewees, James and Harriet, significantly rejected critical legitimacy. Indeed, James even seemed to question the whole existence of a hierarchy of aesthetic judgments concerning comedy:

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 [p.172]), 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 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 see whether there was any homology between this and the aesthetic language used by HCC respondents.

Playing With Form

Among most comedy reviews 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 from these passages that 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', where creativity and originality is the central value criterion (Bauman, 2001). Furthermore, the overall repertoire of evaluation strongly echoes Bourdieu's notion of the 'disinterested aesthetic'. Aesthetic assessments concentrate on 'form' rather than 'function', and echo Bourdieu's (1984: 35) notion of the elite 'refusal of any vulgar surrender to easy seduction or collective enthusiasm'. In a similar way to that described by Regev (1994: 87-98), then, these passages show how comedy critics claim 'artistic' status for comedy by discursively applying 'parameters of art' traditionally used in high-art cultural fields.

A strong homology can also be detected in 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, illustrating that both groups shared a common 'elaborate' linguistic code (Bernstein, 1971).

This notion of a common 'aesthetic language' is best illustrated by an example. Responses to Stewart Lee, for instance, provided a particularly illuminating comparison between critics and HCC respondents. Consider these two sets of assessments of Stewart 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. Stewart Lee, 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.' Indeed, this shared aesthetic language indicates support for Shrum's (1997) assertion that HCC judgments are strongly mediated by the reviews they've read.

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. And I just think that's quite interesting...it's an interesting thing to think about (Graham).

Although it's possible to detect aesthetic judgments in these passages, respondents (albeit using the spoken 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).

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 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.

Again, these aesthetic preferences seem to echo the HCC styles of appreciation outlined in Chapter 5 [p.134-136]. As Andrew summed up: 'something can be funny without you needing to laugh.'

Rejecting The Comically 'Pedestrian'

Significantly, the discourse 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 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 sort of time where we all remember Playstation 1's or whatever else.

Interviewer: 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.

Interviewer: 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 homology 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 fairly representing 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, it seems, even critics sometimes confuse their evaluations, varying their responses according to the same factors as normal consumers, such as context (Lahire, 2008). 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).

Significantly, the data also provides a pertinent reminder that comedy criticism sometimes 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. Some people who hadn't heard rude words before seemed to quite enjoy this. 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 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. His recollection of a trip to the posh Gleneagles hotel was especially funny. 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 as a stellar TV and big gig career clearly awaits. 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 (I couldn't find any other tabloid newspapers with 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. However, it's important to reflect on *The Mirror*'s position in the field of criticism. *The Mirror* is unlikely to be read by many HCC respondents and therefore will arguably have little effect on their styles of appreciation. Furthermore, it has relatively low status in the field and is mainly read

by LCC respondents, and therefore is likely only to reinforce LCC styles as less legitimate.

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 - and often refuse to accept that tastes for critically acclaimed comedians communicate a sense of cultural capital.

Yet while HCC respondents may not automatically accept the value of comedians consecrated by 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 similar aesthetic language into their expressions of comic taste.

Moreover, having uncovered this, this chapter has attempted to go further, examining whether the specific aesthetic standards communicated by critics are being imbibed by HCC respondents and then articulated in public as a sign of their embodied cultural capital. In the main, comparisons between the way (most) critics and HCC respondents assessed the same comedians suggest that this process is taking place. In

particular, close parallels exist in the 'aesthetic language' used by comedy critics and HCC respondents. 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.

However, it must be noted that although this chapter has shown a homology between the aesthetic principles valued by comedy critics and HCC respondents, it is beyond the scope of this research to ascertain whether this constitutes a causal relationship. The fact that most HCC respondents admit to valuing reviews so highly indicates that they may well be embodying this critical discourse, but such a suggestion is hard to prove. Instead, what this chapter suggests is simply that comedy critics do play an important role in the mediation of cultural value, and *may* be instrumental in legitimising certain objects of comedy and certain aesthetic styles as emerging forms of cultural capital.

Conclusion

As the first ever large-scale study of British comedy taste, this thesis 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 acts 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 comedy items 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 item had been legitimated by comedy critics, the most influential agents of consecration in the field of comedy. 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'⁵⁰. 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 7 [p.111]) indicated that there was a strong divide between those aged 44 and under, who tended to be more avid consumers of all comedy, including

⁵⁰ 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.

