

The relationship between the visual
and the verbal within a comedic
moment:
After the Laughter

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Abstract

The relationship between the visual and the verbal within a comedic moment: After the Laughter

This research looks at comedy and questions what its function is. It identifies the gag as a specific moment that solicits laughter and examines what is expressed within and through a gag and whether a gag can trigger a change in our thinking. What are the structures, functions and outcomes of a gag? The project approaches these questions through an examination of the relationship between the visual and the verbal within the gag. This examination involves two very different types of comedy, silent and stand-up, and considers specific gags from both. The methods used for this examination take the form of both a body of visual artwork and a written thesis.

The visual work consists of photographs, videos and text pieces. It is within the video works that the relationship between the visual and the verbal is most readily seen and this is due to the mimetic techniques used to make the work. The videos are a series of re-enactments of silent and stand-up moments and involve my re-performance to camera of selected gags. I have removed certain elements from the gag while emphasising others through mimicry. In doing so I hope to make the viewer aware of the relationship between language and gesture within a gag.

The writing begins with an examination of what it is that constitutes a gag. The relationship between gag and narrative is looked at first, then the relationship between the comic performer and the audience, and finally the ways in which the comic performer manipulates the medium that is used to create the gag. Following this comes a close reading of three comic performers' work: Buster Keaton's *Sherlock Jr.*, Richard Pryor's *Live in Concert* and Jo Brand's *Barely Live*. The gags in each work are examined in order to see how the relationship between the visual and the verbal is used to solicit laughter and then further examined in order to discover what effect the gag has on its audience. How do language and gesture work together to challenge the audience's thinking?

The methods used in both the practical work and the writing are empirical in nature. The source material is examined closely; gags are unpicked and put back together again. This approach allows the research to tease out some propositions surrounding the relationship between the visual and the verbal.

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Thanks also to Sergeant Matthew Casey of the Metropolitan Police for his bemused wish-granting, to Peter Graham for his permission to photograph in his Comedy Club, Downstairs At The King's Head, and to Mr. Jamilly for allowing me to photograph in his Costume Shop, Lawrence Corner.

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Final thanks to Alexander, Neil, Mum and Dad, whose support and encouragement has never faltered.

Author's Declaration

During the period of registered study in which this thesis was prepared the author has not been registered for any other academic award or qualification.

The material included in this thesis has not been submitted wholly or in part for any academic award or qualification other than that for which it is now submitted.

N-L Thallon
September 2010

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Part One

She holds the microphone in her right hand, pressing it to her chin slightly below her lower lip. She walks to the left of the stage while breathing in, side-on to the audience. She changes direction and turns towards the audience while looking down at the floor. She now walks to the right of the stage. She looks back up at the audience. She lifts her left hand to breast height and moves it up and down as she begins to speak. She continues to look at the audience, blinking often.

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Works on DVD*Shorts*

June 2010

11 minutes 45 seconds

HD video with sound, Installed as projection

The Rehearsal

May 2010

5 minutes 44 seconds

HD video with sound, Installed as projection

It's Research

June 2010

24 minutes 39 seconds

HD video with sound, Installed on monitor

The Understudy Part I (Speaking)

July 2010

7 minutes 48 seconds

HD video with sound

Installed as dual projection [with *The Understudy Part I (Moving)*]*The Understudy Part I (Moving)*

July 2010

7 minutes 48 seconds

HD video with sound

Installed as dual projection [with *The Understudy Part I (Speaking)*]*The Understudy Part I (Dual Screen)*

July 2010

7 minutes 48 seconds

HD video with sound

The Understudy Part II (Speaking)

June 2010

12 minutes 49 seconds

HD video with sound

Installed as dual projection [with *The Understudy Part II (Moving)*]

The Understudy Part II (Moving)

June 2010

12 minutes 49 seconds

HD video with sound

Installed as dual projection [with *The Understudy Part II (Speaking)*]

The Understudy Part II (Dual Screen)

June 2010

12 minutes 49 seconds

HD video with sound



Moon Landing



D-Day Landings

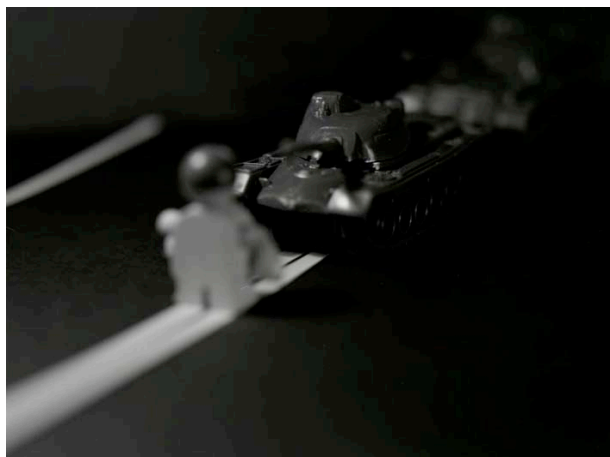


The Assassination of Franz Ferdinand



The Battle of Little Big Horn

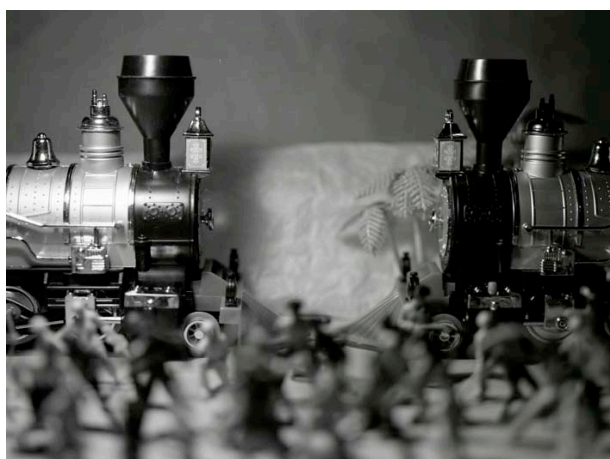
History Re-Enacted, 4 of 7 silver gelatin prints, 2005



