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'You had to be there…': Place and the production of comedy culture

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I confirm that the number of words is 19,985 excluding abstract, acknowledgements, table of contents, tables, figures, reference list, appendices and quotations from primary data

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Abstract

Comedy is an art form that has been both under theorised and studied by geographers despite the many affirmations of its usefulness to those with an interest in culture (Mintz, 1985)*. Live stand-up comedy in particular forms a useful epistemological means to theorise links between art, space and place due to the fact that it is both produced and received in the same moment, rather than being mediated between these events. Through an extensive ethnographic encounter with the field of stand-up comedy in the West Midlands, UK, this project thus explores the geographical implications surrounding the production of live stand-up comedy at a number of different scales. Focusing primarily on theories from Bourdieu, Butler and Deleuze and their subsidiaries - it looks at multiple aspects of the production of comedy, including: the positioning of actors within the field, creation and performance of 'material', and the staging of comedy shows. In doing this it highlights the often hidden power relations that are involved with producing comedy and asserts the importance of both affect and place within these relationships.*

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Introduction

"While, at its simplest, comedy is indeed entertainment; it can also be an art form that does more than just elicit laughter. It makes a statement. It touches people emotionally. It reaches hearts and minds, and changes both. It changes the world we live in. Whether for good or ill, one never can tell, but the best comedy can change the world."

(Jay, Semi-professional comedian, via email correspondence, 08/03/2014)

The cultures of stand-up comedy

Comedy is multifaceted, existing in a variety of forms. Its origins can be traced as far back as Greek times - with the plays of Aristophanes and Euripides, as well as the analysis offered by Aristotle, often cited as part of this formation (Mintz, 1985). The late nineteenth and early twentieth century saw comedy, as an artistic genre rather than as a social expression, move from existing solely within the pages of literary works towards new aesthetic dimensions - primarily comic strips, cinema and variety show theatre performance - the latter of which arguably marks the start of stand-up comedy (Mintz, 1996).

Oliver Double (1991) has written extensively about the history of stand-up comedy in the UK. He explains that it developed from comic songs within music halls during the late 1800s and moved with the halls as they became variety performance venues around the time of the Second World War. Double contextualises the music halls, explaining that they were highly conservative in their style and staunchly patriotic. As such popular topics for

jokes were race, gender and sexuality with many 'blue' and 'minstrel' based jokes being used - a theme also common within the Vaudeville comedy of the USA and Canada at the time (Mintz, 1996).

Working men's clubs also hosted stand-up comedy through the twentieth century, contributing to the styles of stand-up seen within contemporary comedy. Although race sexuality and gender remained popular joke topics within the clubs, the material became more subtle, with jokes about the dominance of female family members and suggesting that 'other' (non-white) races were more stupid, rather than the blunt stereotypes common in earlier joke formations (Double, 1991). The working men's clubs also notably added elements of class to their comedy, including how they dressed and the ways that jokes were told - slower and with more displayed attitude (ibid).

Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s there was a backlash against what was deemed aggressive styles of humour portrayed by comedians (Friedman, 2011). This manifested itself in a new form of comedy, branded 'alternative'; that was non-political, non-racist and non-sexist (Peters, 2013). Peters, arguably a pioneer of this movement, charts its rise, stating that a number of factors facilitated it, notably the punk music of the 1970s and the new alternative television broadcaster, Channel 4 which first aired in 1982.

The main difference between alternative comedy and its more traditional counterpart is that performers claim a sense of ownership over their material, choosing to write their own, rather than regurgitate already known jokes (Double, 1991). Writing material gives space for the incorporation of new styles and the addition of more erudite aspects to comic performances, redefining the genre as somewhere between entertainment and art (Roberts, 2000).

A geographical approach to comedy

Mintz (1985) argues that humour, and particularly stand-up comedy should be seen as a highly transparent window into the cultural values and norms of societies, and that those with an interest in culture should take seriously the voices and actions of comedians. This argument has seemed to resound with segments of the academic community who have produced a body of work relating to a number of different aspects of comedy and humour, as well as laughter more generally.

This project looks to add geographical elements to this body of work through better understanding of the spaces surrounding comedy as an art form, focussing particularly on its production. There have been many advocates of arts based research within geography and a variety of different styles of art have been approached, often used to analyse wider social and cultural phenomena. Little attention has however been paid to the spatial factors surrounding the actual production of artistic products, possibly with the exception of dance (see Nash, 2000; McCormack, 2003; Thrift, 1997).

In this respect comedy, similar to other performance arts, can prove interesting because it is both (re)produced and received in the same moment. Unlike most other art forms however, the comedy audience themselves, through laughter, become one with the performance. This has the ability to change the structure, sound and feel of a performance, adding or detracting from its preconceived aesthetic form and thus blurring the boundaries between producer and consumer. This connection between producer and consumer or audience and comedian echoes connotations within recent work within geography on affectual atmospheres and assemblages. As such I would argue that geographic theory can help us to better understand the performances and the spaces of

comedy. It must also be said however, that engaging with the art of comedy can also provide new insights into how geographers theorise art, culture and different spaces.

Aims and objectives

This project provides a substantive geographic engagement with comedy as an art form, using two distinct aims - each of which will be achieved through associated objectives:

Aim 1. To examine the places surrounding the production of comedy

Objective 1. To understand how the 'field of comedy' fits into wider geographical contexts

Objective 2. Examine the interaction between place and the experiences of comedy

Aim 2. To understand how performing comedy can affect bodies

Objective 3. Determine whether comedy changes the body of producer and consumers

Objective 4. Examine whether comedy can 'align' bodies into spatially bound collectives

Objective 5. Understand the power relationships within comedy spaces and the implications these have on the performance

Structure

In order to create a theoretical framework for addressing these aims a literature review is set out in the next section covering a wide range of both geographical and sociological material. It discusses three main theoretical ideas: the production of culture, as set out by Bourdieu (1993a; 1996); performance and experience, following Butler (1990a; 1993; 1997); and elements of Deleuzian theory, notably that of affect and assemblages as well as examining the notion of place.[1]

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[1] It should be noted that combining these aspects within a single project is a highly ambitious task, and not one that I have necessarily achieved here. I do however feel that it is important to maintain the theoretical conversation between these different strands of thought so that the empirics of this project may be further used in the combination of these clearly linked theoretical projects.

The third section addresses the methodology of the project, discussing the two primary methods used, but also issues surrounding positionality and ethics. Following this, the analysis offers a holistic account of the production of stand-up comedy, looking at different processes, actors and scales, as well as examining both structure/agency and issues of power. This is followed by a discussion where the key themes are drawn together with the theory, arguing two main points – that place matters and that in order to understand stand-up comedy fully, we need to look at its affective nature. Finally conclusions are given including a summary of the project and scope for further research.

Literature Review

'Since, according to Gramsci, the status quo is upheld by the mere functioning of everyday life, where the ruling values take on a "natural" quality, the comedy club is the perfect venue for siphoning new ideas into society's "common sense"'

(Amarasingam, 2010, p. 470)

Humour into Culture

Many theories of comedy exist, however the predominant three are: superiority theory, incongruity theory and relief theory (Double, 1991). Superiority theory states that laughter is caused through highlighting the deficits of others, in often hostile manners; incongruity theory states that we laugh at unexpected clashes of words or ideas; and relief theory states that laughter is caused by the sudden release of emotional tension.

Critchley (2002) argues that humour is culturally universal although this idea has been highly contested, with Friedman (2009), in discussing British stand-up comedy, emphasising the importance of cultural context. Macpherson (2008) also challenges this theorisation of humour as culturally universal critiquing what she sees as a limited academic engagement, centred on the idea that humour and the laughter associated with it are primal or hedonistic (Berger, 1997). Through participating in a visually impaired walking group, she offers a geographical analysis of humour and laughter that draws upon the multiple factors that contextualise humourous exchanges and thus positioning them

as a means of challenging pre-existing notions of both bodies and space (Macpherson, 2008).

Macpherson also argues that humour blurs boundaries between subject and object noting that it can act as a coping strategy or a means of reasserting control over bodies at times where submissiveness is necessary. Sanders (2004), in talking about sex workers, also draws on this idea, making connections between humour, laughter and emotion. Her paper focuses on the use of 'humour' as a whole but specifically outlines six different types of humour used within the sex-workplace - reiterating its multifarious nature. Her primary argument however, is that the use of humour acts as a means of emotionally distancing sex workers from their work. It becomes part of performing 'the prostitute'.

Sanders (2004) identifies that humour within sex work also acts as a means of constructing and maintaining identities, a theme common within the literature. Albrecht (1999) for instance explains how people with disabilities often use humour as a means of redefining their experiences, but also highlights more nuanced uses of humour, as a way to sort people into groups and create hierarchies (see also Delph-Janurik, 2001 who whilst researching disability groups encounters jokes where he is clearly the target). In these situations, humour can reveal the assumed norms within certain groups and can serve to demarcate who is in and out of place (Cresswell, 2001).

Humour can also play a much more active role in the formation of identities, with Kehily and Nayak (1997), whilst discussing the social exchanges by pupils in schools, identifying a number of different mechanisms through which humour is used to construct identities. These include creating humourous imagery through telling stories as well as during ritualised insulting matches. Notions of difference are important to this imagery with this

often being based around gender or sexuality in schools - although in Billig's (2001) study of Ku Klux Klan humour, the differential is obviously mostly race or ethnicity.

In analysing these humourous exchanges, notions of power come to the forefront. Joking becomes a 'social contract' (Walker & Goodson, 1977 cited in Kehily & Nayak, 1997) where those with the most power tend to be the tellers of most jokes, and these jokes mark a disciplining power which can train bodies to act in certain ways and conform to sets of identities. Drawing on Freud's theorisation, that jokes are a way of saying the unsayable or tabood, a standpoint for the normalisation of the language and ideas startes to emerge, where the get out clause of 'I was only joking' allows for redemption if the audience of that particular action deem it to be wrong. As such there is potentially a space provided in society that allows people to be 'othered' without a negative backlash against this oppression (Billig, 2001).

The rise of alternative comedy in the 1980s provided a new medium for humour within society (Roberts, 2000). These alternative comics produced more artistic and politically radical routines that utilised the power of the comedian's position, to promote their beliefs about the world (Colletta, 2009; Double, 1991). Early alternative comedy routines were often aimed at political figures and ideologies, with Thatcherite politics being a popular topic of comedy throughout the 1980s (Peters, 2013) and later figures such a George W. Bush and Al Gore becoming the focus many jokes (Young, 2004). As with any discussion of the influence of art, there is little evidence to support any direct cause and effect relationship between the actions of comedians and the wider political structure; however Young (ibid) suggests that comedic performances play a vital role in the creation of public political knowledge.

This knowledge creation process is difficult to unpick. Colletta (2009) draws on postmodern theory to explain that comedians often convey their messages through ironic displays of the nonsensical nature of everyday circumstances – such as the stupidity of watching television. This means that comedy becomes even more layered in its meaning. Amarasingam (2010) discusses how Muslim comedians, post 9/11, have used this sense of irony to defend their culture from wider prejudices, often by mocking it. This ironic mocking is intended to add a sense of depth to an audience's understanding of Muslim cultures. Subtle messages such as the taking off and putting on of a headscarf can provoke many different feelings within an audience, changing their attitudes in much the same way as a painting or performance art piece may also.

'Alternative comedy' has also served to legitimate comedy as a cultural practice that is more than just a 'lowbrow art *par excellence'* (Friedman, 2011, p. 347)*.* This has marked a change in the means through which comedy is produced (Friedman, 2009) but also arguably within the spaces in which it is produced. Friedman has provided the most detailed assessment surrounding the cultural production of comedy, drawing extensively on the work of Pierre Bourdieu and as such Bourdieu's work is discussed in depth within the next section.

Producing comedy cultures

Pierre Bourdieu and the production of culture

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's work has had huge influence within geography and the social sciences as a whole (Cresswell, 2002). Bourdieu produced a wide variety of empirical work looking at higher education, mass media, cultural industries and the nature of elites in society (Lane, 2000). He aimed to bring together many dichotomies within sociological

thinking during the twentieth century such as structure and agency; object and subject; and theory and practice - which he regarded as explicitly linked (ibid).

From this wide empirical base he formed a theory about the production of culture, spread across a number of different works, notably *The Field of Cultural Production* (Bourdieu, 1993a) and *The Rules of Art* (1996) - the latter providing the more consolidated version of this theory (Hesmondhalgh, 2006). Although able to be applied to many different forms of culture (as has been done in many cases), Bourdieu's main focus was on the 'primarily expressive-aesthetic' fields of art and literature (ibid p. 212).

Bourdieu (1993b, p. 96) himself notes difficulties with sociological engagements with the production of art; a field where the sociologist is viewed with suspicion, seen as wanting to remove the artist from the history of art itself. He accepts this criticism although adds his own critique of previous sociological engagements with art, namely those attending solely to consumption practices, which he argues reifies creators of art as autonomous beings, existing outside the social spaces that 'other people' reside in (see also Hesmonhalgh, 2006).

This critique leads Bourdieu (1993b) to ask a question that is common within his work - *who created the creator*? He sees the traditional sociological view of the production of culture as ignoring the many other aspects that lead to the 'creation' of art (Hesmondhalgh, 2006). Hesmondhalgh expands this point, explaining that this does not simply mean interpreting the wider social context through which the art comes into being - as in Marxist analyses; or examining the wider networks of agents, through an interactionist view point - such as Becker's model; but instead through combining these aspects into a wide sociological view of culture based around three concepts - Capital, The Field and Habitus.

Capital and Field-theory

Bourdieu, being highly influenced by Marx and Webber, formulated theories of social stratification based on systems of capital (Johnson, 1993). His work differs from Marx's however, in the sense that he does not place a primacy on the economic; accepting that there are many different forms of capital, all relating to different forms of power and their associated relationships (Bourdieu, 2002). Four of the forms of capital outlined by Bourdieu are;

1. *Economic Capital* - presenting itself as 'immediately and directly convertible into money... [often] institutionalized in the form of property rights' (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 281).

2. *Cultural Capital* - presenting in three forms; in an embodied state as dispositions of both mind and body; in objectified states as cultural goods; and in institutionalised states through education qualification. Cultural capital can be converted into economic capital within certain fields (ibid).

3. *Social Capital* is a collection of resources (actual or potential) formed through membership of social groups. It exists in the form of connections, based on practical, material or symbolic relationships that can be used as sources of power within social, economic or cultural space (ibid).

4. *Symbolic Capital* is seen as forms of capital that can be exchanged for symbolic profit (honour or prestige). This can increase a person's position within the hierarchies of power that relate to other forms of capital (Thompson, 1991).