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 1. 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 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 of HCC respondents 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, this thesis has been careful not to overstate the significance of its survey findings. In particular, it has warned 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 invariably 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 8 [p.123]). 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 thesis 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 decoded 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 functioned as a highly significant form 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 socialisation⁵¹ 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 tapped the entire emotional spectrum was considered valuable while comedy that aimed for only laughter and pleasure was rejected⁵². 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, the form or substance of ‘good’ comedy should have a meaning or a message, 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 embodied form of cultural capital was that its power was arguably far greater than objectified cultural capital. Comedy as objectified cultural capital, for instance, relied on a diffuse and accepted notion of where a particular comedian stood in the field, which was uncertain. In contrast,

⁵¹ 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].

⁵² 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’.

comedy *style* as embodied cultural capital returned the power of distinction back to the consumer. Its activation was not confined to revered objects of comedy. Instead, as an aesthetic lens embedded in habitus and rooted in the notion of connoisseurship, it constituted 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.

The power of this embodied appreciation style 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 giving the impression of being ‘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 embodied capital to respondents from backgrounds rich in cultural capital.

Reflecting on this data, I tend to agree with Coulangeon (2005: 127) that embodied cultural capital constitutes the most ‘audacious’ mode of 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 recognition of embodied capital - realised here via comic appreciation - 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 thesis. 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 thesis 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 them⁵³, as invariably ‘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 objects of British comedy, but more importantly it has shown the distinct currency of possessing, performing and cultivating a ‘good’ sense of humour.

Comic Cultural capital: Strength and Legitimacy

As outlined, my data indicates that forms of comedy taste constitute important signals 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 thesis 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

⁵³ 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.

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 was ‘widely’ agreed upon was 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 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 legitimacy⁵⁴ 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.

⁵⁴ In Chapter 9 [221-223], 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.

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 thesis, realised in Chapter 6, 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, 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 deference⁵⁵.

Second, and arguably more powerful, was the overt boundary-drawing undertaken by HCC respondents. In what were striking findings, Chapter 6 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

⁵⁵ 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.

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 and Yar, 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 '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 assumed 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 anyone 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 thesis 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 thesis 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 findings⁵⁶. 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 best cashed in via the embodied performance of distinction.

It is also worth noting two additional ways that this thesis has built on *existing* critiques of Bourdieusian social theory. First, the thesis 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

⁵⁶ 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.

support Goldthorpe's (2007) assertion that the British education system is not just reproducing people's cultural capital resources, but in many cases actually creating valuable new resources. For example, 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. 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.

Second, the thesis 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 thesis 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 thesis 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 thesis 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 recent large-scale 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 during this thesis 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. Instead, they should be understood as fundamentally 'moderate' (Payne and Williams, 2005) and subject to confirmation or refutation by further enquiry.

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 interviews⁵⁷.

Finally, it is worth acknowledging the study's weaknesses in examining cultural capital, and in particular its neglect of vital questions concerning *convertibility* and *transmissibility*. 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. Similarly, although there may be some evidence of HCC respondents transferring the aesthetics of their comic styles into 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.

⁵⁷ As mentioned, in future it may be preferable to counteract this problem by using the 'text-in-action' approach advocated by Wood (2005).

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 thesis, 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 thesis 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 interaction⁵⁸.

⁵⁸ 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.

The thesis 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 thesis 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 therefore be interesting 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. It is hoped that some such cross-cultural insight will be achieved via a special edition of *Participations: The International Journal of Audience Research* concerning 'comedy and audiences' which I am co-editing in October 2011.

Finally, 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 thesis, 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 thesis 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 [p.210-212]).

Indeed, it is this point that I believe gets closest to the crux of the thesis. 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 and superiority.

Appendix 1: Cost of Chemistry

CC Resources

The following resources are available to students and staff:

- Library resources
- Online databases
- Physical resources
- Staff support
- Student support

For more information, please contact the relevant department.

Appendix 1: Cast of Characters

HCC Respondents

Kira, 32, is an environmental consultant from Edinburgh. She has a PhD from the University of Edinburgh and owns her own company with her partner. Her father is a professional with a master's degree and her mother is a small business owner, and also has a degree.