Tiananmen Square Protest

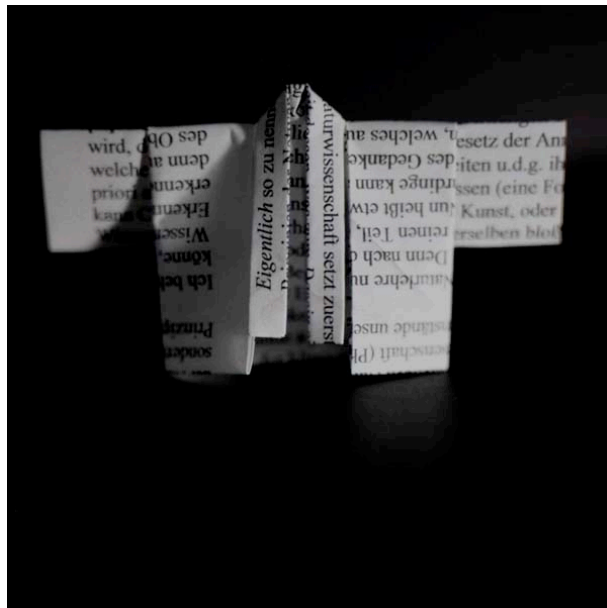


Titanic



Promontory Point, Utah

History Re-Enacted, 3 of 7 silver gelatin prints, 2005

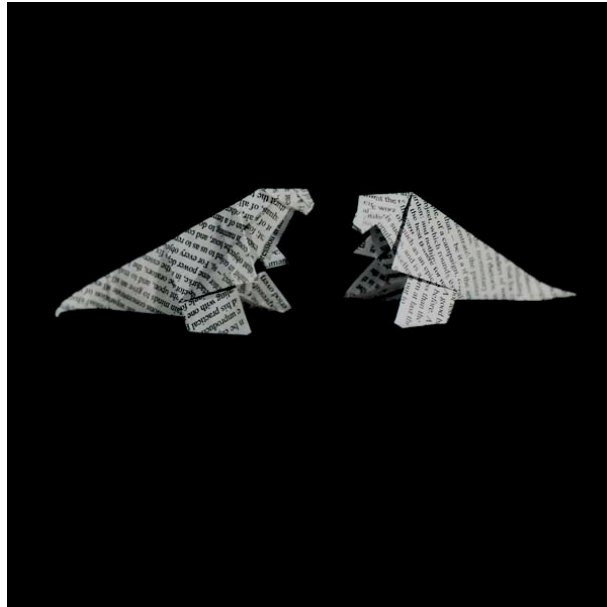


Kant Kimono

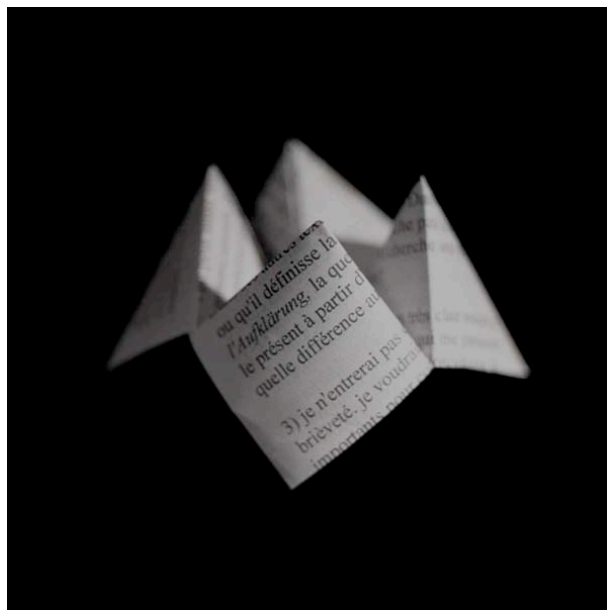


Baudrillard Barking

Philosophy Folded, 2 of 12 silver gelatin prints, 2005

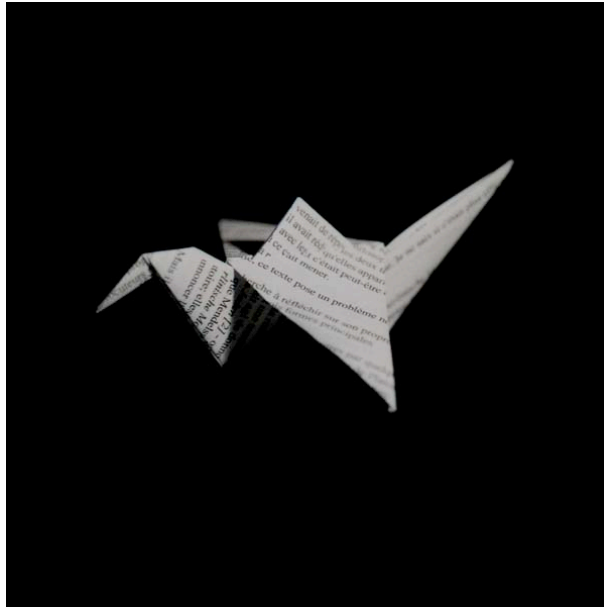


Extinct Emerson

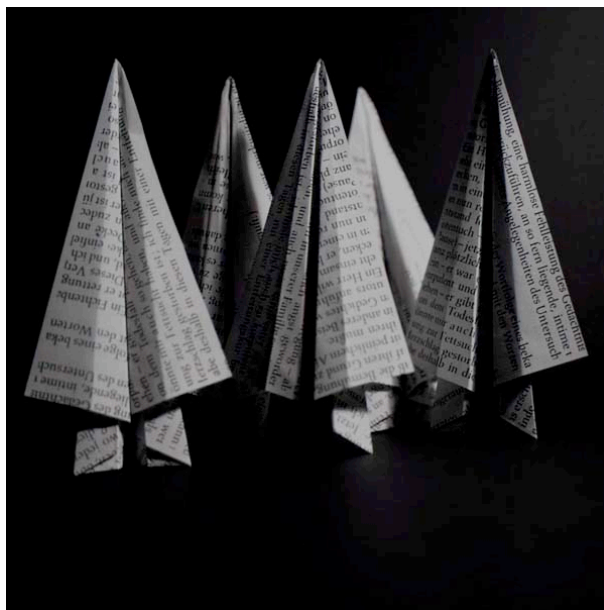


Foucault Fortune

Philosophy Folded, 2 of 12 silver gelatin prints, 2005



Freud Flapping

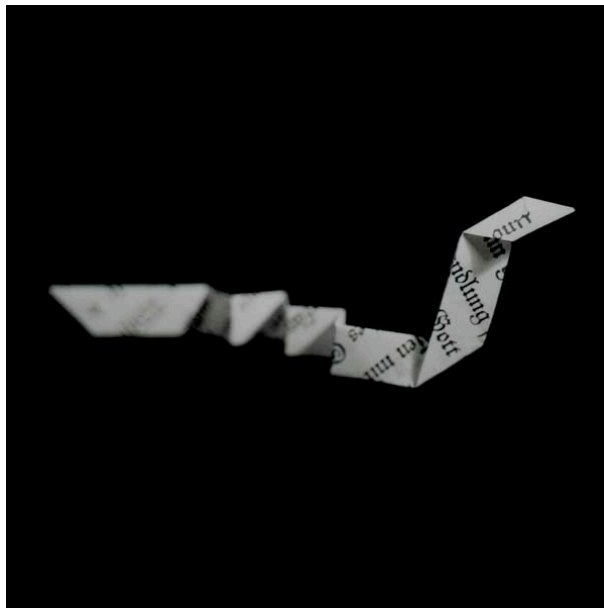


Forrest of Fanon

Philosophy Folded, 2 of 12 silver gelatin prints, 2005

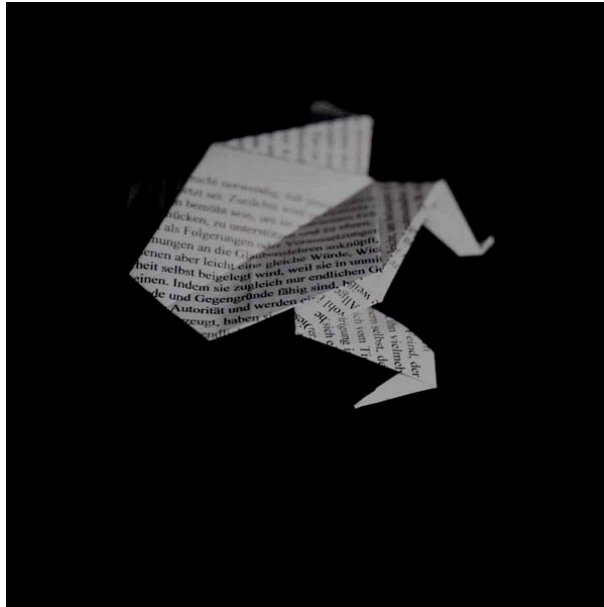


Grunting with Galileo

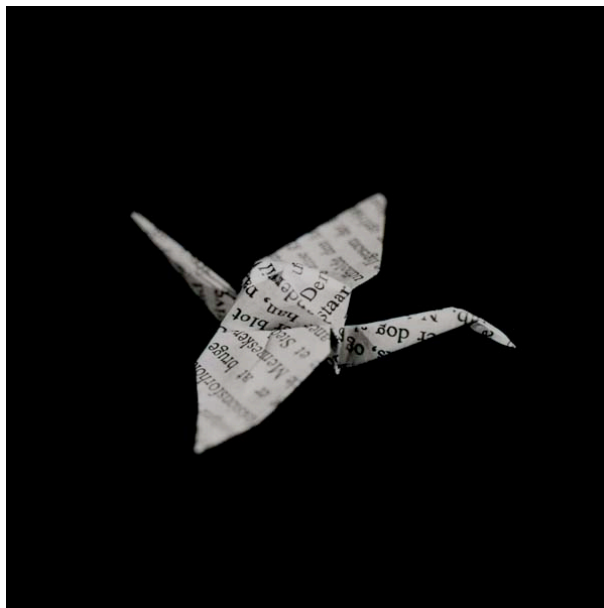


Hissing Heidegger

Philosophy Folded, 2 of 12 silver gelatin prints, 2005

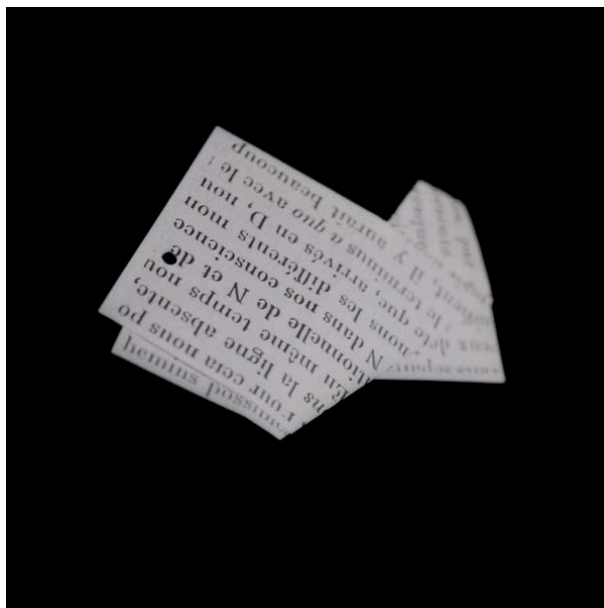


Hopping Hegel

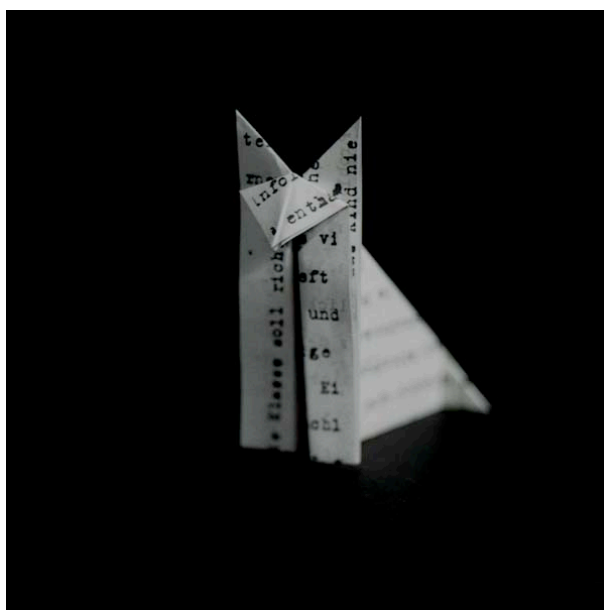


Kierkegaard Crane

Philosophy Folded, 2 of 12 silver gelatin prints, 2005

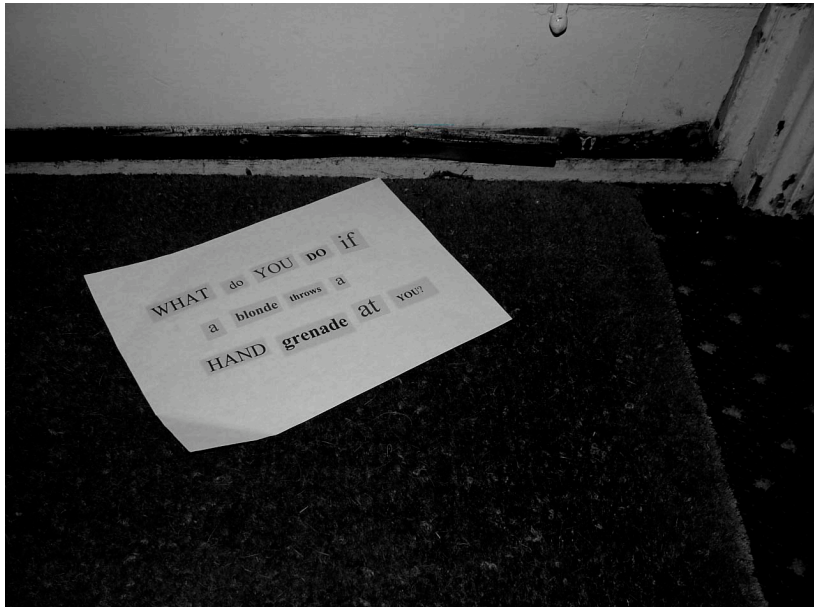


Swimming Sartre

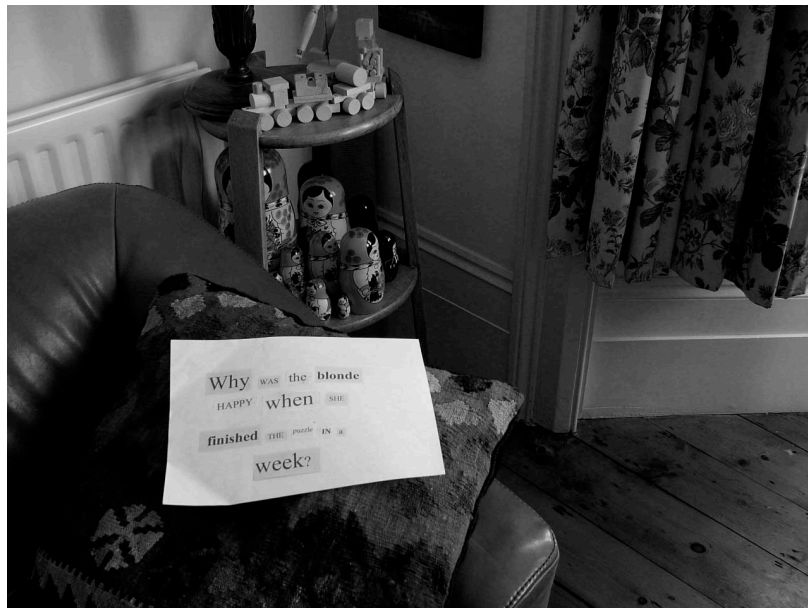


Wily Wittgenstein

Philosophy Folded, 2 of 12 silver gelatin prints, 2005