The diagram shows a large box labelled "social space (national)". Within it contains:

Top left dashed box: CSs+ *Consecrated avant-garde*

Left margin box: CE− CC+

Right margin box: CE+ CC−

Top right: CE+CC+ ⊕

Center: *subfield of* **field of cultural production** | *subfield of*

Right side: **field of power**

AUTON+ CE− CSs+

AUTON− CE+ CSs−

small-scale production | *large-scale production*

(art for art's sake) |

avant-garde bohemia CSs− | *vaudeville, serial, journalism*

non-professional cultural producers

CE−CC− ⊖

Key
─── Social space   CE   Capital – economic
─── Field of power   CC   Capital – cultural
----- Field of cultural production]   CSs Capital – symbolic, specific
─ ─ ─ Subfield of small-scale production AUTON+ High degree of autonomy
                                          AUTON− Low degree of autonomy

Figure 1: The field of cultural production in the field of power and social space (after Bourdieu, 1996)

These different forms of capital led Bourdieu to question the traditional Marxist understanding of structure. As such he developed 'field theory' (Anheier, et al., 1995), positioning culture into 'partially independent areas of social activity, which are structured according to a relational set of struggles that take place over currencies or resources particular to that field' (Svasek, 2007, p. 96). In other words culture can be separated into many different structures based on the predominant type of capital

**Field of Cultural Production
(UK Comedy 1843-1979)**

Intellectual Consecration

Popular Consecration

Restricted Sub-Field

Large-Scale Sub-Field

Autonomy/
'Intellectual'
Audience / High
Cultural Capital/
Low Economic
Capital

Wit/Satire

Physical
Comedy

Market/ 'Mass
Audience'/ High
Economic Capital

Obscene Comedy

'Trad'Comedy

Low Consecration/ No
Audience

Low Consecration/
Mass Audience

**Field of Cultural Production
(UK Comedy 1980-present)**

Intellectual Consecration

Popular Consecration

Autonomy/
'Intellectual'
Audience / High
Cultural Capital

**Restricted Sub-Field
(alternative comedy)**

Large-Scale Sub-Field

Heteronomy/ Market/
'Mass Audience'/
High Economic
Capital

Symbolic profit/
Comedy as art/
Critically
acclaimed/
Rejection of gag
joke form/
Emphasis on
originality and
innovation/
Frequent mixing of
genres

Wit/Intellectual
comedy

Political
Comedy/Satire

Physical
Comedy

Economic profit/
Comedy as
entertainment/
Critically condemned/
Formulaic joke
structure/
Emphasis on repetition
and simplicity/
Rooted in everyday
life/
Unsophisticated and
stereotyped characters

Critical Observational Comedy

Surreal/Absurdist Comedy

Obscene Comedy

'Trad'Comedy

Low Consecration/ No Audience

Low Consecration/ Mass Audience

Figure 2: Changing Field of Cultural Production (UK comedy) (after Friedman, 2009)

utilised by different actors. These structures are never fully independent however, and sit as part of larger structures or fields of culture, society and power.

To demonstrate this notion of interconnecting fields, Bourdieu (1996) uses a diagram, which can be seen in figure 1. He illustrates how the wider field of power is constituted by high levels of economic capital but low levels of cultural capital and the field of cultural

production is an inversion of this. Hesmondhalgh (2006) explains that this type of theorisation is common within Bourdieu's work - in *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984) he argues that the dominated classes aim to acquire cultural capital, in order to exchange it later on, for social or economic capital and as such a stronger position within the field of power as a whole.

Friedman (2009) critiques Bourdieu's conceptions of fields, stating that the idea remains too rigid to deal with changes that occur between fields, such as the one that occurred within the field of comedy following the emergence of alternative comedy. He uses similar diagrams to Bourdieu (figure 2) in order to demonstrate how the field has changed and argues that there are alternatives to field theory that help to better explain the relative social positioning of culturally producing actors – notably Social Network Analysis. These alternative theories will be attended to in more detail further on.

Autonomy of the field

Hesmondhalgh (2006) highlights the significance of autonomy within fields of cultural production, a position echoed by Maton (2005) who calls it the 'keystone' of the whole theory. Unlike Proust who stresses that autonomy is a necessary aspect of producing literature Bourdieu argues that 'the autonomy of art and literature is not a transcendent and universal condition, but was actively produced in the 19th century' (Hesmondhalgh, 2006, p. 214). A field's autonomy can be seen through the way that it constructs its values and markers for success which is influenced by all forms of capital within the field, creating unique states of autonomy in each field (Maton, 2005).

Maton (2005) also looks to further Bourdieu's theorisations of autonomy through dividing the concept into two sub-sections – positional autonomy and relational autonomy. He defines *positional autonomy* as

'...the nature of relations between specific positions in the social dimension of a context or field and positions in other contexts.' (p. 697).

In other words actors who hold positions within two different fields (education and politics for example) weaken the autonomy of both fields compared to actors who are located solely in the single field, who strengthen its autonomy. *Relational autonomy*

'...refers to relations between the principles of relation (or ways of working, practices, aims, measures of achievement, etc.) within a context or field and those emanating from other contexts.' (p. 697).

This means that if a field's measures of achievement are based on indicators such as economic gain, rather than an internally devised mechanism of hierarchy, then the field is relatively weaker than if these aspects were contained within the field itself.

Another aspect which challenges the notion of autonomy within fields stems from the point where production meets consumption. Here Bourdieu describes the workers that sit at the connecting point of these two aspects as cultural intermediaries (Wright, 2005), described as non-professional cultural producers within figure 1 and featuring within the field of stand-up comedy in the form of agents, television producers, promoters and comedy critics. The inclusion of these cultural intermediaries into the field of cultural production could be seen to reduce the positional autonomy of the field but also because they exist in other fields where definitions of success are different, they may also reduce the relational autonomy of a field (Maton, 2005).

Negus (2002) looks to challenge Bourdieu's relatively straightforward conception of cultural intermediaries through looking at the practices intermediaries themselves and how these interplay with the fields of cultural production and power simultaneously. He

notes that cultural intermediaries, rather than bridging the gap between production and consumption, can in many ways seek to reinforce this divide. Once again the static nature of Bourdieu's field theory can be challenged here in favour of something that is more dynamic.

Thus far the discussions surrounding cultural production have focused on the structural elements that seek to constrain and position actors within the cultural production process. This however only attends to half of the Bourdieu's theorisation with the other half being interested in the agency of these actors. As such the next section will attend to the habitus or dispositions of these actors in order to understand the actual performances that go into producing both culture and comedy. This theorisation will draw on a number of literatures but is grounded within phenomenological work which seeks to understand the body as a whole rather than in terms of its constituent parts (Saldanha, 2002).

Performing the production of culture

Habitus: between objectivity and subjectivity

In trying to understand the individual agency of actors within the field, Bourdieu develops a means of bringing together the objective/subjective and structure/agency dichotomies (Roodenburg, 2004), looking to phenomenology and particularly Mearleau-Ponty to develop a more embodied theoretical aspect to both cultural production and consumption. He thus developed the term habitus, arguably the most influential of his concepts within human geography (Cresswell, 2002). For Bourdieu habitus bridges the gap between the objective and subjective and he argues that it captures both aspects within it (Bourdieu, 1988 in King, 2000).

Habitus is the internalised and embodied materialisation of a person's social, economic and cultural capital (Holt, 2008), a 'system of bodily dispositions' (Noble & Watkins, 2003,

p. 520) which 'generate and organise practices and representations' (p. 522). These dispositions reflect the nature of the fields that agents reside in, giving them a 'practical sense' based on collective experiences (Lane, 2000, pp. 24-5). In other words agents gain, what Bohman (1999 cited in Bridge, 2001, p. 207) calls 'a feel for the game,' where practice becomes governed by a logic that is learned through practice itself, without needing to be reflected upon. Habitus thus reflects the 'field of objective possibilities' (Lane, 2000, p. 25), constraining the statistical possibility of action without restricting it completely - meaning both habitus and the field are constitutive of identity rather than regulative of it (Bridge, 2001) which is key in thinking through why certain identities (white, male, heterosexual etc.) may be more prevalent than others within the field of stand-up comedy.

One aspect in which habitus plays a key role is through discussions of taste. Bourdieu (1984) argues that aesthetic taste is based on the class positioning of people and that this is passed down through generations. Arguably taste is therefore a form of cultural hegemony which is related not only to social and economic capital but also to the embodiment of cultural capital, leading to the abjection of cultural tastes of other classes (ibid). This has an important impacts on the field of cultural production itself as it means that both the economic capital and social status (symbolic capital) of consumers influences the types of culture that are consumed, and thus those that are produced for this consumption (Lane, 2000). Bourdieu (1984) separates society into dominant and dominated classes, with each section having distinct cultural tastes. Chan and Goldthorpe (2007, p. 188) however argue that because of the selective cultural consumption of the visual (including performative) arts, this should be more accurately be viewed as a distinction between 'one section of the dominant class and everyone else'.

Both Kupiers (2006) and Friedman (2011) draw heavily on Bourdieu to discuss tastes in comedy. Kupiers (2006) looks at Dutch television comedy, explaining that the style of comedy that is preferred is increasing becoming a marker of class and educational levels. Friedman finds a similar situation in the UK but expands this idea to demonstrate that these tastes are becoming increasingly embodied by people themselves. The consumption of comedy is becoming a performance in itself, whereby the way that consumption occurs is just as important as what comedy is consumed (ibid). These performances allow for distinctions in social status to be made through consumption of a range of comedic styles. This again challenges Bourdieu's relatively static depiction of subfields by providing a new means of legitimising art forms that may have otherwise received relatively little potential for legitimisation, thus adding fluidity and non-fixidity to social relations within fields.

Holt (2008) notes that habitus aligns well with some aspects of performativity, particularly those of Butler (1990, 2011) which have been widely utilised in geographical thought. Furthermore the habitus of both consumers and producers is in part formed through repeat performances (Manderson & Turner, 2006) which can be seen within the performative aspects of comedy consumption described above, whereby certain art forms can take on new meaning through the way that their consumption is performed.

Performativity

The notion of performativity is used widely within postmodern feminist geography and queer theory (McNay, 1999). Due to the gendered nature of much of the literature surrounding performativity, existing collaborations between performativity and habitus often involve a dissection of Bourdieu's work on gender, moving away from discussions of the aesthetic-expressive cultures (Hesmondhalgh, 2006).

Although Bourdieu's work is often critiqued for his 'lack of explicit attention to gender' it is praised for providing a means through which multiplicities of difference (gender, race and sexuality) can be understood together (Rooke, 2007). One of the main advantages that habitus has over more Foucauldian perspectives, including performativity is that it remains dynamic, thinking through the materialities of the body and avoiding the determinism/voluntarism dichotomy (McNay, 1999). Avoiding this dichotomy in favour of dynamism is central to feminist understandings of the embodiment of gendered identities (ibid).

The view of Bourdieu's work as preferable in terms of its dynamism is contested however. Manderson and Turner (2006), while accepting the merits of habitus as an embodiment of social capital, claim that it does not fully unpick the transformative nature of either identity or social positioning. They instead turn to Butler, who offers an interpretation of Foucault based on iteration or repetitive action. It is this iteration that, they argue, gives habitus its ability to reproduce itself and allows for changes over time in class and social norms.

Butler also rejects both the idea that identities are essential and can be read off bodies and that the meanings of bodies are completely socially constructed (Hubbard, et al., 2002). Instead she draws on a number of different theorists and theories including psychoanalytical theory, Foucault, Derrida and Austin, in order to posit that identities are both constituted and regulated through performance (Sparke, 1996). Butler's performativity thesis, in its entirety, is laid out predominantly in three works - *Gender Trouble* (1990a), *Bodies that Matter* (1993), and *Excitable Speech* (1997) – which build on each other in response to various critiques.

Gender Trouble sets out the notion of identity as both performance and performative (Butler, 1990a). Starting by outlining the distinction between the categories of biological sex and gender noting that 'gender' is a cultural construction she then - drawing on the works of Simone de Beauvoir and Lucy Irigaray – unpicks this concept further, arguing that biological sex is meaningless without a gender attachment that symbolically signifies it and as such rather than seeing sex as 'natural' or 'biological', it should be seen as a construct in itself (Hubbard, et al., 2002). This argument then states that performances traditionally thought of as expressions of gender are, in fact, constitutive of it in turn meaning that gender identities are unstable and capable of being renegotiated through subversive performances (Butler, 1990a).

This notion of unstable identities is particularly useful in thinking through comedic cultural production. As noted above, some theories of comedy rely on revealing unexpected ideas (Double, 1991). As such these challenges to assumed identity can be seen in themselves as comedic and are often used by comedians to create laughter (Gilbert, 1997). This can be seen in traditional senses through notions surrounding the grotesque nature of bodies within comic postcards during the early 20th century, also creating links with Bakhtin's carnivalesque (Shields, 1990), which is discussed later.

Bourdieu argues therefore that biological sex and the gender normality associated with it can be seen as a form of symbolic capital which then informs the habitus (ingrained performances) of the sexed/gendered body (Skeggs, 2004). In order to understand the influence of symbolic capital on the habitus, however, it is important to include another of Bourdieu's concepts – symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991). Symbolic violence in basic terms is the condition of using ones symbolic power to change the habitus of another who holds less symbolic capital. The collective regulation of 'normal' gender performances can

be seen in this way, whereby the gendered habitus (and feel for the game) are conditioned through the actions of those with established, symbolically endowed, gendered habituses (McNay, 1999; McRobbie, 2004).

The process through which this symbolic violence occurs is clarified by Butler (1993; 1997) in *Bodies that Matter* and *Excitable Speech* where she draws on Austin's (1962) notions of discursive performativity. Butler (1993) argues that language become the main application of power, both in the form of the performance of language and in the performativity of certain phrases. It is these performative utterances ('I Christen this ship...'; 'it's a girl!'), that form the basis for constructing the performances that then informs the identities of subjects (Lawler, 2008).

One of the other intentions of *Gender Trouble* is to create a space for the discussion of 'alternate' gendered identities within feminist theory (Butler, 1999). Butler explains that:

> *'I sought to counter those views that made presumptions about the limits and propriety of gender and restricted the meaning of gender to received notions of masculinity and femininity. It was and remains my view that any feminist theory that restricts the meaning of gender in the presuppositions of its own practice sets up exclusionary gender norms within feminism, often with homophobic consequences' (1999, pp. vii-viii)*

This political intention could be seen as a means of opening up an understanding of the way that sexuality impacts both the habitus itself, using a less structured, more postmodern analysis of the workings of symbolic violence on different bodies. In order to unpick this further it is necessary to understand how feminist theory has engaged with Bourdieu's work. Skeggs (2004), citing McNay and Fowler, argues that gender should not

Figure 3: A 1950s comic postcard (Image from zazzle.co.uk, 2014)

be thought of as a separate field but instead as the outcome of symbolic violence within the wider cultural field that seeks to reassert the power of men in that field.

Perceiving bodies

These discussions surrounding capital, habitus and the field are thus useful in a number of ways, however arguably lack in explaining how they can affect bodies (Saldanha, 2002). In discussing rave music in Goa, Saldahna addresses these issues through explaining that in part, the habitus is driven by an embodied reception of the music, that allows a perceiving subject to arrange themselves in relation to it. Key to this is that the subject relates through means that are more than just listening, whereby it becomes impossible to isolate different sensory inputs from one another. In unpicking this Saldahna turns to

the work Merleau-Ponty which he argues 'enables us to think the whole moving body' (2002, p. 56).