Frank, 35, is Deputy Chief Executive of a high-profile Scottish arts organisation. Originally from Surrey, England, he now lives in central Glasgow with his girlfriend, 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 master's degree and his mother has her own business and a degree.

Sarah, 21, is an 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, a lighting designer, 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 master's degree 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 at the University of Edinburgh. Originally from Leeds, he now lives in 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 a master's degree. 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 near Edinburgh in 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 a picture framing shop in Aberdeen with his wife. 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, 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 retail team leader 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 assistant 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 2: 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
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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

lzzard+	2.163	0.44462	0.68	0.01	0.05
lzzard=	0.580	4.38922	0.61	0.13	0.29
lzzard-	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

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
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: Comedy Taste Survey

Research Survey

Comedy at The Edinburgh Festivals

The University of Edinburgh is currently undertaking research looking at the growth of comedy in the UK. This short survey aims to explore attitudes and tastes regarding British comedy.

Q.1 For each of the following comedians, please indicate whether you like or dislike them?

	Like	Neither like or dislike	Dislike	Have not heard of
Jim Bowen				
Simon Amstell				
Eddie Izzard				
Michael McIntyre				
Russell Brand				
Frank Skinner				
Puppetry of The Penis				
Hans Teeuwen				
Jim Davidson				
Karen Dunbar				
Andy Zaltzman				
Johnny Vegas				
Mark Thomas				
Roy "chubby" Brown				
Stewart Lee				
Bernard Manning				

Q.2 For each of the following TV shows, please indicate whether you like or dislike them?

	Like	Neither like or dislike	Dislike	Have not heard of
The Thick of it				
Last of the Summer Wine				
Dirty Sanchez				
Brass Eye				
Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle				
Mr Bean				
Monty Python				
Bob Monkhouse Show				
Bullseye				
The League of Gentleman				
Yes Minister				
The Mighty Boosh				
2.4 Children				
Peep Show				
Little Britain				
The Benny Hill Show				

Q.3 Which types of comedy do you LIKE? (*tick all that apply*)

Physical Comedy (e.g. Mr Bean, Bottom, Jim Carrey)	
Obscene Comedy (e.g. Puppetry of the Penis, Roy 'chubby' brown)	
Critical Observational Comedy (e.g. Russell Brand, Rich Hall)	
Surreal Comedy (e.g. The Mighty Boosh, Hans Teeuwen)	
Traditional observational/Blue comedy (e.g. Bernard Manning, Jim Davidson)	
Political Comedy/Satire (e.g. Mark Thomas, Andy Zaltzman)	
Wit/Wordplay Comedy (e.g. Stewart Lee, Chris Addison)	

Q.4 If I'm preparing for a night out, I would prefer to start the evening by going to see: (Tick one box)

Comedy	
Theatre	
A Film	
Dance	
A Musical	
Other	

Q.5 Who would you usually attend these performing arts with?

	Alone	a partner	family member(s)	a small group of friends	A large group of friends
Comedy					
Theatre					
Musicals					
Opera					
Classical Music					
Rock or Pop concerts					
Dance					

Q.6 How important are reviews when deciding to go and see comedy?

Very Important	Relatively Important	Relatively Unimportant	Not important at all

Questions About You

Q.12 What is the highest level of education you have completed?

Secondary School/No qualifications	
GCSEs/Standard Grades	
A-Levels/Highers	
NVQ, GNVQ, SVQ	
First Degree	
Masters Degree	
Doctorate (Phd)	

Q.13 What is the highest level of education your father completed?

Secondary School/No qualifications	
GCSEs/Standard Grades	

A-Levels/Highers	
NVQ, GNVQ, SVQ	
First Degree	
Masters Degree	
Doctorate (Phd)	

Q.14 What is the highest level of education your mother completed?

Secondary School/No qualifications	
GCSEs/Standard Grades	
A-Levels/Highers	
NVQ, GNVQ, SVQ	
First Degree	
Masters Degree	
Doctorate (Phd)	

Q.15 Thinking back to when you were 14, what job was your father doing at the time?

Not Applicable	
----------------	--

Write in Job Title _____

Q.16 Thinking back to when you were 14, what job was your mother doing at the time?

Not Applicable	
----------------	--

Write in Job Title _____

Q.17 What is your current occupation?