*(What do you do if a blonde throws a hand grenade at you?)
Pull out the pin and throw it back*

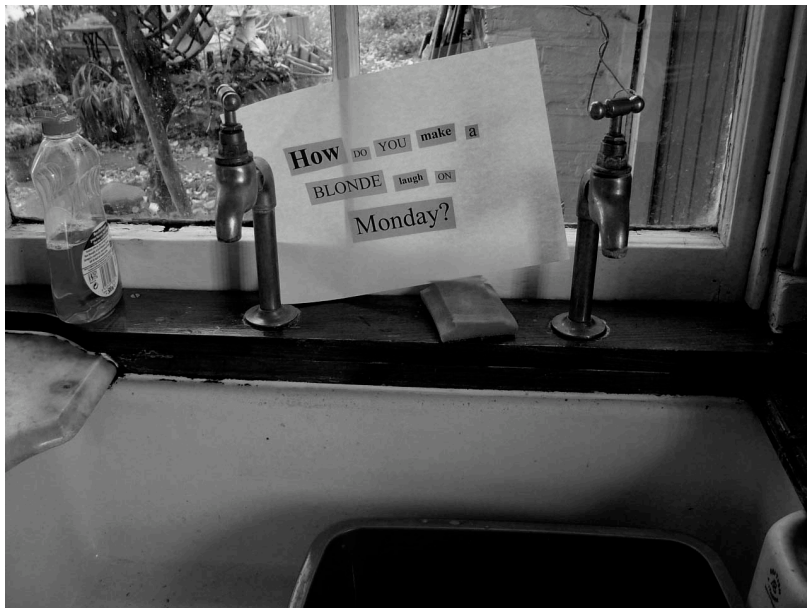


*(Why was the blonde happy when she finished the puzzle in a week?)
The box said three to five years*

Hostile, 2 of 4 black and white lambda prints, 2006



*(What does a blonde say in the morning?)
Who are you guys?*



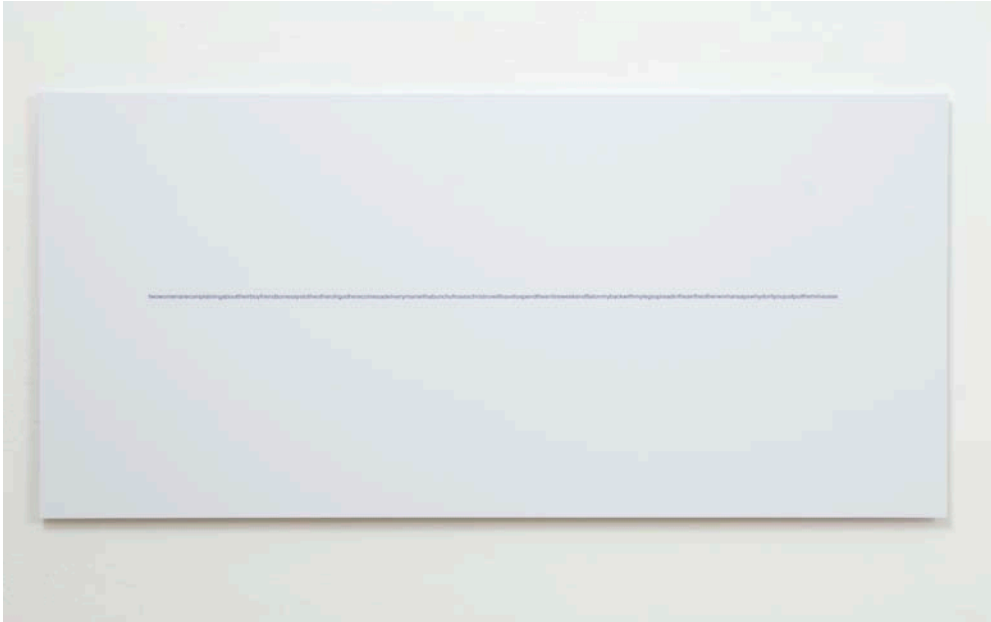
*(How do you make a blonde laugh on Monday?)
Tell her a joke on a Friday*

Hostile, 2 of 4 black and white lambda prints, 2006



(two women are complaining about their boyfriends one says to the other oh god here comes a delivery man with a bunch of roses christ now I will have to spend the entire weekend flat on my back with my legs spread in the air the other woman says why don't you just put them in a vase)

Oneliner (vase of flowers), 1 of 3 colour lambda prints, 2006



(adrunkenmanstaggersintoacatholicchurchandsitsdowninaconfessionboxandsaysnothingthebewildere
dpriestcoughstoattracthisattentionbutstillhemansaysnothingthepriestthenknocksonthewallthreetime
sinafinalattempptogetthemantospeakandfinallythedrunkreplies-
nouseknockingmatetheresnopaperinthisoneeither)