This idea of thinking through the whole body is important when discussing comedy, as both the production and consumption of comedy involves the whole body, including multiple sensory and emotional interactions. As such when thinking through the habitus of the comedy producer, it is important to recognise that these dispositions are experienced as part of a perceiving body that extends past notions of consciousness in the Cartesian sense (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). As such the body can be viewed as part of a process, interacting with many different bodies (both human and non-human) (McCormack, 2008) through complex systems of perception.

This argument has been furthered more recently through discussions surrounding how geographic knowledge is produced. This has partially emerged in the form of non-representational theory (NRT), a concept that has been pioneered by geographers Nigel Thrift, Derek McCormack and John-David Dewsbury and further discussed by many others (see Dewsbury, 2003; McCormack, 2003; Thrift & Dewsbury, 2000).

NRT emerges out of the idea that current means of representation are inadequate (Dewsbury, 2003) and was intended to expand what was deemed a relatively small section of human experience that was being engaged with by geographers (Anderson & Harrison, 2010). The main challenge laid out by NRT therefore, was for geographers to go beyond what can be known and understood, instead working with what is experienced and performed 'without contemplation' (Dewsbury, 2003). This has subsequently been taken in multiple directions and now acts more as an umbrella term for engagement with the 'more-than-human, more-than-textual, multisensual worlds' and as such is often also known as 'more-than-representational' work (Lorimer, 2005).

One aspect of this more-than-representational work has been a re-engagement with the way that the senses contribute to embodied experiences of space, also partially stemming from a feminist critique of the prevalence of visual analysis within geography (Rose, 2003). Rose argues that visuals are highly disciplinary and often used to display certain elements of 'truth' which ignore the constructed nature of visual experience itself. Similarly Macpherson (2005) talks of the discourses that occulacentricism has within the study of landscapes and its specific roles in the creation of geographic 'knowledge'. This draws back to the discussions of dance laid out by Saldahna (2002) whereby he talks of the dancing bodies in Goa as being connected through their sensory engagement with the music, but also stratified through a visual engagement with one other.

The other area of perception that NRT has engaged with in a more detailed manner has been the experience of emotion (Davidson & Milligan, 2004). Although this emotional engagement stems from multiple theoretical positions, such as humanism and feminism (Bondi, 2005), NRT has provided a critique whereby it is concerned with the over representation of the extreme and 'othered' (Pile, 2010) that create only highly 'poignant and powerful' accounts of emotional experience (Davidson, et al., 2005, p. 3). As such advocates of NRT tend to favour *affect* as the means of addressing issues surrounding emotional experience, questioning the authenticity of the extreme encounter and the ability of people to understand their own subjectivity (Anderson & Harrison, 2010; McCormack, 2006; Pile, 2010).

Affect itself is not new and like emotional geographies is based around a number of different theoretical positions, notably, psychotherapy, phenomenology, (Bondi, 2005), actor network theory, the work of de Certeau and Foucault (Nash, 2000) as well as being highly influenced by the work of Spinoza and Deleuze and Guattari (Thrift, 2004).

Anderson (2009) identifies the difficulty of defining affect, stating that definitions are often contested. He does however offer a definition of affect as 'a transpersonal capacity which a body has to be affected (through an affection) and to affect (as a result of modification)' (Anderson, 2006, p. 735). This notion of capacity is common (see Lorimer, 2008, p. 2; Duff, 2010, pp. 881-882), directly reflecting the definition offered by Spinoza (Buchanan, 1997).

Thrift's (2004, p. 64) definition is more political stating that affect is a 'sense of push' and that it is capable of being politically manipulated in order to increase the likelyhood that certain outcomes will occur. He also argues that 'the flow of practice in everyday life is embodied... caught up with and committed to the creation of affect' (Thrift & Dewsbury, 2000, p. 415). This means that emotions are seen by affectual geographers as performative, or as behavioural representations of affects, rather than as entities in themselves (Thrift, 2004).

Although not without its critiques (see Curti, et al., 2011; Thien, 2005; Tolia-Kelly, 2006) this sense of affect has become increasingly popular within geographical thought. This is due to its ability to be enable the creation of relationships between bodies which allow them to be seen as part of a wider process of interaction. In turn this allows for conceptualisation of much more complex relationships, such as the relationships between habitus and the field as well as creating an understanding of interactions between different aspects of perception, such as emotions and bodily actions, including laughter.

Making connections

Assemblages

I noted before that Friedman (2009) critiques Bourdieu's conceptions of fields as being too static to deal with the changing structures surrounding the legitimisation of comedy

(as well as art more generally). Instead he posits the use of Social Network Analysis (SNA) which he argues 'offers a more sophisticated approach for understanding how significant 'moments' of change occur in cultural fields' (Friedman, 2009, p. 17). This notion of network analysis is becoming increasingly popular within social sciences however, and within human geography is seen as an effective means of engaging with non-Euclidean spatial thinking (Dewsbury, 2011).

One form of this network based thinking that has gained particular prominence in human geography is that of assemblages (Anderson, et al., 2012) which stems from Deleuzian thinking and thus has strong ties with the concept of affect (Dewsbury, 2011). Essentially, Deleuze sees an assemblage as a means of co-constructing knowledge within heterogeneous populations (DeLanda, 2006) whereby connections are made between different systems (or actors) to create a new 'collective body' (Kaufman, 1998; Bissell, 2010).

It is possible to picture Bourdieu's connections between the habitus and the field through understanding this in terms of assemblages, whereby individual (heterogeneous) habituses interact and combine to form the collective knowledge of the field and as such the field is maintained by a collective of individual agencies. Clearly there are issues here however, and indeed those that have tried to tie assemblages and structure together have been criticised for this style of thinking. Instead, many advocates of assemblage theory look to it in order to undermine notions of structure, instead questioning the relationships that bring together people together into what may be seen as a structure (Marcus & Saka, 2006).

Deleuze and Guattari see bodies as non-fixed entities, only definable by what they can do and their position within these larger assemblages (Markula, 2006). They state that

'We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what

its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects,

with the affects of another body, either to destroy that body or to be destroyed by

it, either to exchange actions with it or to join with it in composing a more powerful

body' (Deleuze and Guarttari, 1987: 257 in Buchanan, 1997: 74)

Thus the notion of structure in the simple form stated above is challenged through an understanding of bodies in terms of their affects. This quote from Deleuze and Guattari also demonstrates that this notion of the affectual capacity of bodies should not be seen as a flat ontology of power (Tolia-Kelly, 2006) but instead should be considered in terms of the relative power that bodies have over each other (Buchanan, 1997). This is not to say that each body has a stable affectual capacity however with Olkowski (2000) noting that each body has multiple trajectories and capacities that exist simultaneously to each other, based on the different assemblages in which that body exists. As such the notion of habitus could be seen as an affectual outcome of these assemblages, unfixed and thus highly dynamic. In viewing habitus in this manner, the field as an assemblage too becomes non-fixed and dynamic, able to change as different sets of assembled habitus emerge and are destroyed – reaffirming Friedman's (2009) critique.

Also key in understanding Bourdieu's theory of cultural production is that his theorisation is based around human connections only. More recently, when discussing the production of culture, albeit usually from a cultural industries perspective, there has been a call for a spatialised production of culture perspective (Pratt, 2004) and a need to 'recover the material conditions, production sites and place boundedness' of cultural production (Sassen, 2000, p. 169). Here again assemblages can prove useful in understanding the bodies engagement with the world on multiple levels. Specifically through engaging with

the notions of atmosphere and ambience, it is possible to understand how bodies and habituses interplay with their surroundings.

Ambience and atmosphere

Atmosphere, as a term in geography, was arguably pioneered by McCormack (2008), but is highly linked to affective fields, as described by Conradson and Latham (2007). In his paper, McCormack (2008) looks to connect physical and cultural aspects of space, through understanding the interactions between both human and non-human bodies and how they create affective patterns. Anderson (2009) furthers this idea, viewing atmospheres as simultaneously affective and emotive, and thus blurring the boundaries between these concepts.

Work on atmospheres can be difficult to describe because of the contrasting definitions of affect. McCormack (2008, p. 413) expresses them as 'something distributed yet palpable, a quality of environmental immersion that registers in and through sensing bodies while also remaining diffuse, in the air, ethereal' and Duff (2010, pp. 881-2) adds that they 'capture the emotional feel of a place, as well as the store of action-potential, the dispositions and agencies potentially enactable in that place'. Atmospheres are seen to be created through interactions between bodies that in turn envelop them (Anderson, 2009). These atmospheres can therefore be seen as produced by bodies, but never entirely reducible to these bodies (ibid).

Here notions of assemblage are drawn into this work. Bissell (2010), through looking at the atmospheres of busy trains, deals with this notion through seeing the train carriage as a 'mobile collective' (p. 270) which both materialises through and produces atmospheres, aligning people into formations. As such atmospheres can create a sense of belonging or not belonging, aided by the physical and cultural materialities of space.

Furthermore Bissell notes that public transport offers a set of simultaneous experiences within a small space, to people who often don't know one another, which Fujji (1999) terms intimate-alienation. Communication between the bodies is often therefore held in tension, with the level of acquaintance between bodies mediating the communication that occurs. This, Bissell (2010) argues, leads to a decline in verbal communication and stresses the importance of other forms of communication.

When thinking about comedy in this way laughter could be seen as one of these alternate forms of communication - in a similar manner to Watkins' (2011) theorisation of tears. This creates a theoretical base to position comedy as affective and capable of creating collectives within spaces. When coupled with Amarasingam's (2010) view that comedy can provide a space for changing social and political views, this provides an interesting approach to understanding comedy as an art form, which includes both its material and cultural positioning.

This issue is however complicated through recognition that atmospheres are only capable of being experienced through the perceptions of human bodies (Bissell, 2010). Drawing on the work of Dufrenne (1973), Anderson (2009) argues that any representation within space needs to be perceived before it can take on a meaning. This positions atmospheres as simultaneously real and not real, based on whether or not a body is currently sensing them (ibid), which can give a tendency for atmospheres to be viewed solely as a background to social activity.

This position is contested however, with Adey et al. (2013) discussing how the interactions between the material aspects of space and human perception can have a direct influence on the perceiving body itself. They draw on a parallel theorisation of atmosphere, the notion of ambience, which stems from continental philosophy and looks to deal with a

more 'traditional' understanding of sensory engagements with the world. Their study looks at the experience of train stations in both the UK and France and particularly how the body engages with highly securitised space. It argues that perceptions of security and surveillance can both cause atmospheres/ambiences and be caused by atmospheres/ambiences. In doing this they note how these atmospheres can create feelings of being in place, but also feelings of being out of place – these feeling in turn changing the means through which the atmosphere is perceived.

As such, discussions surrounding atmospheres and ambiences have in part added more affective dimensions to the already existing concept of place (c.f Conradson, 2005; McCormack, 2008). In essence it can be seen that social practice itself creates an affective excess (Edensor, 2012) which in turn redefines space and time, converting thin spaces into thick places, imbued with affective knowledge and meaning (Duff, 2010). This atmospheric sense of place can however have a more forceful nature, directly influencing the means through which people inhabit space (Bissell, 2010). Also because of the unstable nature of the individual components of the assemblages that make up these atmosphere, this sense of place once again remains dynamic, deforming and reforming as different sets of bodies interact with each other (Anderson, 2009).

Situating experience

In the previous section there has been much discussion of place. It does however seem necessary to unpick this concept further in order to understand more fully how the human experience becomes situated. Place is seen by Agnew (1987) as having three different elements, that capture its numerous meanings; two objective – location as a geographical area; and the locale, as a setting for social relations - and one that is subjective in the form of a sense of place, based around personal feelings within a space. It is this final notion of

place, as a subjective, sense of feeling that is most akin to the discussions surrounding atmospheres and more in line with recent work in human geography.

The idea of sense of place originates from humanist approaches, particularly those of Relph (1976) and Tuan (1977; 1978) that see place as being conceived of as both individualist and shared (Hubbard, et al., 2002) and as forming the context of action as well as forming the centre of meaning to those actions (Entrikin, 1991) – once again echoing discussions above. Relph (1976) in particular looked at place in terms of globalisation and the way that this has changed how people and the places they inhabit come together.

In doing this he questioned the authenticity of some places, creating the concepts of place and placelessness, defined based on perceptions of feeling inside or outside the feel of that place (Hubbard, et al., 2002). This 'sense of belonging' marks a connection between the already discussed ideas of identity and the body, connecting these to the material (and atmospheric) spaces in which they exist.

This interconnectedness was explored thoroughly by Massey (1991; 1993; 1994; 1995; 1997), specifically through Marxist and Feminist lenses. Massey argued that power was highly important in place-making, and that power geometries, created primarily through practices of exclusion help to generate relationships that connect people to particular places (McDowell, 1999). It is within these geometries that the boundaries of places are created in both spatial and social spheres, thus dictating the sense of belonging felt by different people (Hubbard, et al., 2002). These power geometries thus serve to structure people through their engagement with the world, partially dictating their ability to perform certain identities at certain times.

There are however times where these structuring forces can be subverted, most prominently those which are deemed liminal. Emerging from work by Victor Turner on rituals, the concept of liminality is used to describe:

'...moments of discontinuity in the social fabric, in social space, and in history... [marking] liberation from the regimes of normative practices and performance codes of mundane life...' (Shields, 1990, p. 47)

In Turner's work, liminality often marks a moment of in-betweenness, usually during a transition from one stage in life to another (Shields, 1990). Turner himself notes that art can provide a sense of liminality with Mary Douglas (1991) drawing on this to discuss the rites and rituals of joking which in turn has led to theorisations of comedy as liminoid - a term used for activities that express characteristics of liminality but are not part of mandatory or traditional rites of passage (Turner, 1995). These theorisations revolve around liminal spaces where society can explore and potentially change its structures or values, subverting the old ways and proposing new ideas (Mintz, 1985), a notion that once again echoes Amarasingam's (2010) discussion of the use of humour by Muslim comedians as a means of changing social perceptions.

Moran (2013) explores the spatial aspects of liminality in particular describing how they often remain elusive, beyond the 'regular' social norms and cultural values. In looking at liminal spaces within prison visiting rooms however, she starts to question the linear nature of liminality, instead theorising a sense of static betweenness. In the prison case this is illustrated through partial transformation for both visitor and inmate on entering the visiting room that is then reversed upon leaving that space. If comedy is viewed as liminal then that would in theory position the spaces of performance as liminal also and

thus capable of transforming social ideas (Amarasingam, 2010) but also capable of maintaining these ideas in the state of betweenness.

A similar concept to liminality, where comedy has been studied in much more depth is within notions of the carnivalesque. This concept emerges from the literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin's writing on the medieval carnival and denotes a space where temporary inversions and transpositions can occur (Brown, et al., 1999). The carnivalesque, although displaying similar properties to liminal spaces in its challenging of authority and social norms as well as its ritualised nature, is often characterised more by humour, bodily excess and counter-culture as well as elements of surrealism (Shields, 1990). These aspects are also highly prevalent within writing on comedy, particularly with female comics where images of bodily excess that could be deemed grotesque have arguably become the norm (Arthurs, 1999).