Write in Job Title _____

Q.18 Are you male or female _____

Q.19 What is your current age _____

As part of this research project, we are aiming to conduct a number of interviews exploring in more depth the questions mentioned in this survey. If you are willing to be interviewed, please include your contact details in the space below and we will contact you. Your name will not be used in conjunction with any of the answers you have given in this survey

Name: _____

Email Address: _____

Telephone Number: _____

Appendix 4 Occupational Status Scale (developed from Peterson and Simkus, 1992: 156)

Higher Cultural – eg. Architects, Academics, Lawyers, Clergymen

Artists – eg. Authors, dancers, editors, musicians, painters

Lower Cultural – eg. social workers, public relations, secondary school teachers, religious workers

Higher Managerial/Technical – eg. accountants, entrepreneurs, managers, officials, engineers, actuaries, chemists, physicians,

Lower Managerial/Technical – eg. administrators, pharmacists, nurses, computer programmers, health technicians

Sales/Clerical – eg. insurance brokers, estate agents, receptionists, sales staff, retail staff

Skilled Manual – eg. plumbers, electricians, bakers, carpenters, mechanics, printers, brickmasons, gardeners, bakers, machinists

Semi-Skilled Manual - eg. Taxi drivers, deliverymen, truck drivers, chauffeurs, factory operators.

Unskilled - eg. clerk/typist, surveillance system monitor, hand packer, circuit board assembler, restaurant dishwasher

Appendix 5: Interview Schedule

1. Begin with some informal questions about respondent's experience of this year's Edinburgh Festival. Did you see any comedy you particularly liked or disliked? Why?

2. Recalling the survey you filled out, which of the comedians that you said you liked would you say are your favourites?

Follow up:

What is it about he/she/the show that you like so much?

Can you recall any favourite jokes/skits/sketches?

Why is it about this joke/skit/sketch you like so much?

3. From all the comedians you said you dislike, is there any that you really dislike?

Follow up:

What is it about he/she/the show that you dislike so much?

Is it the style of comedy/ the personality/ the themes in the material?

Can you recall any favourite jokes/skits/sketches?

Why is it about this joke/skit/sketch you like so much?

4. Were there any comedians that you particularly like or dislike that were not included in the survey?

5. In our survey, Monty Python was by far the most popular British comedy show. Why do you think people, from all backgrounds, ages etc like it so much?

6. When you think about the comedians you like, what do you think are the most important factors in determining whether you enjoy their act or show?

7. Do you think you judge people who like comedy that you dislike?

8. How might you characterise such people who like these comedians?
9. Do you think the factors you find important in deciding whether you like comedy are the same factors that are important when you go to the theatre, watch a film or look at a painting in an art gallery?
10. If so, why do you think these factors are so important for you?
Did you always look for these things in art? If not, what factors are more/less important when you enjoy these other arts?
11. Do you discuss comedians or comedy shows with friends or family? What about at work?
12. Would you say your friends tend to have the same taste in comedy that you do?
13. Would you say that being seen to have 'good taste' in comedy is something that is valued among your friends? What about at work?
14. What about your parents? Do you think they find the same things funny as you do? Are they as interested in comedy as you are?
15. Do you feel confident about your taste for comedy when talking to people?
16. Would you say the sense of humour you respond to in everyday life is very similar to the kind of comedy you like?
17. Do you use comedians as a reference point when making jokes in everyday life?
18. If you find someone who has a similar sense of humour to you, does it make it easier to get along? Why is that? Do you think it means you see the world in similar ways?
19. Would you say you have particular preferences for certain genres of comedy, or does it generally depend more on the individual performer?
20. How often would you say you go and see live comedy?
21. How often do you watch comedy on TV?
22. How often do you watch comedy online? Do you send comedy clips to friends?
23. Do you read reviews of comedy shows? Before or after?
24. In general, do you find you agree with the opinions of comedy reviewers? Why do you think that is?

25. Thinking back to the festival, what did you generally do after watching comedy?

26. Did your parents introduce you to a lot of art and culture when you were growing up? What was their attitude to art and culture? Do you think of comedy as an art form?

Follow up:

Did you go to many concerts/gigs/plays etc?