Oneliner (no use knocking), 1 of 3 colour lambda prints, 2006



(a travelling salesman's car broke down on a lonely road late at night in the middle of nowhere he walked to the nearest farmhouse and asked the farmer if he could stay the night the farmer replied of course you can but im a afraid youll have to sleep with my son the salesman answered im sorry cant stay im in the wrong joke)

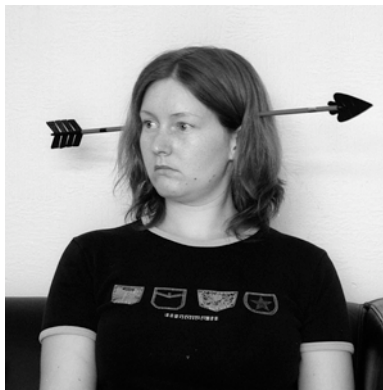
Oneliner (wrong joke), 1 of 3 colour lambda prints, 2006



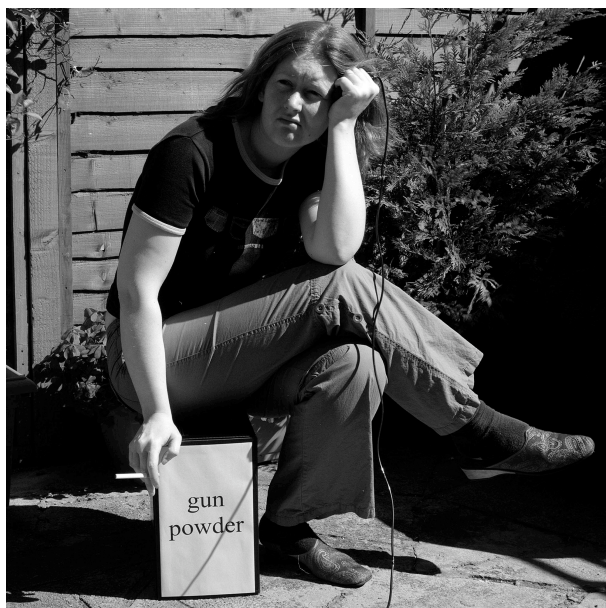
Slapstick, 3 of 5 c-type prints, 2006



Slapstick, 2 of 5 c-type prints, 2006



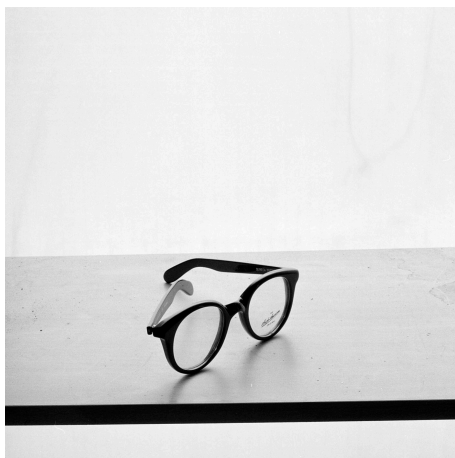
*Self-portrait of the artist posing as Buster Keaton, 3 of 5 black and white
lambda prints, 2007*



*Self-portrait of the artist posing as Buster Keaton, 2 of 5 black and white
lambda prints, 2007*



Absence, 4 of 16 c-type prints, 2007



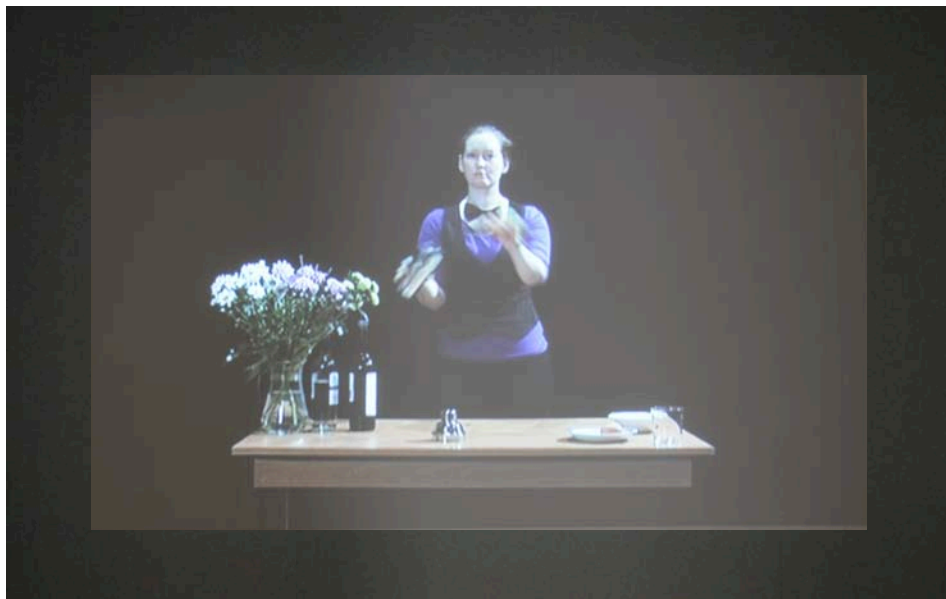
Silent Object, 3 black and white lambda prints, 2007



(How to be a detective)
Become A Master of Disguise, 3 silver gelatin prints, 2007



Oceana Rolls, Installation Shot

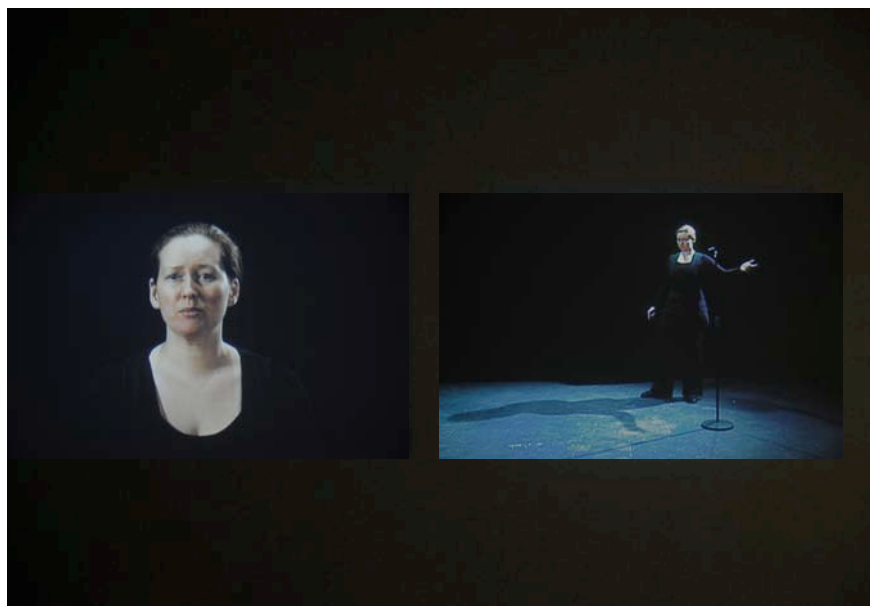


Cocktail Making, Installation Shot

Shorts, HD video with sound, installation shots from Show Research, 2010



Dual Projection Installation Shot



Dual Projection Installation Shot

The Understudy Part I, HD video with sound,
installation shots from *Show Research*, 2010



It's Research, Installation Shot



It's Research, Installation Shot

It's Research, HD video with sound, 2010

Part Two

I must warn you, reader, that it is not the purpose of this book to make you laugh. As you know, nothing kills the laugh quicker than to explain a joke. I intend to explain all jokes, and the proper and logical outcome will be, not only that you will not laugh now, but that you will never laugh again. So prepare for the descending gloom.

Max Eastman¹

¹ M. Eastman, *Enjoyment of Laughter*, Stanhope Press Ltd, Rochester, 1937, p. xv.

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Preface

In order to begin, some words must be said about the relationship between the visual and the verbal, for that is the essence of the project. Throughout the course of this PhD by practice, the visual work and written work have developed in tandem. At times the writing has led the visual work, at times the visual work has led the writing, but at all times they have developed together.

The practical work began with an examination of what constitutes a comic image. I created image-text works in an attempt to articulate and understand the relationship between the visual and the verbal within the joke. The text first took the form of titles [pages 12 and 13] to be later incorporated into the actual images [pages 14 to 21]. But this work was not showing me what I wanted. I was trying to make photographs that solicited laughter, but they were failing at that. In addition they did not speak of anything about *the relationship* between the visual and the verbal.