Methodology

"Through my humour I would convey to fellow participants in the research the ways in which I was not putting myself above them. I offered myself up as someone who was not necessarily superior to them but, rather, someone who could be poked fun at - a sort of gesture of vulnerability"

(Macpherson, 2008, p. 1088)

Theoretical approach

Engaging with art has had several consequences as to how both space and bodies are understood in the field of geography. Schuermans, *et al*. (2012, p. 675) discuss how art has to be viewed away from 'the eyes of a detached scholar' , arguing that the spaces of art, and particularly public spaces should be viewed as having their own pedagogy, constantly being taught and learnt through cultural-political practices. Similarly McCormack (2003) and Fleming (2002), when looking at dance and performance art respectively, highlight how different ontologies of space can become uncovered through art's facilitation of loss of control and order that are often associated with western academic theorisations.

Central to McCormack's (2003) understanding is that aspects of these alternate ontologies, such as the emotional feelings that they evoke, are not always capable of being fully or accurately represented. As such he argues that the traditional methods of engaging with space, from an academic standpoint should also be challenged and that there are other ways that geographers could engage with artistic practice, beyond merely

trying to explain or represent it. He instead poses that art can be used as a methodological means of accessing these 'non-representational geographies', allowing for a deeper understanding of the multiple spatialities that exist within a single bounded location.

There have been a number of researchers who have engaged in artistic practice as a methodology, often also through dance. Markula (2006) for example looks to further understand feminist conceptions of space through the act of dancing arguing that although the audiences of her dancing may not have understood the theoretical concept, it had changed her perceptions and thus provided a worthwhile endeavour. Foster and Lorimer (2007) also reflect on their collaboration between artist and geographer noting that engaging with each other's worlds had allowed for new understandings to be generated, not only of different ways of interacting with space but also of the limitations within their individual methods.

This project has adopted a similar line of artistic enquiry, taking a broadly post-structuralist approach, in line with the theoretical positions outlined in the literature review. Post-structuralism was developed in response to structural theories that considered language to be the key force in the creation and maintenance of social structures (Hubbard, et al., 2002). Instead it looks to more fluid interpretations of language and indeed subjectivity itself, arguing that they remain only momentary representations of 'truth' (Storey, 2001). This leads to challenges against the stability of knowledge itself whereby knowledge is seen to be formed from unstable 'speech acts' thus remaining fluid and changing (Peet, 1998). As such there is a clear rejection of meta theories stemming from the argument that existing 'knowledge' is unable to explain the complexity of social worlds (Doel, 1999).

Furthermore, fluidity of language has been used with the intention of fragmenting existing notions of the interactions between art and geography, understanding that 'taken for granted' interpretations are often social constructions rather than universally established truths (Hubbard, et al., 2002). Through drawing on non-representational theory (McCormack, 2003; Thrift & Dewsbury, 2000), analysis of particular performances has been used, in order to understand elements of producing art that are incapable of being efficiently represented through language.

Research design

Originally intended to be a more structured engagement with comedy; the research design has become more akin to ethnographic work in its 'traditional' anthropological sense. This shift reflects the happenstance nature of much of my research, whereby more 'data' was being generated outside of the specific moments within my research design and I felt that adopting an ethnographic approach allowed for my whole experience to facilitate the emergence of more in-depth and nuanced data.

Watson and Till (2010, pp. 121-22) state that:

> *'Within geography, ethnography is a research strategy used to understand how people create and experience their worlds through processes such as place making, inhabiting social spaces, forging local and transitional networks, and representing and decolonizing spatial imaginaries'*

Ethnography has thus provided a means through which I, as the researcher, have been able to unpick these notions in terms of the production of comedy. Indeed ethnography could be argued to be one of the only ways to fully engage with the literature outlined in the previous section with Waquant (2004) noting that many of Bourdieu's concepts,

particularly his notion of habitus, emerge directly from engagement with ethnographic research practice. In terms of non-representational theory also, ethnography provides a meaningful way to interact with phenomena, without solely relying on language, thus providing more subtle modes of analysis, drawing directly on my own experiences as well as my engagements with the experiences of others.

Understanding ethnography as a strategy (Watson & Till, 2010) is important here, where I am making a clear distinction between ethnography, as the overall framework for the research, and the individual methods used. Within this framework I have used two primary research methods; participant observation and qualitative interviews. Alongside this the research can be categorised into three different modes which provided an insight into all aspects of the production of comedy (see figure 4).

Participating and Observing

Participant observation is arguably the easiest geographical method to implement because of our already existing knowledge of how to engage with and observe the world (Laurier, 2010). It is also most in line with ethnographic research as a whole. The method can take place in the form of either participant as observer or as observer as participant (Hoggart, et al., 2002), both of which I have utilised within this research.

- *Observer as participant:* This occurred during times when I attended comedy events with the intention of researching. The focus was more clearly on other people within the study and less attention was paid to my own performances, although I did remain aware of my own feelings and actions at this time.

- *Participant as observer*: Here the emphasis remained on *my* involvement in the production of comedy. Examples of this are doing the comedy course, attending a

meeting between comedians in Birmingham city centre, and performing comedy myself

Mode	Method	Use
Participating in producing comedy as an audience member	Participant Observation (Observer as participant)	Witnessing comedy allowed for a more distanced and 'objective' view of the production of comedy through watching comedians perform and interact with audiences. This also meant that I was able to gain an experiential understanding of what it is like to be in an audience, including issues surrounding place and atmosphere.
Participating in producing comedy as a comedian	Participant Observation (Participant as observer)	This involved attending a stand-up comedy course, writing material and performing myself. It allowed for a more embodied understanding of the processes involved in the production of comedy.
Talking to other producers of comedy	Qualitative Interviews	This allowed for a thorough exploration of a number of different people's experiences of producing comedy, also providing an insight into elements that I could not directly experience through my initial performances.
Accessing other sources	Observant Participant	Interaction with a number of different sources within my 'everyday life'. These include blogs, websites, youtube videos and television programmes, as well as conversations with friends and colleagues about my research.

Figure 4: A description of the different modes of research and how they contribute to the project

It is difficult to differentiate between these aspects however, with participation and observation both informing each other through different systems of representation, and as such Thrift (2000) calls for researchers to become observant participants rather than participant observers. Furthermore there are issues with positionality that must be addressed by those observant participants in order to ensure that they understand the contexts of actions in terms of the phenomenon studied, rather than through their own cultural lens (hooks, 1991 in Hoggart, et al., 2002).

**Figure 5: The author performing stand-up at The REP, Birmingham, in September 2014
(Source: author's photograph)**

Talking to others

There are however issues that would be impossible to gain a full insight into through my personal engagement with comedy, notably how the performance spaces and the wider field are engaged with by more experienced performers and how these engagements are different for people with different social positions to myself (for example different gender, class, ethnicity or sexuality). As such qualitative interviews were conducted with comedy performers, audience members and organisers of shows in order to gain understandings of the production of stand-up comedy from a number of different perspectives.

Thirteen interviews were conducted, lasting between around ten and ninety minutes with seven male participants and seven female participants as well as one 'email correspondence interview' with a further male participant. One interview consisted of myself and two participants (Mark and Sharon) with all others being one on one

Name	Date of Interview	Location	Details about the participant
Chris	18/01/2014	Evesham Art's Centre (Evesham)	Professional comedian touring both nationally and internationally
Holly	21/01/2014	Café Aroma (University of Birmingham Campus)	Amateur Comedian
Paul	04/02/2014	Participant's home	Professional comedian and comedy promoter
Dave	06/02/2014	The Holly Bush (Cradley Heath)	Owner of the Holly Bush Pub, comedy promoter and amateur comedian
Andy	09/02/2014	Pub next to The Glee Club (Central Birmingham)	Professional comedian
Mark & Sharon*	09/02/2014	The Glee Club (Central Birmingham)	Regular audience members around Birmingham
Joe*	09/02/2014	Pub next to The Glee Club (Central Birmingham)	Professional comedian including television appearances
Martin	08/02/2014	The Barge and Barrel Pub (Tipton)	Amateur comedian, comedy promoter and Christian minister
Janice	06/03/2014	My car on the way to Wolverhampton	Professional comedian and actress, including television appearances
Betty*	06/03/2014	Newhampton Arts Centre (Wolverhampton)	Comedy audience member
Jay	08/03/2014	Email correspondence	Semi-professional comedian and former comedy club worker/ promoter
Hannah	30/04/2014	University of Birmingham Library	Semi-professional comedian and comedy promoter
Maureen	08/05/2014	Café at BHS (Central Birmingham)	Professional comedian and comedy promoter
Zoe	16/05/2014	Café at BHS (Central Birmingham)	Professional comedian including television appearances

Figure 6: List of named Participants (* indicates that the interview is unrecorded and participant observation taken instead)

conversation between myself and the participant. These interviews took place in a variety

of settings, often restaurants, bars, cafés or at venues of performance themselves. One

interview (Paul) took place at participant's home and one interview (Janice) took place in

my car as I drove her to a gig.

The interviews were all semi-structured in nature, following pre-determined themes although they became increasingly structured throughout the process. Initial interviews were carried out in river-channel style, whereby a very open question was asked and the answers followed to natural conclusion before another very open question was asked (Hoggart, et al., 2002). This allowed for themes that had initially not been conceived of to emerge and thus served as somewhat exploratory. Later interviews looked to dissect these common themes more thoroughly whilst still leaving room for new themes to emerge.

This quantification of participants can be deceiving however as many other people have conversed with me about the project in forms that are difficult to describe as interviews in the traditional sense. These participants have provided insights and ideas that will have inevitably shaped the project but due to the fleeting and momentary nature of these engagements, and the lack of informed consent from them, I feel that including them as 'participants proper' would be both impossible and unethical, however a count of these participants from my field diary adds over thirty more participants (fifteen coming from the comedy course).

Data analysis

Within the project a certain level of reflexivity was required in order for each research event to build upon previously gained knowledge. Most interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone with notes being kept in the field diary for those unrecorded and for participant observation events. The recorded interviews were transcribed (see figure 7) and then coded in line with Crang and Cook's (1995) guidelines using the software NVIVO.

Phil: oh cool, so do you look for gigs yourself much? Or is it mostly people approaching you?

Holly: uhm mostly people approach me but I do look for gigs as well and I use the West Midlands Comedy Forum (*Phil: ok*) uhm and facebook is really useful as well, the last two, the last two gigs that I've got, the ones coming up in February and March, one of them I was approached and the other one I found advertised on Facebook (*Phil: yeah*) so social media is, it's the only thing I really use it for now,

Phil: and are there particular places that you prefer to play, or types of gigs that you prefer to play?

Holly: uhm yeah, there's ones that I shy away from having done, so I did a gig at the The Green Room in town, it's like a coffee shop, restaurant type place and I'm always dubious now about gigs that are in places like that because you tend to be, you tend to be incidental people aren't there for the comedy night, they're there eating their dinner and you're sort of in the corner talking and [laughing] they are not really that interested [stops laughing] (*Phil: ok*) uhm in fact, or or even so far as see you as a an intrusion in their evening (*Phil: yep*) uhm but there have been a mixture of venues that I have really enjoyed so actually doing a comedy club, I did Reckless Comedy in Leamington (*Phil: yep*) and that's actually a comedy club, it's not a pub or a bar or anything and that was lovely because everybody's there, that's what they're there for (*Phil: yeah*) uhm and uhm, there was a oh, what was it called? Cocktail, Keystones in Worcester, it's a cocktail bar, that was a really nice gig as well because it was a cool venue and uhm, again it was like a widely advertised comedy night sort of thing so it was a [can't hear on recording]

**Figure 7: Extract from the interview with Holly**

Situating the project

Understanding place is very important when discussing geographical issues and particularly considering the literature discussed in the previous section. As such it seems important to briefly outline place as concerned with this project. This can be difficult however, due to the numerous definitions that surround the concept (Cresswell, 2008) and as such it seems impossible to fully integrate every definition into this section.

In terms of place as location, the project has been situated entirely within the West Midlands region of the UK. The specific sites of interaction have mostly been within the Birmingham and Black Country conurbation, with one site being located in Evesham (Worcestershire) and two in Wolverhampton (see figure 8).

This definition could be seen to confine the project to the West Midlands region itself; however it should be noted that the constituents of my research often transcend this locational boundary in order to perform and as such have knowledge relating to other locations which they draw back into their understandings of the West Midlands. This positions the West Midlands as a relational place (Massey, 1995) rather than an individual place.

Comedy in the West Midlands is a relatively emerging field. Although there have been comedy clubs in Birmingham for many years there has been a growth in the number of venues offering comedy within the region over the last decade or so, as there has been across the UK. These venues offer a variety of nights including open mic nights - for new comics and professionals who wish to try out new material – to professional only line ups and single performer stage shows.
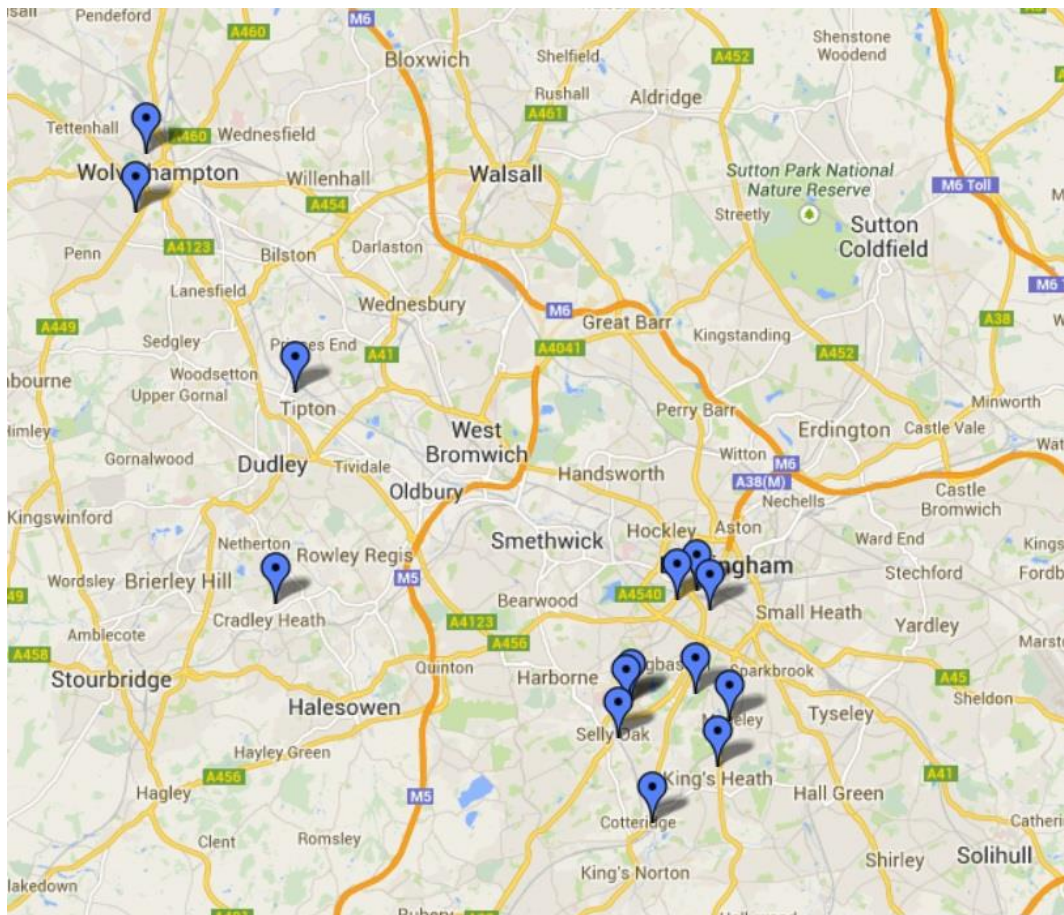
Figure 8: Distribution of sites of study within the West Midlands (Excluding the Evesham location) (Source: Google Maps, 2014)

Within this project, I have attended all of these types of shows, although the project primarily focuses on my experiences of three venues:

1. The Glee Club – A built purpose comedy club that offers primarily professional acts, although does provide an open mic night once a month

2. The Holly Bush – a once a week open mic venue which hosts mainly new acts but also professionals trying new material

3. Laughing Cows – located at the Kitchen Garden Café in the Kings Heath area of south Birmingham, Laughing Cows is a once a month female only line up night, consisting of professional and semi-professional female acts from around the UK.