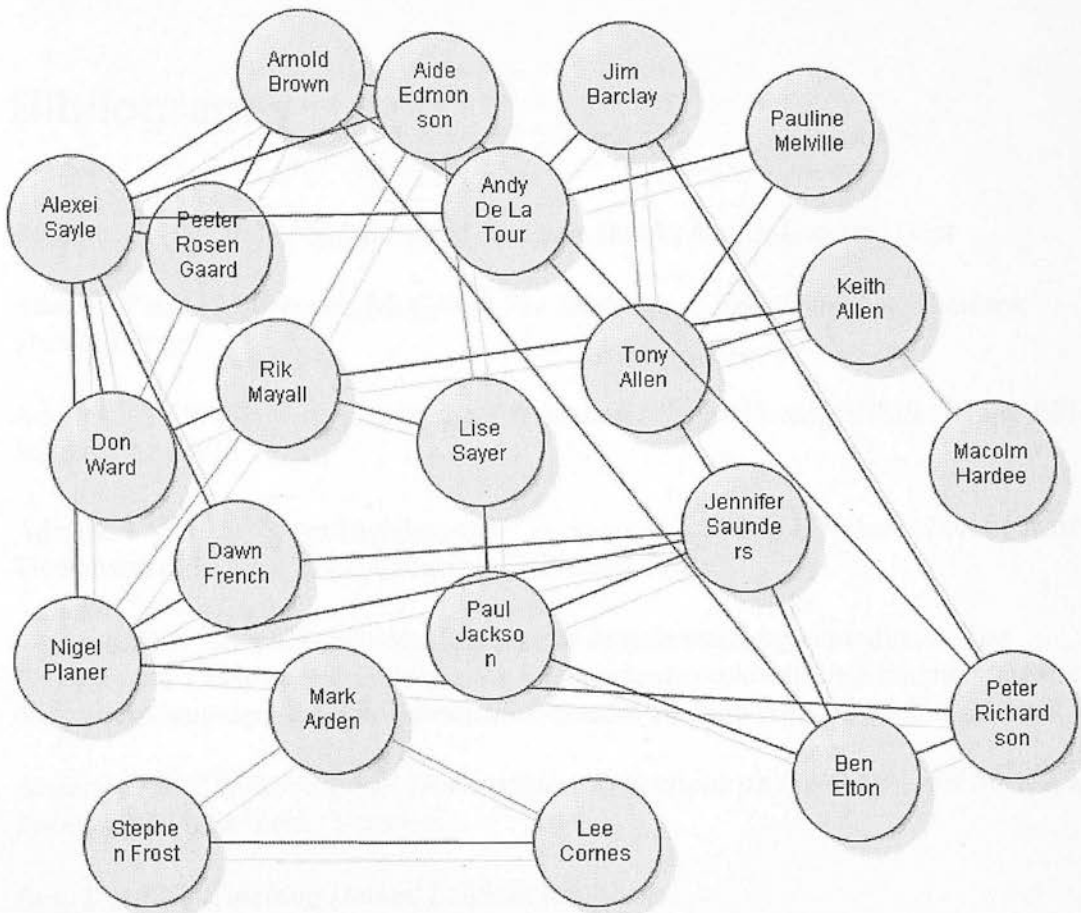
What sort of books did you read?

Were you encouraged to think about art?

27. Did you learn a lot about art and culture school?

28. Do you discuss art and culture much with colleagues at work?

Appendix 6: The Social Network of Alternative Comedy 1979-1982



Key

————— = Two actors were involved in a common comedy group (such as a duo, trio, cabaret, troupe or 'improv' group)

————— = Two actors were known to be close friends

..... = Two actors were known to be romantically linked or lived together

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Comedy Videos Sent To Interviewees

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XTNusRuX5-w>
Karen Dunbar

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=89ojjeWBQ-0>
Thick of it

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AIpO8rR95iM>
Bernard Manning

Brass Eye - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kFNs2mOkKzc&feature=related>

Stewart Lee -
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0zdyJkKA5L4&feature=PlayList&p=07F8ADC57AB8B16A&playnext=1&playnext_from=PL&index=35

Hans Teeuwen - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sYwATBRu_c&feature=related

Roy Chubby Brown -
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MyT6d4FWpw&feature=related>

Benny Hill - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCwKUcrVVZs>

Dirty Sanchez - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uLd3-cfLlvU>

Little Britain - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uLd3-cfLlvU>

Michael McIntyre - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ZIwvxJMZY0