Following this I made a text piece that involved the retelling of three common jokes [pages 22 to 24]. The spaces between the words were removed in order to cause the viewer to work at 'getting' the joke. The jokes I selected to work with were chosen for their ability to create a strong visual image in the mind of the viewer as she or he reads them, as well as for their stereotypical content. At this point it became apparent that, thanks to its largely visual elements, silent comedy was becoming important to the research. I became interested in slapstick comedy and began working on re-enacting generic slapstick moments [pages 25 and 26] as well as more specific comic moments from the work of Buster Keaton [pages 27 and 28].

Having begun a close reading of Buster Keaton's silent film *Sherlock Jr.*, I became interested in the 'comic object' and its relationship to the comic performer. I am using the term 'comic object' to refer to objects that a comic performer may use in her or his performance to solicit laughter. This goes a little deeper than simply a prop that a performer happens to employ in a gag. I mean, rather, objects that are synonymous with comedy such as Keaton's porkpie hat or Charlie Chaplin's cane. I began reflecting on whether an object could solicit laughter on its own (a 'comedic object'), or whether it was the association with the comic performer that made it a 'comic object'. I started photographing objects associated with comic performances but dissociated from the presence of the performer, lacking the comedic body [page 29]. I became particularly interested in objects that were added to the body and became part of the body such as Charlie Chaplin's bowler hat or Harold Lloyd's pair of spectacles [page 30]. These objects have an intimate relationship to the performer's body. They are more than just objects; they stand in for the comic performer—the part stands for the whole. I realised that through an examination of comic objects, I had been lead back to the body. I also realised that the best way to examine the role of the body within the gag was for me to substitute my own body for that of the performer's. I returned to re-enacting specific comedic moments from Buster Keaton that incorporated both image and text [page 31].

It soon became apparent, however, that there was limited mileage in the photograph because the still image did not communicate the entirety of a gesture in the way that the moving image did. This was particularly important given that the direction of my writing had turned to stand-up comedy performers. It became clear very quickly that the best

way for me to scrutinise the relationship between the visual and the verbal was to pick selected gags apart through the re-performance of them to video camera [see DVD]. It was through this approach that the practical work became the most instructive and useful for the research concerns and it was at this point that the visual work and written work began speaking to each other most successfully.

The video works I have made can be separated into three areas: those that deal with the silent gag (*Shorts*); those that deal with the stand-up gag (*The Rehearsal*, *The Understudy*) and those that deal with the materiality of a gag (*It's Research*).

Shorts is a series of re-enactments of different gags by Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin [page 32]. The majority are silent, but for one that uses speech. In the works, the references to the original context of the gag are removed. The props remain (bread rolls, a cocktail shaker, a bowler hat...) but backdrops and sets are gone. Instead, the gags are performed in a studio in front of a white or black backdrop. The work is entirely focused on the moment of the gag abstracted from the overall narrative.

A similar method is employed in the work on stand-up comedy. References to the original context remain within the work (the use of a black curtain to refer to a stage and a microphone stand) but no attempt is made to film the work in the style of the source DVD (moving cameras and multiple camera angles) or to involve a live audience. Rather, the gags are re-performed in a studio. The only audience is the static camera.

The Rehearsal marks the beginning of my re-performance of stand-up comedy. It involves a short performance to camera, incorporating the use of props, of a Bill Hicks routine. The work shows the full body of the

performer, making explicit the relationship between the words being spoken and the gestures being simultaneously made.

From here I moved on to make *The Understudy*, a further examination of the stand-up gag through the removal of certain performance elements [page 33]. I began by performing to camera the words from an extract of a Richard Pryor routine and the words from an extract of a Jo Brand routine. The image shows a headshot of the performer, thus removing any relationship between the words being spoken and the gestures that the performer may have simultaneously made. I attempted to recite the words in as deadpan a way as possible, using my own (Scottish) accent, trying not to make facial expressions. This helped me to examine how closely linked the performer is to his or her material, both in terms of bodily gesture and in terms of physical presence. After making this work I then performed the gestures that accompanied the words of the routines. This work involves my full body and is edited in a way that emphasises specific gestures. These two separate videos are then projected simultaneously, allowing the visual and verbal elements of the work that are stripped down, to be united again in a reconfiguration.

It's Research was made when I was embarking on an examination of what it is that constitutes a gag [page 34]. It is a spoof television programme involving myself as the only performer within the show, playing every part. The work foregrounds the techniques of its production through self-reference and incongruities and was instrumental in helping me examine the relationship between the gag, narrative, context and the performer.

There is an element of mimesis within the body of video work, an imitation of certain comedic performances. It is not impersonation, but rather a re-presentation, a removal of some elements of the performance and a mimicking of others. I repeat the words originally spoken verbatim. I mimic an action as it appears on screen. Yet on both occasions I do it as *me*, rather than as an impersonation of the original performer. This approach allows me (and my viewer) to really look at the material of the gag and to see what has been removed from (or indeed added to) the original performance. It allows me to evaluate the relationship between the gag and its context, and between the gag and its performer.

The mimesis that the work engages with, the staging of the gags and their re-presentation, allows the viewer to look at what is being seen and heard within the gag. The substitution of my body for that of the original performer foregrounds the material of the gag and asks the viewer to look more closely at what is happening within the gag. My body is a physical presence within the work, as is my voice. The absence of my voice in *Shorts*, for example, allows the viewer to see that the body is, at certain moments, in excess of language. Something is being said through physical gesture that cannot be said through words. Similarly, the absence of my body in *The Understudy Parts I and II (Speaking)* and the subsequent re-introduction of my body in *The Understudy Parts I and II (Moving)*, allows the viewer to see how the relationship between the spoken word and gesture may be constructed in order to create the gag. There are moments when words alone solicit laughter. There are moments where gestures alone solicit laughter. It is the separation and reunion of these moments in the work that allows the viewer to consider something of their relationship to each other. And this is only possible through the

mimesis present in the work, through the separation of voice and body, word and gesture.

The work I have made (both practical and written) has come about from intense looking and listening, from taking specific comedic moments and teasing them apart, unpicking them and scrutinising their component parts. The methodology has been practice-led and has involved working within the framework of three separate close readings of particular comedic works. Although I have looked at artists using humour within their work,² I have chosen not to write about them. This is because an examination of a time-based comedic moment seems to offer me more. The three performers I have chosen to look at were all selected because of the ways they use their bodies to communicate in their work. There is a relationship between the visual and the verbal in all three performers' work that allows me a specific way of examining each relationship.

The project has been empirically driven from the beginning, which has been a specific methodological choice. There are moments within my writing where I look to an existing body of thought and employ it. There are moments when it seems appropriate to turn to existing knowledge and put it to use. These moments allow me to tease out my ideas and make my propositions about the gag. And the work is just that: a series of propositions. The work lies in a series of intense instances of looking and listening that offer me moments of understanding.

Finally, some words must be said about my own use of words. I find the terminology surrounding my project problematic. Humour,

² Artists such as John Baldessari, Joseph Beuys, Maurizio Cattelan, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Fischli and Weiss, Andrea Fraser, The Guerrilla Girls, Jeff Koons, Peter Land, Sean Landers, Louise Lawler, Sarah Lucas, Paul McCarthy, Bruce Nauman, Hayley Newman, Richard Prince, Ed Ruscha, Cindy Sherman, Gavin Turk, Mark Wallinger, Gillian Wearing and William Wegman.

comedy, amusing, funny, laughter, joke, gag: all terms I find myself using questioningly, rather than with certainty. I find them problematic because each one requires the use of another in its definition. For example, I may say that humour is the appreciation of something funny, or that humour is the use of wit to provoke laughter. But then I am in the position of defining the terms 'funny', 'wit' and 'laughter' without using the word 'humour'. Salvatore Attardo tells us in *Linguistic Theories of Humor* that:

Linguists, psychologists and anthropologists have taken humour to be an all-encompassing category, covering any event or object that elicits laughter, amuses, or is felt to be funny.³

I find myself using the term 'humour', when no other word or phrase seems appropriate. It is indeed a general term, but the context that I use it in gives it some specificity. 'Comedy' is equally as general a term, but at least brings with it some reference to performance. Humour seems to refer to a response (that of laughter), comedy to the stimulus. 'Amusing' and 'funny' are problematic due to their equally subjective nature. I can never say 'this is funny', but only 'I find this funny'. This leads me to the problem of the gags I discuss (and here I decide to say gag, rather than joke).⁴ I recognise that they solicit laughter from their viewer. But my readers may not find them funny. I hope that if this is the case, you will indulge the fact that I have labelled them so.

³ For further sources and discussion of this problem, see A. Salvatore, *Linguistic Theories of Humor*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin, 1994, p. 4.

⁴ Further discussion of my use of the term gag rather than joke can be found in Chapter One.

Introduction: The Visual and The Verbal

Humour is universal. It is culturally constructed, shifting throughout history. What people laugh at is a product of their historical, personal, social and political context. One element of humour that is created with the intention of provoking laughter from its audience is comedy and it is comedy that this research concerns itself with.