Positionality

The research involved understanding embodied and situated knowledges (Haraway, 1991) of both myself and other performers as well as understanding non-representational aspects of these experiences (McCormack, 2003). As such an awareness of the positionality of different actors is highly important (Bennett, 2002). As such, following Denzin (2001) the research events should be understood as performances in themselves, whereby a co-construction of knowledge is obtained between participants and researcher.

In Bourdieusian terms this co-construction of knowledge can be seen as the interaction between the habituses of researcher and participant. My position as a white, middle class, university educated male - a very common position within the field of stand-up comedy[2] - has inevitably affected my interaction with participants and subsequently my interpretation of the data (Rose, 1997) partially perpetuating the dominant understandings of humour that are produced by people with similar positioning to myself. It is however important to note that I also feel that my habitus has also changed significantly through engagement with the research whereby my dispositions and means of acting around comedians has been affected by the interactions with different comedians. This has allowed for much greater understanding of topics in later interviews and events rather than earlier ones.

Linked to this changing of my habitus are the issues surrounding where some of the knowledge I have gained actually came from. There are aspects of comedy that I have 'learnt' which are unrecorded within the field diary yet I know that I have gained from

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[2] This aspect of social positioning within comedy is explored in greater depth in the next chapter

somewhere. This marks both a limitation and an advantage to this style of ethnographic research - I have gained what Haraway (1991) calls situated knowledge, where my positioning within the comedy field, has started to affect both what I know, and how I see things.

Ethics

At the outset of all interviews, oral consent was sought from all participants. This involved an explanation of the project's aims as well as assurance that responses would be confidential and anonymous if they so wished and that they had the right to withdraw from the project at any time and for any reason – key ethical considerations (Clifford, et al., 2010). No participants requested for their names to be changed however only first names have been used. In the cases where promotional material containing full names of participants has been included, further consent was sought via email.

Analysis

"The emphasis on hypermobility, global communications and the neutralisation of place and distance in the mainstream account about economic globalisation needs to be balanced with a focus on the work behind command functions, on the actual production process in the leading information industries, finance and specialised services, and on global marketplaces . . . We [need to] recover the material conditions, production sites and place boundedness."

(Sassen, 2000: 168–9)

Understanding the comedy field

Career and capital

It is difficult to state definitive reasons why people start in comedy, with participants giving a wide variety of reasons, mostly involving a vague interest in comedy and an urge to give it a go for themselves. In most cases it seems that a form of outside encouragement acts as a necessary catalyst, with Andy explaining:

'Well somebody put me up to it at work. Uh, I mean, I suppose I've always done a little bit of performing, and uhm, at college I wrote sketches and got people to perform in them and I wrote for the student union magazine. Uh, and at school I'd done public speaking with a bit of performing there as well. So uhm, some sort of performance I would have got into, but specifically comedy, that was uh was a bit

of a fluke really. Stand-up comedy; somebody put me up to it at work. I did five

minutes and thought, "oo this is good, I enjoy this," so just kept at it'

(Andy, Interviewed 09/02/2014)

Andy's story seems to be very common and a number of the other participants revealed similar experiences of starting out by simply trying it. These early gigs have a profound effect on the comedian's habitus, teaching them the 'rules of the game' (Noble & Watkins, 2003) and as such this period is often referred to by the term 'apprenticeship'. This apprenticeship can also be initiated through a different means however, through the use of comedy courses which serve to either provide this change to the habitus in what was described as a 'safe space', with constructive feedback or through more structured means, 'sort of like an evening class' (Holly, Interviewed 21/01/2014).

There is a body of work that discusses the merits and differences between artists who are self-taught and those who are formally educated. The main element of this discussion relates to distinctions between notions of 'genius' and those of taught or prescribed techniques associated with formalised training (Thomas, 2007). Generally the notion of a 'genius' is connected to the idea that, within their self-taught work, resides a true expression of inner personality that is unmarred by the social world surrounding them (Fine, 2003). This echoes debates within geography that surround distinctions between what is natural and what is humanly constructed, as well as issues surrounding performativity (c.f. Butler 1990).

It is important to note though that when entering the field, the comedian becomes positioned in a power structure relative to the other comedians within that field which, as stated by Bourdieu (1984), is intrinsically linked to notions of capital which serve to provide distinctions between actors and thus create hierarchies which in turn structure

the field. These hierarchies remain very mobile however, with different sets of capital serving to structure the trajectory of a comedian's career (Giuffre, 1999).

A new comic will usually start their 'career' with little or no symbolic capital. Broadly speaking, from this point, the career of a comedian can follow four basic trajectories. This
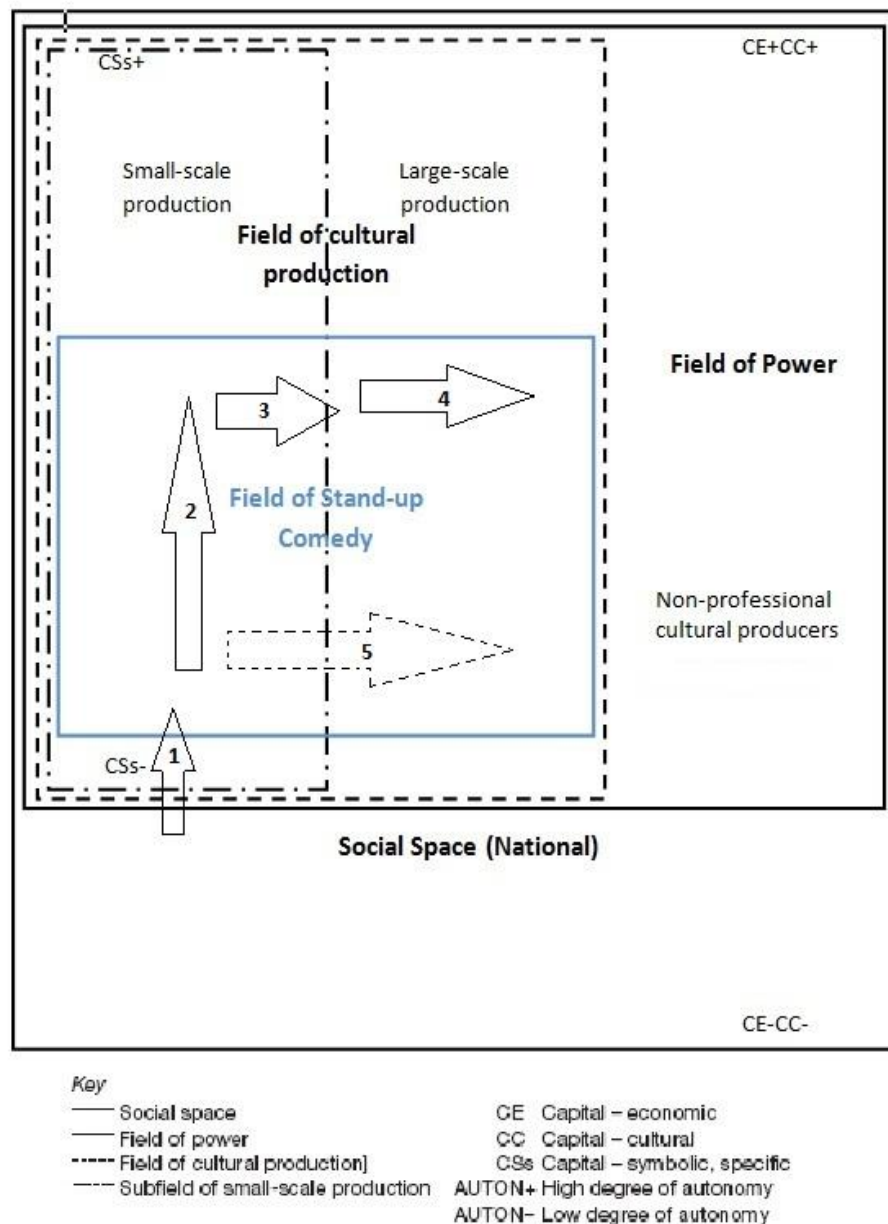
Figure 9: The field of Stand-up comedy inserted into a simplified version of Bourdieu's conception. The potential career trajectories are marked with arrows (after Bourdieu, 1996)

is not to say that these trajectories are rigid or mutually exclusive and indeed there are a number of options that are not covered within this basic model, including leaving the field of stand-up comedy for another field. Passing through these trajectories involves growing the capital of the comedian although the type of capital grown can dramatically change the trajectory of the comedian, as seen in figure 10.

1) A new comedian entering the field as described above

2) The first trajectory should be seen as common amongst all comedians and relates to the apprenticeship described above. This involves the early gigs and can last a number of years. The primary forms of capital grown at this stage are symbolic and social capital (through increased inclusion into social groups contained within the comedy field), as well as embodied cultural capital (in the form of the dispositions that they possess when approaching comedy performance). At this stage performers will remain within the field of restricted-scale production often paying 'open spots' to relatively small audiences.

3) A comedian moves towards large-scale production. This often involves turning professional, thus gaining economic capital from performances instead of just symbolic capital. At this point the comedian maintains a position between mass production and small scale production. They may work 'weekend clubs' or corporate gigs but will inevitably be relatively unknown by the general public.

4) The comedian continues from trajectory 3 becoming known as somewhat of a household name. This increasingly involves entering the field of television and the gaining new sets of embodied cultural capital as well as more increased economic and symbolic capital (in the form of fame).

5) The comedian skips trajectory 3, entering the field of television comedy. Their position however may lack consecration from within the field which will need to be grown over time as articulated by Paul:

'there are certain people who you just think, you watch them and you think, they should be on TV and then there's certain people you see who are on TV and you go really? Because they are not big on the circuit, you know, no one is requesting them and then they spring big just because they get uhm, pushed in the right direction, because there is some sort of marketability about them, you know there a uhm, there's an angle that people can sell'

(Paul, Professional Comedian, Interviewed 04/02/2014)

This notion of providing an angle that can be sold is part of a wider trend of commoditisation that exists within capitalist economies. It seeks to instil value into cultural products such as art, music and comedy (Castree, 2004; Menger, 1999). This in turn changes the meaning of both career and success within the field of comedy, making assumptions of fame and money as markers of success. These markers of success are linked to other fields, notably the field of economics and as such their use within the field of comedy serves to partially weaken its relative autonomy (Maton, 2005).

Although I utilise these assumptions myself, they are not universal measures of success throughout the field of comedy, a point that was picked up on during the interview with Janice where she asked the question *'what is big success and is that the only measure of success, money?'* Her question served to both reset my assumptions about the field, as well as to challenge wider social assumptions. Holly also talked of these assumptions when describing a conversation she had after a gig:

'he said things to me like oh, oh like I hope you go far and I hope it goes well for you,

(PE yeah) he obviously didn't realise, people don't think that it's something you just

do (PE right ok) like you've got a proper, you've got a 9-5 quite serious job and it's

just something you do occasionally, because I think people think you are quite

serious about it (PE yeah) and that you really want to succeed with it'

(Holly, Comedian, Interviewed 21/01/2014)

Although Holly is unusual in her lack of desire for a career within comedy, with all of the other participants either expressing desires to go further or already working as professional comedians; these assumptions do form part of the social space within which the field of cultural production resides (Bourdieu, 1996). 'Fame' and 'celebrity' form an intrinsic part of the way that both contemporary society and space are constructed, essentially forming new class systems and ways of increasing the position of power within a field (Barry, 2008; Turner, 2006). As such stand-up comedy can be conceived, not only as a space for the production of an art form, but also as a way of increasing this position in terms of fame and creating an opportunity for media of television presenting, a common observation made amongst participants.

Cultural intermediaries

Cultural intermediaries play a crucial role in the career trajectories of comedians. They take many different roles - including agents, television commissioners, club promoters and in some ways comedy critics; although this final category is somewhat more complex than with the other intermediaries (Bourdieu, 1993a; Cameron, 1995). Agents and promoters play a significant role in the commoditisation of comedy, as noted above, and within the field of comedy they perform a role that is most similar to the conception of cultural intermediaries originally proposed by Bourdieu (1984).

The role of these two sets of intermediaries in particular, transgresses a number of boundaries, notably the divisions between art/entertainment and between professional judgement/personal tastes (Negus, 2002). The main aim of the intermediary, according to Bourdieu is to provide a symbolic value to cultural goods (Nixon & Gay, 2002) and act as a means of connecting producers with consumers of culture (Wright, 2005). Agents do this in a very direct way through positioning the comedian in certain spaces and situations which allow for the build-up of both symbolic and economic capital.

There are certain power relationships between agents and comics associated with the way that a comedian presents their material publically. Chris highlights this when talking about his own agent and the length of time that it has taken for him to perform a solo show at the Edinburgh Festival:

> *'so if I had signed to a bigger agency, I would have been pushed forward to do Edinburgh quicker to then get me onto like TV slots like Mock the Week and stuff and then Road Show and touring and stuff and doing your own DVDs (PE yeah?) uhm I'm not saying that all those doors would have been open for me but I deci.. I kept with a small agent and we went at the pace of me and how I'm comfortable with my comedy coz I don't want to do things before I'm ready, I don't want to put stuff out that I'm not proud of'*
>
> **(Chris, Professional Comedian, Interviewed 18/01/2014)**

Chris has noted that he has chosen a smaller agent in order to maintain the power relationship and ultimately the artistic nature of his work. The alternative would involve dealing with a more economically (and culturally) powerful actor and as such would position Chris with relatively less power than his current agent allows. These power relationships have a direct impact on the autonomy of the field (Hesmondhalgh, 2006).

What Chris describes as being 'pushed' to do Edinburgh quicker could be seen as a form of symbolic violence towards Chris's habitus, changing his dispositions and forcing performances that he may not be proud of - also ultimately changing his whole career path (Rooke, 2007).

The larger agencies can also utilise their economic dominance to elevate the position of a comedian within the field. Paul explained that there were a number of the larger agencies who also run production companies with notable examples being Avalon, CKP and Off the Curb. Avalon, who represent the comedian Russell Howard also run the production company that produces his television programme 'Russell Howard's Good News' and as such use the end of the show, where they showcase a new comedian, to give other acts that they represent a television spot.

This, in many ways is the archetypal role of the cultural intermediary, in that they are adding symbolic value or capital to a comedian and thus raising their position within the field of comedy, however it significantly changes the structure of the field on a basis that is related to external social capital rather than an internalised set of values (Maton, 2005). In some ways this could therefore be seen as an act of symbolic violence on the field of comedy as a whole, challenging its autonomy and restructuring the dispositions of the actors within it (Hesmondhalgh, 2006).

Autonomy and place

Bourdieu conceptualises the field of cultural production as set within social space at the national level (Hesmondhalgh, 2006), as can be seen in figure 10. This means viewing the field at what could be conceived as the macro level; similar to the way that the field of economics as a whole can be viewed in terms of macroeconomics, whereby the smaller components that influence the large scale remain relatively ignored. This notion of

combining smaller factors into larger compositions relates strongly to the Deleuzian idea of assemblages (DeLanda, 2006). Furthermore the specifics that form Bourdieu's conceptions of the assemblages that make up fields have been critiqued as being only applicable to high art in France (Friedman, 2009).

In order to utilise this notion of assemblage it seems important to reiterate that fields are primarily distinguished by their autonomy; which can be conceived as emerging from the social networks through which individual actors are connected (Friedman, 2009). These networks are prevalent within comedy, serving multiple purposes both professionally and socially, used for a number of purposes including getting work at gigs as well as forming friendships and often mutual households of comedians (ibid). As Peters (2013) alludes to, during the 1980s, a tight social network of different actors actually helped to form a new field of comedy, in the form of alternative comedy.

Interestingly the West Midlands comedy circuit is actively attempting to form these similar connections and establish itself with an autonomous comedy scene. This can be demonstrated through the details of a meeting of West Midlands comedians that I attended, run by Paul:

> *'The meeting discussed ways to bring up the status of West Midlands comedy. Things like more open mic slots, acts working together in writing groups and more improv and sketch nights were deemed to be good things to do. They also discussed taking control of the Birmingham Comedy Festival in order to make sure that a more authentic view of what comedy in the West Midlands was portrayed'*
>
> *(Extract from Field Diary, 08/02/2014)*

And also through Martin's reason for starting a new gig where he discusses the networks of gigs within the West Midlands, stating that he had set up an open mic gig in order to give specifically the West Midlands comedians somewhere to play more often:

'there was only really two decent open mic venues, you had the Holly Bush and you had the Roadhouse, and there's a lot of comedians in the West Midlands and I felt we need more places to play to hone our craft (PE yeah), ok, because otherwise you're having to travel up to Manchester, and you are having to do gong shows in Manchester, Burton, in and around you know, you are looking at travelling all the time'

(Martin, Comedian, Interviewed 18/02/2014)

The fact that, through running gigs and establishing new directions, comedians in the West Midlands seem to retain control of many aspects of the field would suggest that the field of comedy itself is relatively autonomous (Maton, 2005). As such West Midlands stand-up comedy could be positioned as a sub-field within the larger field of stand-up comedy (Friedman, 2009). Demarcating these sub fields is very difficult, however, as their boundaries are highly porous and dynamic, with comedians crossing these boundaries regularly as they travel to gigs in different areas, as can be seen in the quote above. A rough way of defining these subfields is through the use of the online forums for each field:

'there's a West Midlands comedy forum (PE mm) which is still reasonably new, uh, it started, well, it's about five or six years old, then there's Chortle which is the national - chortle, like laughter - which is the national comedy forum, then there's a Manchester one, a Yorkshire one...'

(Dave, Owner of the Holly Bush, Interviewed 06/02/2014)

Here it is possible to see that there are a number of different subfields (Manchester, Yorkshire, West Midlands) which all form parts of the national field (encompassed by the forum *Chortle*). Although their names would suggest a spatial arrangement of production, it is important to note that the field and the place it is named after do not necessarily align directly – not all comedy that happens in the West Midlands is part of this subfield, for instance stadium shows by national touring comedians.

As such it could be seen that these subfields all act as bodies that form the national field of comedy through an assemblage (DeLanda, 2006; Anderson, et al., 2012). It should be noted however that the national field of comedy does not simply reflect a combination of these different fields but instead represents a field in its own right, whereby these subfields can be seen as actors, competing for capital and position within the field.

When discussing comedy in the West Midlands, there have been two common themes. The first has been the sense of infancy surrounding the comedy scene in the West Midlands, alluded to in the quote by Dave above where he talks about the establishing of the West Midlands Comedy Forum. The second has been comparison between the West Midlands and other 'comedy scenes.' This comparison between locations is common within discussions of identity and when applied to identities of space this equates to the formation of place (Massey, 1997).

There is also literature surrounding competing places, usually focused around notions of power and economic capital accumulation but also in terms of other forms of capital, notably social and cultural capital (McCann, 2002). It seems however that within comedy this form of place making and competition is more focused around symbolic capital:

> *'there is a debate on facebook, with Bruce Dessau... who is a London comedy critic*
>
> *and quite a few kind of national comedians, who tour nationally, are saying that*

there is only, there are only a few square miles of London that a, comedy critics are at all interested in (PE yeah) and everything else is just ignored, uhm then they go to Edinburgh and they might not move out of the Pleasance, is what people are saying (PE mm) so there is a lot of complaining about, uh, yeah a London centric view of what's going on, even though there is much more happening, and then people are being judged as good or bad based on what people have seen, and they've not actually seen the full spectrum of what's going on (PE yeah) it's a very small sample that they're regarding'

(Janice, Professional Comedian, Interviewed 06/02/2014)

This London centric view that Janice is discussing shows the symbolic capital afforded to London. There could be a number of explanations for this - historically London holds an important symbolic position in British Comedy, with the first single purpose comedy club, The Comedy Store, being opened in Soho in 1979[3] (Double, 1991). Related to critics however, is the notion of consecration, which is directly linked to symbolic capital (Hesmondhalgh, 2006). Bourdieu (1993a) argues that critics have the ability to define wider tastes through legitimising them as 'high' or 'low'. As such we could see this London centric view of critics as redefining the symbolic structure of comedy, positioning 'London tastes' as somehow different and more valuable than those of the rest of the UK, and thus granting London with a higher proportion of symbolic capital and a more influential position within the field of comedy as a whole.

This shows the power of place as a structuring factor at the national scale. Stand-up comedy however, is not produced at the national scale, instead being produced by the

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[3] The club moved to its present location at Leicester Square in 1982.

individual and combined performances of different actors. As such the next section attends to these performances, demonstrating that rather than an act of individual genius, these performances can be seen as an assemblage of many different actors and identities.

Power and performance

Creating material

There is much literature that attends to the linguistic nature of 'jokes' - which, although interesting remains difficult to discuss here[4]. Instead I wish to attend to the process of creation. Although this process is, in cases highly visible, there appears to be a disconnect between many audiences' perceptions of comedy performance in terms of its final product (as seen on television, and in DVDs of live shows) and the reality of this process of production:

> *'the people you see on TV with these finely honed; joke; joke; joke; joke; joke are, that's because you are not seeing the creative process, you are not seeing the jokes that didn't make it, you know... no one starts out with a really fine honed twenty minutes, they probably have done a few hours' worth of material by the time you get to twenty minutes because a lot of it wouldn't have been very good'*

> *(Paul, Professional Comedian, Interviewed 04/02/2014)*

Honing this material relies highly on the habitus of the comedian in terms of their embodied capital and experiences. As such comedy can be seen to be created as much

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[4] The nature and scope of the research does not allow for a dissection of individual jokes and as such the act of joking has been taken as a whole. While this marks a limitation within the research it actually allows for an exploration of comedy that moves beyond linguistic understandings and towards the non-representational approaches outlined by McCormack (2003).

from wider cultural influences as it is from the comedian themselves. Comedians often use their own life as the basis for their comedy, setting it within a cultural landscape that is easily relatable to an audience member[5]. During the first session of the comedy course, this sense of drawing on reality was explained to be useful for providing certain levels of authenticity and originality - key traits of both alternative comedy (Double, 1991; Peters, 2013) and in providing a 'selling point' for the commercialisation of art as discussed previously (Fine, 2003). Hannah, however, also gave another reason for using her own life as inspiration:

> *'I think I just find the truth funnier so it is an active decision, (PE yeah) so sometimes if I'm thinking about comedy and I'm trying to write something funny, if it doesn't feel that it's me saying it, it doesn't feel that believable to me, I know it won't be that funny, or that that's just the kind of comedy I enjoy really'*
>
> **(Hannah, Semi-Professional Comedian, Interviewed 30/04/2014)**

Many of the books that teach stand-up also stress the use of emotions as a way to write material, an idea that relates strongly to Bourdieu's (1996) conceptualisation of the habitus as a key part of artistic production. During the comedy course, we were taught to use this technique through doing an exercise where you had to talk about something that you hated as though you really loved it. This exercise was intended to highlight how it is often the irrationality of a comic's feelings that is humourous to an onlooker. As such a conscious understanding of emotion forms a key aspect of creating comedy. Burkitt (1997) further links this sense of emotion to the ideas surrounding habitus, explaining that

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[5] The comedian Michael McIntyre is arguably the most famous example of this style of writing within contemporary British Comedy

emotions form part of the dispositions that people have towards certain objects and people.

This use of the comedian's habitus for creating ideas could create a sense that the production process is not linked to a particular geographical location. The site of production can be seen to be located within the body, and to some extent in the interactions between bodies (echoing discussions surrounding affect - see McCormack, 2008; Jayne et al. 2010). It also means that the production process is inherently tied to the embodied consumption of other culturally symbolic goods, further blurring the boundaries between production and consumption in much the same way that Benson (2008) discusses when she talks about producing poetry through generating ideas from consuming popular culture.

As such it is possible to see the creation process as part of a wider assemblage of people, ideas and emotions (Anderson, et al., 2012), which have impacts on the production of comedy through their role in creating the creator (Bourdieu, 1993b). These assemblages do not exist solely in an imagined space and are often rooted within physical spatial settings. For example it is interesting to note that although this process of producing ideas can occur in any situation; many of the comedians seemed to suggest that doing certain activities, particularly mundane ones such as washing up or driving, tended to coincide with moments of inspiration. This aligns with psychological studies which suggest that during the performance of mundane activities, cognitive functions within the brain remain unengaged which enhances the probability of creative connections being formed (Bink & Marsh, 2000). This in turn positions the items used within these activities (e.g. the car) as key actors within the creation process.

Although the idea of a car as part of a network of cultural production is fairly abstract, this process can be seen more tangibly when looking at how comedians 'hone' their raw material. This process of honing takes place once again, not solely within the body of the comedian but as part of a larger assemblage between many different bodies; requiring the idea to be performed and changed through feedback. These performances usually take place in set spaces, such as new material nights or open mic nights, which are constructed specifically for the purpose of generating this feedback; however they can also occur in other spaces - notably virtual spaces such as twitter or facebook whereby the 'like' and 'retweet' buttons act as a marker of success. If a joke does well it can then be tried in front of an audience.

Relating to physical performances, feedback can come in two distinct forms - either as direct feedback or indirect feedback. Indirect feedback can be seen as the feedback that the comedian is giving to themselves, usually in response to the levels of laughter generated by the audience:

> *'[W]e know, oh that joke's, that joke's done better. Everyone tracking that, in my head, anyway, I track. That joke's done better than it has done in the rest of the thing. And how did I do that differently? Or maybe if I switch this joke here, maybe it will do that'*

> *(Paul, Professional Comedian, Interviewed 04/02/2014)*

This feedback allows comedians to tell how their performance has gone, based on the reaction of the audience which in turn means that they can reshape their comedy in order to manipulate these reactions. Feedback can however also come from other comedians or audience members in a more direct form, whereby they comment on things within the

performance through speaking to the comedian directly, something that I have observed at almost all of the performances that I attended and even taken part in.

These notions of feedback can be crucial in the production of comedy and demonstrate the way that this production process can become spatially located. The feedback inevitably is dependent on the way that a comedian is received by the audience, which is in turn partially affected by the spatial context in which the comedian is performing.

Performing comedy

In terms of the production of stand-up comedy, the actual performances are obviously of key importance. I have paid little attention to the style of material here and instead am viewing the performance in terms of the strategies used to present material as well as the means through which performers interact with the audience.

A key idea is that these performances are intended to affect audience members in a particular manner and as such could be seen in terms of Thrift's (2004) discussions surrounding the manipulation of affect as well as what has been termed affective labour (Hardt, 1999). In order to do this the performer can utilise both visual and sonic performances, as well emotional performances such as glee or even depression, and what could be arguably seen as affective performances that are less tangible and not attached to a 'single emotion', for example confidence.

These emotional performances also form a kind of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983). Here the comedian must change their gestures in order to fit the emotional state of the performance, even if the emotion does not correspond to their emotional state at the time. This sense of emotional performance is in many ways connected to the sense of using emotions in order to create material as discussed before; however the process of performance can be highly emotional in many other ways.

One of the key emotional states that I have experienced through my limited experience of performing comedy is that of nervousness. Having done a fair bit of public speaking through my life, I would consider myself comfortable in front of audiences, however when it comes to comedy, I experience an unusual sense of fear; the fear that no one will laugh at my jokes and stories. It would be easy to place this as a symptom of being new to comedy; however Zoe explained that despite eleven years of experience, she is always nervous when going on stage. These nerves in turn have to be emotionally managed (ibid) in order to portray the confidence that is vital in order to create laughter.

Laughter itself has the ability to affect the performer and performance. Many comedians have talked about riding the waves of laughter and how it can help you to find confidence in your material which in turn creates new rhythms for jokes and enhances the performance further. Indeed sustained laughter throughout a set can leave a comedian with a real sense of both adrenaline and elation, with the heart beating faster and often an inability to stop smiling following a good performance (Double, 1997), and as such laughter can be seen as having the ability to affect and indeed modify the body itself (Anderson, 2006). Arguably however, this ability however is not evenly distributed between the comedian and audience with the comedian often being perceived as relatively more powerful that the audience members.