What is it about comedy that I want to say? I want to look at comedy and ask what purpose it serves, other than providing entertainment or pleasure (as if this were not enough). I am interested in the moments that solicit our laughter and what is expressed in those moments. What happens after the laughter has stopped, has our thinking been changed in any way? My way of approaching these questions has been to look at two very different types of comedy, silent and stand-up, and examine specific moments from both that I consider to be revealing.

Silent comedy and stand-up comedy have different ways of soliciting laughter from their audiences. Both use elements of the visual and the verbal in different degrees and to different ends. Silent comedy is primarily a visual medium whereas stand-up comedy relies on the verbal for its effects. However, stand-up comedy incorporates a greater element of the visual than silent comedy does the verbal.⁵ In a stand-up routine the audience watch the performer on stage as much as they listen. It is what they see in combination with what they hear that creates the comedy. What

⁵ Stand-up comedy involves both the spoken word and the physical gestures of the performer. Silent comedy's only use of the verbal is in the form of occasional intertitles.

happens within this relationship between the visual and the verbal that demands from the audience a reaction further to their laughter? How does the relationship combine to offer them the opportunity to change thought? How do the visual and the verbal work together to challenge the audience's thinking?

In order for me to answer these questions I have chosen specific works from three particular performers. To address my concerns in relation to silent comedy I will look at Buster Keaton's film *Sherlock Jr.* The film relies on the visual for the majority of its comedy, but there are moments within the work that the verbal is also employed for comedic effect. An examination of this film will allow me to discover what the specific comedic moments within it express and to what effect.

My examination of stand-up comedy will focus on Richard Pryor's *Live in Concert* and Jo Brand's *Barely Live*. Pryor's work has been chosen for the physical nature of his performance style and for the relationship between himself and his material. Pryor's comedy is inherently linked to his own position in the world: as male, as black (specifically, as African-American), as heterosexual, as working class. Examining how he communicates his perception of the world (from his own position within it) through his use of physical movement and spoken word will allow me to discover the relationship between the visual and verbal and what the use of that relationship can communicate to an audience.

As with Pryor, Brand's material is linked to her own position in the world: as female, as mother, as heterosexual, as working class. Like Pryor, Brand uses her body in the delivery of her material. But Brand's performance style is markedly different from that of Pryor.

Brand uses her body in almost the opposite way to Pryor; he is animated and energetic, she paces slowly making small gestures. It is the physicality of her body that Brand uses in her work. Her material deals with what she looks like, and how people treat her as a result. Examining the link between Brand's physicality and her spoken material will further my understanding of the relationship between the visual and the verbal and the communicative potential of that relationship.

Each performer has therefore been chosen for the particular elements that she or he brings to my research, and although these elements differ between performers, they all share a commonality: each performer makes use of his or her body in the construction of their comedy. How they do this, and to what effect, will be examined in more depth in the following chapters.

Each performer that I will be examining occupies a different place in cultural history. Buster Keaton is considered one of the four 'great comic minds' of the silent comedy era.⁶ Similarly, Richard Pryor is often deemed a 'modern master' of stand-up comedy, frequently labelled 'genius'.⁷ Jo Brand is a contemporary performer, whose enduring impact on culture is yet to be determined, but her culturally critical material is suggestive of lasting importance. Despite the differences in the historical and cultural standing of these three performers, I approach the work in relation to the concerns of my own research, in relation to my own position as a researcher. This position is linked to gender, race, sexuality, class

⁶ See for example G. Mast, *The Comic Mind: Comedy and the Movies*, New English Library, London, 1974.

⁷ See for example M. Watkins, *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy from Slavery to Chris Rock*, Lawrence Hill Books, New York, 1994.

and language. By approaching the performances from this position, it is possible for me to tease out some ideas surrounding the issues that the works deal with.⁸ This position enables me to study the relationship between the visual and the verbal in terms of what that relationship expresses to me. This inquiry begins then, for me, with an examination of the gag.

⁸ I do not pretend to look at these works with an understanding of their meaning for their original audiences (particularly Keaton and Pryor, who I am the most removed from historically). It is possible to tell from the reactions in the DVD recordings that I will be working from how the audiences respond to the stand-up performances. However, it is not their reactions to the gags that particularly interest me, but what the gags themselves express. The silent comedy DVD offers me no evidence of how an audience may have responded to the gags in the work. Again the audience's reaction is not of particular interest to me. It is what the gags express that I am concerned with.

Chapter One: The Gag

I would like to avoid the too general use of the word 'humour' and instead think about the more specific concept of 'the gag'. This seems to me to be a better phrase than, for example, 'the joke', which only refers to language and has to be prefixed with the word 'visual' if I want to talk about humour arising from an amusing sight of some sort. The gag, however, can refer to either the visual or verbal equally, without the need for a prefix.

In his book *Pie and Chase*, Donald Crafton speaks of the basic problems of defining the term 'gag' because it is 'marked by affective response, not set forms or logic'.⁹ But surely this does not mean I cannot attempt to question what it is that constitutes a gag? Surely this does not mean I cannot attempt to question my own understanding of the term 'gag'? It is important for me to question what it is a gag can consist of because a large part of understanding the relationship between the visual elements and verbal elements of comedy is identifying what it is that constitutes a gag in the first place.

Perhaps at this point I should say something about the nature of the gag as I perceive it and why I consider it to be so worthy of scrutiny. Without wishing to state the obvious, it seems to me that a gag is a constructed moment that has been designed to make its audience laugh. It may involve a person, people, objects, words, and very often a combination of all four. The gag is intended, deliberate, designed. It is created in order to solicit laughter. Something comical happening in the course of life is not a gag, even if the event causes laughter. If I trip and fall

⁹ D. Crafton, *Pie and Chase: Gag, Spectacle and Narrative in Slapstick Comedy*, in K. B. Karnick and H. Jenkins (eds.), *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, Routledge, New York, 1995, p. 109.

over, many will find this amusing, but it is not a gag in itself unless I intended it as such. The gag has a point of creation, a method of distribution and an instant of reception.

Does the gag exist by and for itself? Those that I will be looking at have been created to provide entertainment and pleasure within a comic performance. They solicit laughter, and once this has been achieved, they do not linger for long. The place of the gag is taken by another one, also seeking to make us laugh. They are fleeting and constant, arriving one by one, demanding the physiological response 'ha ha ha' and then are gone. But once they are gone, does something not remain? Has the gag not instructed our thinking in some way, caused a change in our thinking in some way? If so, this is a powerful moment.

The gags that I will be looking at do not tell me something and leave it at that, they tell me one thing, and then express something further. Often I perceive a gag immediately and I 'get' it. I understand the humour and I laugh. It is after this, in reflection, that I begin to consider the further meaning that can be inferred from the gag. This is a complex process that is largely dependent on the background of the viewer of the gag.¹⁰ For example, the following joke can be interpreted in a number of ways:

*Why did Helen Keller masturbate with one hand?
So she could moan with the other.*

¹⁰ I am avoiding the use of the term 'intention' here because much of the time a gag is created without conscious knowledge of the effect on the viewer (other than laughter). It may be that the comedian has made a gag and did not realise at the point of creation the levels of effect of that gag. It is impossible to be completely aware of the effect that the gag will have on its audience. Sometimes a viewer of a gag will experience a moment of self-awareness, of clarity, of understanding. Other times she will experience revulsion. There are endless possible responses to a gag, regardless of the creator's intention.

To understand this joke at all, the reader must have an awareness of who Helen Keller was, or at least understand that she was deaf, dumb and blind and communicated with hand gesture. Assuming that the reader does indeed know who Helen Keller was, the joke then becomes most successful when she allows her understanding of the words to create a visual picture in her mind. This joke creates a strong visual image for me and it is from this that I derive the humour. On realising that this joke is, at face value, making fun (in a particularly cruel way) of disability, the reader has a number of options available. Traditional superiority theories would suggest that the reader might feel superior to Keller (not having any of her disabilities) and laugh as a result. Or maybe there is a conflict in the mind of the reader between disability and sexuality? Perhaps the idea of a disabled woman having sexual needs is incompatible and therefore laughable?