These performances also take place, in most cases, as an assumed identity – either a separate character to the comedian, or in the form of an exaggerated version of themselves. Within the quote above, Hannah, talks about how she finds it more truthful to be herself on stage. She juxtaposes that against the notion that character acts are somehow untruthful. Interestingly however, when asked about why she played the character Barbara Nice on stage, Janice expressed an opposing opinion:

'I find it more truthful for me to be somebody else than pretend I'm outgoing and funny all the time because I don't think anybody is... I think I find it a bit more honest to say, I wear this on stage, I be like this and I also find it more straight forward for me, because I can take it all off and say I'm not on stage any more, I'm not performing'

(Janice, Professional Comedian, Interviewed 06/03/2014)

Although the opinions of both Janice and Hannah differ in their assessment of what is true, in many ways the truth of the situation is created through the performances that they are portraying. Essentially the identity of the comedian is constructed through the performance on stage, creating a sense of performativity that forms a real character in that particular time-space. Indeed, as discussed within the *Literature Review*, Butler (1990b) argues that no identity is fixed and that any notion of a true identity is purely a social construction, although in this case it becomes a more deliberate construction of the self.

This construction of identity also has another performative nature in that it allows certain actions that would be unacceptable in other circumstances. Jay explains that there is a certain leeway based around a 'shared conceit' between the audience and the comedian whereby both accept the nature of what is being said as non-offensive. This highlights that although the comedian acts as the creator of the character, it is not solely them that brings that character to life, also requiring the acceptance of those witnessing the performance (c.f. Valde, 1996). This also links to Butler's (1990a) discussions of sexed and gendered identities, whereby we can see how the characters become a reality through performative reiteration by comedian and audience.

Although only discussed by participants in terms of characters, this acceptance by the audience is key to the production of comedy. As has been noted, audiences themselves play a key role in helping a comedian to understand the material that they have created but the audience also plays a role in producing stand-up comedy through their reception and reciprocation of the material produced. Indeed if a performance receives no reception from an audience in the form of laughter, the question can be posed, *is it really comedy*? As such understanding the audience cannot be separated from understanding the production of comedy itself.

Power relationships

Interaction with the audience is highly important within the production of comedy and serves to create a sense of inclusion between audience and comedian. This interaction can occur in a number of ways although often it involves using 'regulars' in order to create 'in jokes'. The Holly Bush provides a good example of this whereby the regulars that come from Kidderminster every week have become affectionately known as the 'Kiddermonsters' and are often the butt of several jokes during the initial stages of the evening.

Within larger venues such as the Glee Club, where the room is bigger and regulars are less known this same sense of creating an 'in joke' is still used however, often involving people in the front few rows. This is often misinterpreted by audiences who are not used to seeing live comedy and some people have a real fear of being 'picked on' by comedians, often trying to avoid these seats. Paul notes however that a comedian is rarely intending to insult people (with some obvious exceptions noted); instead they go to the audience in order to provide a more natural sense of interaction and as a means of getting to a joke

that they would like to tell, often about generic subjects such as working in an office or the football team that they support.

This sense of inclusion once again serves to create assemblages of people (Duff, 2010). It looks to bring them together into a collective body that also includes the comedian. This is again, not to say that each member of the group holds the same levels of power to affect changes (Thien, 2005), however creating inclusionary feelings seeks to make these power hierarchies less obvious.

The power structures within comedy have thus far been generalised towards the comedian having most power during their time on stage. Generally this is true, however conceptualising this power is far more complex than simply stating that power comes from the performative nature of being a comedian:

> *'The power is, with the person with the microphone. It doesn't necessarily matter what you say... you can be the most low status character... just be quiet and stuff, but the power in the silence between words, or in the power of your punch lines or in the images you are painting... The power in the staging of the comedy club... The power is in the alcohol that everyone has had... But ultimately it comes down to... everyone is looking at you and expecting you to be funny... In some circumstances they are expecting you to be shit and then there is even more power because you surprise them... that's a very powerful tool.'*

> *(Chris, Professional Comedian, Interviewed 18/01/2014)*

Chris highlights how different factors contribute to the power relationships within comedy clubs. Again assemblages are highly important in understanding this power, with a number of different technologies interacting as part of the wider assemblage (Buchanan, 1997) that forms the comedy performance. There are the factors mentioned

already, in the form of character and material but also there are a number of other factors such as the technology of the microphone, the staging of the club, alcohol and the individual perceptions of the audience members.

As such it is possible to see that these different factors can come together in order to create different sets of power relations. This is in a sense highly affectual, in that these factors seem to provide great potential for power to be situated with the comedian but can never guarantee it. I experienced this faltering of power relations a number of times whilst in comedy clubs whereby either the material 'didn't work', thus leading to a lack

of laughter or in other instances where an audience member became drunk and started to heckle, thus challenging the power of the comedian on stage. These assemblages can thus be seen in terms of Deleuze's Concept of *the body without organs* (Markula, 2006) whereby the audience and comedian are seen as a collective body (Bissell, 2010) which is held together by the potentials contained within it.

These sets of power relations are perceived differently by different members of the 'collective body' forming a sense of place for each individual which is largely non-representational (Duff, 2010). This sense of place is important also for situating the performance within the wider field as discussed above and also for understanding its affective nature, both over short and longer time scales. As such the next section unpicks the concept of place further, looking at both the material and atmospheric elements of comedy places.

Funny places

Representing comedy

In understanding how different people perceive comedy space, it is important to look at how these spaces are represented. Promotional materials form a key means of representing how comedy shows are intended to be perceived, drawing heavily on a variety of symbolism. In comedy these representations are often intended to be humourous with Chris explaining that:

Figure 10: The poster for Chris's show 'Pretty Fly' as displayed for the Adelaide Fringe Festival (Image from VIP Entertainment Club, 2014)

'the marketing is going to be towards people who go oh hip hop show, because it's

called Pretty Fly and the whole thing is it's a poster of me in a vest holding a cap like

its Hamlet and hopefully people see that and are like, that looks stupid (PE Yeah)

lets go and see that it's a white boy doing a hip-hop show, and it's going to have a

parental advisory sticker in the corner and like because we sold out last year I can

put the sell-out laurel on it which is nice'

(Chris, Professional Comedian, Interviewed 18/01/2014)

Here Chris draws on symbolism as well as levels of cultural capital in order to display his conceptualisation of space. There are references to both Shakespeare's Hamlet and to contemporary hip hop which when juxtaposed create a humourous image. As such he is seeking to position certain people as included and some as not included based on their perceptions of place.

There are certain obvious power issues here whereby certain actors (either comedian or the promoter) can control how certain places are represented and thus how people come together within them. One of the most obvious and prevalent examples of these power relationships relates to how gender is represented; an issue that is largely ignored within the limited literature on comedy cultural production.

Both Maureen and Janice talk about the way that comedy shows are promoted as places for men to perform. Daniel Kitson's Edinburgh show 'The Honourable League of *Gentlemen*' is given as an example of this but Janice also explained how this had manifested in a recent show she had done:

'they would never say this is an all-male comedy night, although strangely I, I did a

gig, uhm in Lei, not Leicester, where the hell was it now, Worcester and somebody

had pulled out and I said I would do it last Sunday night and it was advertised as

Kings of Comedy and then they had to supplement my face, so there's a poster

saying kings of comedy with me and two fellas'

(Janice, Professional Comedian, Interviewed 06/03/2014)

Figure 11: Poster from the Kings of Comedy event at Mode comedy club in Worcester. (Image from Mode Worcester Comedy Club (Facebook page), 2014)

This example shows the engrained nature of perceptions surrounding women in comedy and how symbolism can lead to perceptions of the stage as a place for men, with these materials often set out by men themselves. This use of power can occur in a more direct and obvious fashion however, shown by this tweet from comedian, Jenny Collier:

Figure 12: Jenny Collier's tweet following her being removed from a gig due to 'too many women' being on the bill (Image from O'Meara, 2014)

This is a fairly blunt example of how the economic power of cultural intermediaries can position them as 'dominant' and as such how they can use symbolic violence against the 'dominated' comedian (Bourdieu, 1984) but also demonstrates how they can change the perceptions of how the space should be viewed. Following this tweet, however, there was a large demonstration of support from other comedians, including those with high

symbolic capital which looked to use this capital in order to enact their own forms of symbolic violence onto the promoter of the gig, in essence 'naming and shaming them'.

It should also be noted that there have also been changes more recently within perceptions surrounding women in comedy with many promoters now ensuring that they have women (more realistically, a woman) on each line up. Furthermore, the BBC announced in February 2014 that they would no longer show panel shows with all male casts (BBC News, 2014). There is no evidence to state that these changes have any connection to actions from comedians themselves but has a clear marking for changing landscapes surrounding women in comedy.

There are potential criticisms of these changes as producing a sense of 'tokenism' whereby there is a woman on the bill only because you need a woman; something that is accepted by many of the comedians that I spoke to. Interestingly however both Zoe and Hannah noted that this 'need' for a woman on the bill may provide them with opportunities that they may not have had before and as such were what they described as 'realistic' about these changes.

What is clear from the discussions surrounding the representations of women in comedy is that there are definitive power arrangements in the way that comedy is represented and thus perceived from the 'outside', potentially conditioning audiences to view certain comedians in certain ways. Interestingly however, many comedians have described stand-up as a 'leveller' whereby everyone becomes equal, echoing theorisations of it as carnivalesque (Mintz, 1985). Zoe however, having originally made a statement of this type, on further questioning changed her mind and stated that:

'a mediocre comic, male comic may apparently be getting more laughs than a mediocre female comic because people are more used to laughing at men I think that might happen'

(Zoe, Professional Comedian, Interviewed 16/05/2014)

It is however not only promotional materials that change affect how people perceive space; the venues themselves and the kind of show that is being put on also have the potential to affect how audiences understand stand-up as an art form.

Perceiving venues

The venue itself can also be affected by representations primarily in terms of the location, type of venue and its layout (although this last aspect is discussed later in terms of atmospheres). The location of the venue forms part of how it is conceptualised, both by the 'public' and by comedians. Obviously in terms of comedians, certain venues will be located in closer proximity to their homes which makes it more likely that they will play there and as such these comedians form part of the venue's image. The location can also affect the audiences that attend the venue however, with Dave describing this in terms of *The Holly Bush:*

'you are not really in a city centre environment so uhm, most places, most places will set up next to a university or a big college or something like that, where you've got a guaranteed [audience], even if people just come once... I mean say you've got a poster up in a university and its close by, its walking distance, or a short bus ride then people are gunna go like yeah, but here that doesn't happen, I'm not near, I'm completely in the middle of nowhere so its uhm, that's the difference, is I don't continually get a new audience, I rely, at the moment I rely on a lot of acts that aren't on... they are not actually performing , they are coming because its, you

know, their group, their peer group and they enjoy it and they sort of like to come and watch and support the gig which is fantastic obviously, uhm maybe that doesn't happen at other gigs, maybe it does but I think at other gigs they get more, bits and bobs, bits and bobs of uh, irregular trade I mean I get a little bit, but not a lot'

(Dave, Owner of the Holly Bush, Interviewed 06/02/2014)

This lack of passing trade would mean that many businesses would not carry on running comedy nights, however Dave confesses that 'it really is for the love of it' and that he doesn't run the night for the 'sales' anymore. The fact that the Holly Bush, due to its location, also has an audience mostly consisting of comedians is tied into the type of venue that it is. It is an open mic venue meaning that it often contains new comedians with 'unpolished' material. As such many audiences would not appreciate what may be considered the low standard of the comedy performed there, however with a largely comedian based audience, they understand the nature of the acts and can offer feedback and advice to each other in much the same way as described above.

The type of venue (open mic, weekend club, hotel ballroom) although important should not be seen as static, instead being able to change and adapt for different purposes. The Glee Club in central Birmingham for instance is primarily used as what might be called a weekend club whereby it will book mainly professional or well-known acts. This conception of Glee as a 'weekend club' can change however during their 'Rough Works' show once a month which is intended to provide a place for local professional acts to try out new material.

Andy argues that this new material night draws a very different crowd, because it is both cheaper and less well advertised. He notes that the audience at Rough Works are therefore 'primed' for the experience of new material, often coming for that particular

reason. Indeed on speaking to Mark and Sharon, who were regulars in the audience, they said that although they enjoyed the comedy, they were arguably coming to see the comedians grow, mentioning two of my participants, Andy and Joe as people that they had followed at similar events over a number of years.

As such it is clear to see how different types of venue can create a sense of place within venues. This is true of all the venues I have attended, although its effects on people were most noticeable at Laughing Cows. The female only performances tend to create audiences with a very different sense of place to those that I have experienced elsewhere, with Maureen describing them as 'friendlier', explaining that the gig draws in a very different crowd from the 'normal' comedy nights:

> *'we get a lot of, actually people who don't go to normal comedy nights, so we get*
>
> *a lot of older women, we get a lot of gay women who I think wouldn't feel welcome,*
>
> *justified or not, they wouldn't feel welcome, say at some of these 'bear pit' comedy*
>
> *nights, and it's an older audience so uhm, it's a different attitude'*
>
> **(Maureen, Professional Comedian, Interviewed 14/05/2014)**

Here the audience are deemed crucial to how the event feels, whereby people are less likely to interrupt the acts. The prevalence of gay women in the audience also has a profound effect on the type of material that is used. Maureen knows her audience very well and there are regulars with whom she often uses 'banter' based around their sexuality, in a way that I was initially shocked by, but is extremely well received.

It is difficult to tangibly describe what it is like to attend these events as in many ways my understanding is built around my feelings and emotions within the space – my own sense of place. Here arguments surrounding non-representational theory start to interplay with the analysis, whereby it becomes very difficult to explain what are often understandings

which are layered with a number of different and changing meanings (Dewsbury, 2003; Davidson & Milligan, 2004). One of the most difficult experiences to explain for example surrounds how I felt the first time I attended Laughing Cows, where I was the only man in the audience. The field diary entry from this event clearly shows these mixed emotions:

'It was very strange, I felt so out of place, I kept watching the door, waiting for another man to come in... I felt like I needed to manage how I acted, watch what I said and not be too loud or brash, not be too 'manly', at the same time though everyone was being so nice and I really felt accepted by the group, people kept congratulating me, saying "well done"... As I left I was elated, I loved it and can't wait to go back'

(Extract from Field Diary, 08/04/2014)

These mixed feelings and understandings of the places of comedy relate strongly to the atmosphere within the venue. These atmospheres are highly palpable at live comedy events and are extremely powerful actors with the ability to affect bodies in both emotional and performative ways. Atmospheres are also very important to the descriptions and assessments of venues and individual shows given by comedians with many stating that venues can manage these atmospheres through technology, although often commenting that organisers of gigs fail to consider this.

Constructing atmospheres

Duff (2010, pp. 881-2) argues that atmospheres 'capture the emotional feel of a place, as well as the store of action-potential, the dispositions and agencies potentially enactable in that place'. They are in essence the outcome of the assemblage (Bissell, 2010) that is formed when stand-up comedy is produced through interactions between many bodies

(Anderson, 2009) and the relationship that their perceptions form with the spaces surrounding them (Adey, et al., 2013).

Various technologies and bodies come together in the formation of these atmospheres (McCormack, 2008) which can be manipulated in order to affect bodies in desired ways (Thrift, 2004), primarily in order to stimulate laughter. There is no single and unified theory of how to maximise this response and so a number of conflicting approaches exist however recurring themes do exist which align strongly with existing literature on the creation of atmospheres.