◇¹¹ The basis of the superiority theory is that we laugh when we compare ourselves favourably to others as being less stupid, less ugly, less unfortunate and less weak. According to this theory mockery, ridicule and the foolish actions of others are all central to the humour experience. Aristotle was

¹¹ The use of indented text and '◇' symbol indicates a change in the register of voice used within the text. The indented text functions in a different way from the main body of writing, but requires to be placed within the writing at this point. For example, the discussion of humour theories here is relevant to the argument at this point, but is disruptive to the momentum of it. Similarly, there are moments within the writing when I turn to existing bodies of thought (for example, Julia Kristeva's notions of abjection or Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque) and discuss their application to my work. The moments of reflection and questioning that occur within indented passages (particularly in Chapter 4) are to be read in relation to the main argument, but separately from the main body of text.

perhaps the first to write about the superiority theory in *The Poetics* in which he says that the ludicrous is to be found in some defect, deformity or ugliness that is neither painful nor destructive.¹² The sixteenth century philosopher Thomas Hobbes also believed in the value of this superiority theory declaring laughter to be a 'sudden kind of glory', which we achieve primarily by observing the infirmities of others and comparing them with the eminency in ourselves. We can, however, also laugh at ourselves, provided that our infirmities are in the past and we are conscious of having overcome them.¹³ Alexander Bain takes this theory further by stating that we don't always have to be conscious of our own superiority. We can, for example, laugh sympathetically with another who scores off his adversary. Bain also says it does not necessarily need to be a person as the subject of derision; it may be an idea, an institution or 'an inanimate thing that by personification has contracted associations of dignity'.¹⁴ A.M. Ludovici believed humour to be a case of superior adaptation.¹⁵ The humour is found in one person believing himself to be better adapted

¹² Aristotle, *The Poetics*, translated by S.H. Butcher, Cosimo Classics, New York, 2008, p. 9.

¹³ T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Oxford World's Classics, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008, p. 38

¹⁴ A. Bain, *The Emotions and The Will*, Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1865, p. 249.

¹⁵ See A.M. Ludovici, *The Secret of Laughter*, Constable and Co. Ltd., London, 1932.

to a situation than someone else: the greater the dignity of the victim, the greater the amusement.¹⁶

On another level, this joke moves speech from an aural to a kinetic level. Keller does not audibly moan, she signs her moans with gestures. This is incongruous and perplexing: why would a moan need to be signed? How can a moan be signed? Is it the absurdity of the occurrence, then, that provokes laughter? The following bring about similar responses:

*How did Helen Keller burn her left ear?
Answering the iron.
How did Helen Keller burn her right ear?
They called back.*

A typical response to this type of joke (as with the previous example) might be what Mary Klages terms a 'laugh-wince', which represents a moment of simultaneous resistance and acceptance.¹⁷ Perhaps the reader recognises the violation of social taboo here. These jokes are certainly not politically correct, so the reader laughs at the joke and then chides herself for laughing at something that she should not find funny. These jokes remove Helen Keller from being representative of certain cultural values (we are supposed to admire her and the values she symbolizes). So laughter reinforces that removal and the wince reinstates the values. And what about the teller of these jokes? Perhaps he thinks the jokes are funny and uphold certain beliefs about disability and stupidity. Or perhaps the

¹⁶ For further discussion of humour theories see J. H. Goldstein and P. E. McGhee, *The psychology of Humour*, Academic Press, London and New York, 1972 and D. H. Monroe, *Argument of Laughter*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Victoria, 1951.

¹⁷ See M. Klages, *What to Do with Helen Keller Jokes: A Feminist Act*, in R. Barreca, (ed.), *New Perspectives on Women and Comedy*, Gordon And Breach, Philadelphia, 1992.

teller is repeating them as a way of empowering people with disability, reiterating such (potentially) offensive jokes as a way of diffusing any sort of power they might have. But these are not things I necessarily consider on first hearing the joke. First comes my laugh, then my wince, and then my philosophising.

Gag Narrative

When thinking about a comic text, and here I am referring to anything from a film, play or novel to a stand-up routine, the question seems to be whether analysis should be based on individual gags and their structure, or upon larger units such as comic character or narrative. The structure of the minimum unit (the gag) seems to be a necessary basis to work from, as it is likely that all other aspects of the comic text will stem from the base unit gag: the theory of visual or verbal comedy demands an examination of what constitutes a gag as its necessary foundation. It is by closely examining a gag that the visual and verbal relationship within it will be revealed.

There is much debate amongst film criticism on the relationship between gag and narrative. Some argue for the irreconcilability of gags and narrative, others that gags subvert narrative logic or disrupt it.¹⁸ I am particularly interested in gag and narrative in relation to context, and wonder how well a gag would function outwith a narrative. This question applies as much to the two stand-up performances as it does the silent film that I will be looking at. Clearly a narrative supports the gags within the silent film. The stand-up performances also support a narrative structure.

¹⁸ K. B. Karnick and H. Jenkins, *Funny Stories*, in K.B. Karnick and H. Jenkins (eds.), *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, Routledge, New York, 1995, p. 85.

This structure is not as plot driven as the silent film, but the stand-up performers all use story and anecdote as comic devices to incorporate their gags into their work, and more often than not there is a theme overriding the whole performance. These themes, stories and anecdotes create a sense of 'wholeness' in the performances. Their performances feel like complete bodies of work, rather than a random collection of unconnected gags.¹⁹ This realisation begs the question, then, can a gag be as successful if it exists without reference to anything else?

It seems to me that there cannot be a gag that does not have, on some level, an element of narrative involved. All gags have two stages: the preparation stage and the culmination stage. In verbal humour this is often termed 'setting up the joke' and the 'punch line'. Even the most primitive gag demonstrates a beginning and an end: when I fall over to amuse my nephew, I start the gag standing and finish horizontal on the floor. Can this physical transformation be referred to as a narrative? Or is it the external knowledge that the gag requires that is linked to narrative? My nephew accepts the normality of my body standing erect; he does not consciously think that thought, but he knows it. When I fall over he then knows that this is an abnormal act. My body is contravening its normal state and, as long as I safely get back up again, he laughs at this.

In Fischli and Weiss's *Sausage Photographs* from 1979 I understand from prior experience of the world that sausages do not usually dress up and parade down a catwalk. In fact, sausages are for the most part

¹⁹ It is entirely possible that the stand-up performances are indeed a random collection of unconnected gags that the comics have weaved into their narratives. If so, the fact that they have done this is telling: there is a strength that the narrative gives to their work. The narrative assists in the generation of laughter from the audience.

inanimate²⁰ and serve the sole purpose of being food. So when in the photograph *Fashion Show* [page 58] I see sausages arranged with human attributes such as hair, eyes and clothes, balancing on a bathroom shelf, I understand the humour as a result of my prior knowledge about the nature of sausages. Is this external information I need to get the joke part of the narrative of the gag?

At this point, then, I can say three things about gags and narrative: a single gag has narrative in itself; a sequence of gags together creates a narrative and the comic text the gags are part of has another narrative of its own.²¹ Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik discuss the second point in their book *Popular Film and Television Comedy*. They tell us that a sequence of gags is a comic event: a comedic moment that is *inseparable* from the narrative. A single gag, on the other hand, *disrupts* the narrative.²² If this is so, then what effect does the disruption have? Tom Gunning suggests that disruptions serve as ‘attractions ... distractions from the narrative aims of the plot’.²³ But again, what effect does this have? Surely a gag serves more purpose than being a distraction from the plot? Is it not the gag that instructs the audience? Is it not precisely the gag that does the telling? Near the end of Buster Keaton’s short film *Cops*, Buster has managed to drive his horse-drawn cart into the middle of a parade of marching police officers, to the fury of the crowd. Buster mistakes their angry hand gestures as waves and tips his hat in response. The parade

²⁰ At least, they are once they have *become* sausages.

²¹ This could be, in terms of a film, the plot. Or it could be the structure or theme a stand-up comic has constructed in order to frame his or her collection of gags.

²² S. Neale and F. Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, Routledge, London, 1990, pp. 44 – 57.

²³ T. Gunning, *Crazy Machines in the Garden of Forking Paths: Mischief Gags and the Origins of American Film Comedy*, in K.B. Karnick and H. Jenkins (eds.), *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, p. 97.



'Fashion Show', Sausage Photographs, Fischli and Weiss, 1979

comes to a halt and Buster makes use of the opportunity to light a cigarette, although he cannot find his matches. From the roof of a building, an anarchist (we did not use the term 'terrorist' so readily then) throws a bomb, which lands beside Buster on his cart. He picks it up and lights his cigarette with the fuse before carelessly tossing it aside into the parade, where it explodes, shocking his horse into bolting. The rest of the film is an extended chase. It is possible to see from this short sequence how integral the gags are to the progression of the story as well as how the gags can show us something new. The plot development in this example is hinged entirely on Buster mistakenly throwing the bomb into the crowd, resulting in him being hunted by the entire police department of Los Angeles. The only reason Buster even has the bomb in his hand is because he is using it for a lighter. He has not recognised the true function of the bomb because he is so wrapped up in lighting his cigarette. The comical substitution of one object for another has directly driven the plot forward. Additionally, Keaton shows us comic misrepresentation with this gag. He has substituted matches for the fuse of a bomb. Two separate objects have been condensed into one function, comically demonstrating the disastrous consequences that can occur when one is not entirely paying attention, when one is entirely wrapped in oneself. Buster's misplaced narcissism provokes our laughter. In this case it is the gag that instructs us. It is the gag that does the telling.