One such notion relates to the lighting in the room; having the audience in the dark means that the stage appears very bright within the room. This creates a focal point which draws the audience's attention towards the performer, providing their words with more power and increasing the probability that their act will be laughed at. The structure of the room is also important for this also, with low ceilings and clear lines of sight seen as necessary contributors.

The audience in darkness provides another advantage in that it allows for any self-consciousness surrounding laughing in front of other people to be mediated and thus increases the chance that laughter will occur. This creates a sense of intimate-alienation, as described by Fujji (1999) yet mediates the tension between bodies that can be transferred by facial expressions (Bissell, 2010). Arguably, the setup of the seats serves this purpose also with some people arguing that the audience should not be able to see each other both so that they focus on the comedian and can see each other laughing. The manager of the Glee Club held the contrasting opinion however, whereby he sat people on a curve so that they could see each other laughing on the other side of the room which, he argued, makes laughter more infectious.

Andy also talked about the infectious nature of laughter and seating focusing on aspects of proximity rather than visual stimulae, stating that you want people to be:

'Sat in small seats, really next to each other because for some reason when people are together, they uhm, the laugher becomes more infectious'.

(Andy, Professional Comedian, Interviewed 09/02/2014)

This idea of infectious laughter can be related to ideas surrounding affect, whereby laughter can be seen as an affective force that can generate even more laughter (Macpherson, 2008). In sitting people close together (Andy) or in a single block (Paul), this affective force can draw people together to form a collective body. This collective body is another example of assemblage, whereby each individual is, in theory, affected by the group as a whole and thus drawn in, creating a strong sense of place and thus a thick atmosphere (Duff, 2010). [6]

There are a number of other sensory experiences within the club which can be seen in terms of assemblages, notably alcohol which is seen to affect the inhibitions of the individual and make them able to laugh more - the alcohol essentially forming part of the body itself (Jayne, et al., 2010). Obviously alcohol it can have other affects also, making people more 'aggressive' or likely to heckle which demonstrates that although these assemblages can be conceived and designed to have certain affective results, these results can never be guaranteed (Thrift, 2004).

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[6] Although the descriptions of laughter have mainly focussed on its visual aspects here, the act of listening also forms a key means through which audiences and comedians form collective bodies. Again a limitation is present here surrounding the difficulty I have with expressing these audible aspects on paper – demonstrating a key critique that is levelled at non-representational theory and one that I remain unable to resolve within the scope of this project

Music too has contrasting opinions surrounding its use. There is the idea that music has the affective potential to change people's perceptions is common, with participants saying things like 'it just sort of makes you feel that it's sort of a night out' (Dave). The idea is clearly to lift the excitement in the room through use of uplifting tracks, often from famous films. Music can however have detrimental effects for comedians, with Martin explaining:

> *'I've seen it also used at venues and it's just drowned out the MC and uh, the comedian has had to use the first thirty seconds to reaffirm who he is'*
>
> *(Martin, Comedian, Interviewed 18/02/2014)*

Here once again it is clear that any conceptualisation of what creates affective atmospheres is subject to notions of 'potential' within affective theory and it must be noted that I have experienced most of these combinations and have seen them work when they shouldn't or fail when in theory they should work. This idea as to whether they have worked is a judgement made by myself, based on my perceptions of there being a thick atmosphere (Duff, 2010) and as such remains highly subjective. My perceptions of this do however sometimes defy 'rational' consciousness. I note the morning after my first visit to the Holly Bush:

> *'I woke up this morning and can't work out why the Bush was so good. The atmosphere sort of crept up on me when I wasn't looking'*
>
> *(Extract from Field Diary, 07/02/2014)*

This importance placed on atmosphere thus positions it as something more than just 'the background' to my experiences. Atmosphere in essence forms as important a force in the cultural production of comedy as the material, the delivery or the interaction with the audience and as such understanding atmosphere provides a key insight into aspects of

the production of culture (particularly at small scales) that are inefficiently explained within Bourdieu's (1996) theorisations. Atmosphere is in many ways the culmination of all of these different aspects coming together and it could be said that the atmosphere forms the actual cultural product that is understood as comedy. In this situation the nature of the cultural producer's job shifts towards constructing and managing the atmosphere and people's experiences of it.

Discussion

"There is a club called the Roadhouse, that I really love going to, because it's very much, its full of other comics, it's like a workshop space almost and I love that… you can just kind of, you can try stuff out and you know that the audience are quite up for anything and they're used to seeing comedy… I've done all sorts really, I've done The Glee Club and I've done you know, I've done Highlight and those have been really good; charity nights in village halls and all that and then obviously clubs around Birmingham, yeah, but they are all interesting in their own different way"

(Hannah, Semi-professional comedian, Interviewed 30/04/2014)

Place matters

In line with Bourdieu's (1996) conceptions of the field of the production of culture, the field of stand-up comedy sits within the wider field of power, which in turn sits within wider social space. With stand-up comedy however there appear to be a number of overlapping subfields, demarcated by genre, as identified by Friedman (2009) but also by elements of geographical place. These elements of place are in turn influenced highly by power structures in the form of capital (economic, social and cultural) (Massey, 1993) but also by the sense of place given by people's perceptions (Agnew, 2011).

I however, disagree with Friedman (2009) that fields are an inefficient means of discussing groups of cultural producers, although I do accept that Bourdieu's (1993a) original conceptions, particularly surrounding issues of autonomy remain too simplistic to deal

with the dynamic nature of these groups. As such it seems to me that understanding these fields in terms of Deleuzian style assemblages (Anderson, et al., 2012) seems to account for the dynamic nature of their changing structures and autonomy. Assemblages also provide a means of understanding how the field is constructed by the different constituents within it (Dewsbury, 2011) as well as how it fits into wider contexts – by positioning each field as an actor within a wider network of possibilities (DeLanda, 2006).

These aspects of assemblages and place form an alternative means of understanding the production of comedy at larger (national) scales but can also provide insights into the actual embodied processes that go into the production of art (see Noxolo's, 2009 discussion of the embodied production of academic literature). This process however does not simply occur within a vacuous space, abstracted from real life; instead all aspects of production are embedded within places that are thick with meaning - as such it is clear that place matters (Sassen, 2000). What is also somewhat clear from this discussion of comedy as a culture however, is that understanding cultural production is also important to understanding theorisations of place (c.f Butler, 2007).

Within comedy, atmospheres form a hugely important aspect of place. These atmospheres have the ability to draw bodies together into collectives (Bissell, 2010), changing the bodily dispositions of both comedian and audience. These performative interactions between different bodies can thus change the whole nature of the spatio-temporal setting, providing a clear sense of liminality whereby the comedy club sits at a 'moment of discontinuity in the social fabric' (Shields, 1990, p. 47) which can change people's outlook on the world. It is unclear what the long term effects of this changed disposition are for audience members, with the most probable scenario being that it is limited (see Young, 2000, also Moran, 2013), however for comedians each gig in some

ways represents a rite of passage that they must pass through as part of their 'apprenticeship', giving a sense of the comedy performance as liminoid within the field of stand-up comedy.

The connections between inside and outside create a sense of porosity to these places also, with different perceptions of them transcending the spatio-temporal reality of the comedy club. This occurs through the way that these spaces are represented, through promotional materials, but also through stories or based on how people perceive the venues in which they occur.

There are however various power relationships that influence these perceptions (Saldanha, 2002). The discussion of promotional materials for instance showed that often women are symbolically marginalised within these representations of comedy. In relation to gender and comedy, a limitation within this project emerges whereby the size and scale of the project have not allowed for a thorough dissection of this individual and highly complex power relationship. Drawing on Butler (1993) however, allows an understanding of the way that women are ritually marginalised and ostracised from entering the stage as a space. As stated, the geographical implications of this need to be further explored in order to understand how the experience of women (and other marginalised social groups) interact with and disrupt the construction of comedy clubs as white, male, heterosexual spaces.

Towards an aesthetics of affect

The comedy production process is clearly tied to multiple (possibly all) aspects of the everyday experiences of cultural producers. In essence the comedy that they produce is an outcome of the assemblages that form the habitus (Bourdieu, 1984; Buchanan, 1997) including embodied, performative and emotional aspects. Comedy, and in many ways art

more generally, can thus be seen as a body without organs (Markula, 2006) which exists within what Deleuze and Guattari would call a *plane of imminence* (Deleuze, 2001) - formed from all the constituent parts that bring it into being as well as every other possibility that exists.

This plane of immanence thus enables us to think of comedy in terms of aesthetics of affect whereby the representational elements of the art form can be analysed alongside its affective potential within both producing and consuming bodies (O'Sullivan, 2006). Understanding comedy in terms of these aesthetics of affect provides a key theoretical position through which geographers, and particularly cultural geographers can engage with art in a manner that is both separate from art historians and in some respects sociologists, particularly considering the vast body of work that has already been carried out within geography following similar theoretical strands (see Thrift, 1997; 2004; Thrift & Dewsbury, 2000; McCormack, 2003).

Understanding comedy in terms of aesthetics of affect also allows highlights Bourdieu's (1993b) argument that the cultural producer should not be vilified and removed from the history of the culture that they are producing, as indeed many visual methodologies could be critiqued for doing so. Instead art becomes a means through which a cultural producer can utilise affects in order to realise the virtual rather than merely representing the possible (O'Sullivan, 2006).

In other words it allows the comedian/artist to manipulate 'real life' in favour of a wide variety of potentials - once again fragmenting social fabrics (Shields, 1990) and creating liminal space between what is 'real' and what is fantasy. This virtual potential is however in many ways contextualised by the experiences of the comedian as they consume culture more generally, whether that be the mundane, such as shopping (Colls, 2004) or travel

(Bissell, 2010), or aesthetic-expressive cultures of art, literature (Hesmondhalgh, 2006) or even comedy.

As such we must be careful not to provide the artist/comedian with a sense of absolute power with which they can control the social reality around them. Instead they should be seen as part of a wider collective assemblage (Anderson, et al., 2012; Bissell, 2010; Buchanan, 1997) or a body without organs (Markula, 2006), whereby they form one aspect of the 'shared conceit' (Jay) in equal measures with both habitus of audience members (which contain within them the field of all objective possibilities (Lane, 2000)) and the places within which their experience is situated.

What is very clear with comedy, where the interaction with the art form is a multi-sensory and fully embodied experience, is that these final two factors are just as important as the art form itself in creating distinct and palpable atmospheres (Anderson, 2009). This atmosphere forms both an outcome of performing comedy and as a key force within the creation of the experience also (Duff, 2010; Jayne, et al., 2010).

The atmosphere itself should be seen as the ultimate outcome of the affective aesthetics of comedy, for it is this non-representational quality that provides comedy with an excess, allows it more power than 'objective reason' may suggest and providing this 'lowbrow art par excellence' with a highly palpable sense of imminence (O'Sullivan, 2006) that when experiencing it, is very hard to ignore.

Conclusions

"Stand-up comedy is such a powerful medium because you feel, if it's done properly, that you are laughing and you are evolving"

(Omid Djalili, taken from BBC's 'The Art of Stand-Up', 2011)

Overview

Producing stand-up comedy is a highly complex process that involves collaboration and connections between a multitude of different bodies, both human and non-human. Within this project I have used a number of different theoretical bases, providing a holistic and highly geographical account of many of these processes.

Starting with Bourdieu's theory of cultural production, a clear set of merits have emerged showing the utility of understanding the processes that produce stand-up through fields, habitus and capital (Hesmondhalgh, 2006). There are issues however as to how these different aspects are defined and differentiated, with possible theorisations of multiple subfields, formed from assemblages of bodies (DeLanda, 2006) and based around genres, styles, geographic locations and even the identities of producers and consumers – for example women's comedy; black comedy; LGTBQ comedy; and arguable white, male, middle class (mainstream) comedy.

What's more, the boundaries between these fields become increasingly blurred when looking at comedy, where increasing levels of globalisation have seen location as a constructor of geographical place fall to the wayside to experienced senses of place. There are many comedy clubs, such as the Glee Club, that are what Relph (1976) might describe

as placeless, able to fit into any location at any time. On the other hand however, there are also comedy spaces, such as the Holly Bush, that exude a thick sense of place, through the atmospheres created by interactions between performers and audience members (Duff, 2010).

This thick sense of place is experienced by both producers and consumers of comedy through the affective flows between them, which serve to bind bodies (including non-human bodies, such as lighting rigs or alcohol) into assemblages (Anderson, et al., 2012) or collective bodies (Bissell, 2010), and change the habituses of all contained within that body. This collective body could also be seen to have its own habitus however, providing venues themselves with dispositions and a 'feel for the game' (Noble & Watkins, 2003), which in turn adds to the atmospheres that are felt within these spaces.

These assemblages however, should not be seen as having equal or flat power structures, with certain actors tending to hold more power than others depending largely on their symbolic capital, and thus the ability to affect symbolic violence on other bodies, either positively through causing laughter, or negatively such as 'putting down' a heckler. This sense of power and symbolic violence can also be seen between the subfield assemblages within the wider field of comedy. Within the individual club, this power is afforded mostly to the comedian on stage whereas within the subfields of comedy, certain comedians and promoters with have more power, particularly through the means that they represent comedy. At the national scale this sense is also true, with regional dimensions added to this - whereby London and the Edinburgh Festival generally maintaining stronger positions as a whole.

Scope for further research

This project has provided an initial insight into the geographies of stand-up comedy. Although it has addressed many issues, there are further questions that have spawned from this engagement with comedy especially given the project's limited scope. The primary scope for furthering this research is, as stated in the introduction, a more theoretically thorough dialogue between the production of culture and assemblages literatures. There are obviously many ways in which these could be used together in order to create further insights into one another and although I have started this project here, it remains far from complete.

Furthermore, although unintentionally, the main focus of this research has resolved around spaces that are dominated by white, male, middle class people but also mainly involving 'inoffensive' and fairly 'middle of the road' comedians (more Michael McIntyre than Roy Chubby Brown) which may skew the results towards a positive light. Laughing Cow's, as a case study does however provide an insight into how these spaces can often be limiting and exclusionary to people of othered identities. There are alternatives to these spaces however, with an increasing number of 'specialist' comedy clubs emerging, aimed at consumers who may not feel comfortable at the more traditional establishments.

Revolving largely around black people, gay people, and women, these 'alternative' alternative comedy venues provide scope for understanding the interplay between humour and the cultures of difference. Furthermore there is scope to understand how comedians from these groups experience and interact with the more traditional and exclusionary venues.

There is much scope for work outside of the sub-field of stand-up comedy also, analysing television, radio and internet based comedy, where different production and consumption practices will affect the spaces and performances that go into producing comedy. Finally, approaching humour more generally, through an understanding of the aesthetics of affect provides a means of engaging with different spatialities which can be applied to many different contexts.

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Appendices

If anyone wishes to access any of the data used within this project it can be requested by email.

Please email phil.emmerson@gmail.com outlining the nature of the research and valid reasons why this specific data needs to be used.

The author reserves the right to refuse access to the data for any reason in line with the data protection and ethics codes outlined by The University of Birmingham and the British Sociological Association.