I can see from these examples that the most intriguing gags have complex perceptual or emotional resonance and are inextricably linked with context; they do not function by and for themselves, but instead relate to everything around them. A gag has a clear form. Action happens either visually, verbally, or a combination of both and the desired audience

response to it is immediate laughter. This action revolves around the use of the body. A performer uses his or her body in the enactment of a gag, either through speech or physical bodily movement. Even the term 'gag' itself seems to refer to something of the body.²⁴ The next question for me to address, then, is how does the body figure in comedy; how is the body used in the production of the gag?

The Body

A comic performer is physical and recognisable, and both these elements are employed frequently for comedic effect. A comic performer uses his or her body in the production of a gag, through the utterance of speech, through facial expression, through gesture and physical movement. The body is the comic performer's instrument. But even before the gag has been produced, very often the performer uses his or her body to signify the fact that she or he is a comic figure. How, then, does a comic performer play with this visually recognisable status, and to what effect?

Silent comedy in particular relies on the visual in the production of its gags. The performers of silent film use their bodies in very physical ways. The viewer watches them on screen and must follow the narrative through physical action. Textual captions are useful for clarification, but overuse becomes tedious for the viewer. As a result of this emphasis on visual movement, the silent comedy performer needs to exaggerate his physicality in order to communicate his story and, indeed, his humour. So the body becomes extremely important. Without the use of audible speech, the body is the only tool left. The viewer's engagement with a

²⁴ A gag is an object, usually a cloth, put in or over someone's mouth to prevent speech. It is also a medical device used to keep a patient's mouth open and a term used to refer to the process of retching caused by the sensation of nausea.

silent comedy film is therefore primarily experienced by the imagery and action of the humour, with the visual gags.

Silent comedy is a genre of comedy performance that involves exaggerated physical violence and relies on the audience knowing that such embellished violence exceeds the boundaries of possibility (that is, without extreme harm befalling the participants), and as a result licensing their laughter. Hugely theatrical, physical gestures are key characteristics of the silent comedy technique.²⁵ In *Harold Lloyd's World of Comedy*, Lloyd is quoted commenting on the physicality of the comic performer:

Most successful comedians are funny not only in their facial expressions, but the way their bodies express themselves. One of the reasons television is handicapped when it comes to comedy is that you're too close up. But comedians in the early days did not have to be close up. The way they moved their feet, their arms, their shoulders, the way they stood, or fell, were all funny.²⁶

It is clear then that silent comedy revolves around the body. Comic movements tend to be emphatically physical, but as Lloyd points out to us, even standing still can provoke laughter.

In addition to their physical skills, comic performers are also required to be visually recognisable as a comic figure. They foreground something in their appearance through an excess of visibility. As a result, many of the inhabitants of the silent comedy world demonstrate physically extraordinary traits such as unusual height or a remarkably

²⁵ As the genre developed, a range of techniques became traditionally employed by the picture makers: speeding up action by cranking the camera slowly; using cloth bricks and breakaway bottles and vases; the double take and slow-burn; pursuits; chases and most essential of all; the pratfall. These techniques became utilised so frequently, they may now be considered clichés.

²⁶ See W. Cahn, *Harold Lloyd's World of Comedy*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1966, pp. 59-60.

rotund figure. In fact, they are more often than not larger and wilder and more colourful than life, as David Robinson explains in his book *The Great Funnies*:

They might be fat or thin, giants or dwarfs, with oversize trousers and undersize hats, tangled spectacles and overgrown moustaches; but in any case they were ridiculous, monstrous, adorable caricatures of reality.²⁷

There are many examples of the ‘adorable caricatures’ that Robinson describes. Charley Chase was long and gangly, Fatty Arbuckle was rotund and childlike, Ben Turpin had crossed eyes, Chester Conklin, Snub Pollard and Mack Swain all sported over-sized moustaches. Each performer utilised one or more visual characteristics that made him instantly identifiable as a comic figure [page 63].

And of course, I must not forget the most recognisable of all: Charlie Chaplin. All I need is a small black moustache and bowler hat and I am instantly familiar as The Tramp. Chaplin’s entire visual persona was designed to be comical, from the oversized trousers and shoes to the waddling walk. This might go some way to explain why he is the most mimicked of all the silent performers [page 64].

But it is not only the silent performers who utilise comic physical features. Even once sound was introduced to filmmaking, performers continued to play with the comic potential of visual characteristics. For example, Laurel and Hardy make use of their opposing statures²⁸ and the

²⁷ D. Robinson, *The Great Funnies: A History of Film Comedy*, Littlehampton Book Services Ltd, England, 1969, p. 45.

²⁸ Laurel was tall and thin, Hardy short and fat.



Charley Chase, Fatty Arbuckle
Ben Turpin, Chester Conklin
Snub Pollard, Mack Swain



Charlie Chaplin

Marx Brothers wear wigs and facial hair.²⁹ Contemporary performers also understand the importance of comic visual features. For example, Lee Evans³⁰ has enormous ears and Billy Connolly³¹ has long, unruly hair and dyes his facial hair unnatural colours [page 66]. These performers all know that through the visual expression of the comic nature of their work, their audience will be more receptive to the gags, more willing to laugh.

Audience Relationship

At this point it seems important to look in greater depth at the relationship between the viewer and the comic figure. How does a performer play with his visually recognisable character in order to generate a gag? What do these gags express to the viewer? A greater understanding of the complexities of comic performance could help me address the interaction between the audience and the performer in the process of making and remaking meaning.

Much of the material I have been looking at foregrounds the comic figure's role as a performer rather than a realistic character. The performer is allowed to acknowledge the presence of the audience in some way, without being concerned that the viewer's suspension of disbelief will be detrimentally affected. Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, the Marx Brothers, and Monty Python's Flying Circus are all performers who do this.

Comedy parades the performer as performer. The comedian is defined more by his specific performance skills than by the character

²⁹ Groucho Marx's facial hair was not even hair; it was actually painted on to create a further layer of comedy.

³⁰ A young British stand-up comedian and comic actor.

³¹ A British performer who first achieved fame in the 1970s as a folk singer before embarking on a career as a stand-up comedian and actor.



Laurel and Hardy, The Marx Bros.
Lee Evans, Billy Connolly

traits and social roles that the comic text ascribes to him. The emotional appeal of his work relies as much on sequences displaying his skills as it does on his involvement in particular stories. References to the comic's persona, to the earlier work of the comedian, or to the entertainment industry all bear a relationship to the exhibition of the self, in the sense of the individual personality or the role that personality plays within comedy's commercial and cultural operations. For example, when Buster Keaton wears his porkpie hat even in situations that he wouldn't normally, this is a reference to 'Buster' the character, the character he always plays regardless of the context of the film. When he is in the Wild West he wears the porkpie hat, despite the fact that everyone else is wearing cowboy hats, and when he is diving in the ocean he wears a porkpie hat outside his diving helmet [page 68]. These are references to Keaton's career and the character he plays again and again.

I can see that both silent and stand-up comedy directly acknowledge the spectator and enunciate, 'look at me perform!' Genres such as westerns, melodramas, detective stories, gangster films, situation comedies, romances and so on, all invite spectator identification with characters, rather than supporting audience awareness of the performance. The audience is encouraged to forget that they are watching a performance. However, genres such as film comedies, cartoons and musicals are marked by a more open and expansive narrative structure that acknowledges the spectator. Here the audience is repeatedly reminded that they are watching a performance, usually by being directly addressed by the performer or by the performer making reference to him or herself as a performer (as in the case above where Keaton refers to his comic persona through the perpetual wearing of his porkpie hat, even in



Keaton in *Go West*, 1925
Keaton in *The Navigator*, 1924

inappropriate situations). These references and direct addresses would spoil a more traditional narrative, where performers are never allowed to step out of character. This stepping out of character highlights the artificiality of the performance and reminds the audience that what is being viewed is a production, an invention, an artistic creation.

◇ The constant reminder to the audience that they are watching a performance is resonant of 'Epic Theatre', a theory and practice of theatre that Bertolt Brecht was the main advocate of. One of the main aims of epic theatre was that the audience always be aware that it is a play that is being watched. The main techniques used to achieve this include montage, interruption and direct address to the audience by the actors.³²

Stepping out of character can be done in a number of ways. Visually, the comedian is permitted fictional rupture through a glance to the camera, for example the way Oliver Hardy looks to the audience for sympathy when Stan Laurel gets him in 'another fine mess' [page 70]. Verbally, the comedian is allowed to break the narrative by addressing the audience directly, for example when Woody Allen looks at the camera in the film 'Annie Hall' and asks 'what do you do when you're stuck in a movie line with a guy like this behind you?' [page 70].

³² For a full discussion of Brecht's Epic Theatre see J. Willett (ed.), *Brecht On Theatre*, Methuen Drama, London, 1964, pp. 121-129.



Oliver Hardy's look to camera
Woody Allen in *Annie Hall*

While such gags mock the principle of classical narrative, they simultaneously reaffirm the special nature of the comedian (as performer and licensed eccentric) and of comedy as a general space in which the conventional rules of fiction and identity are turned upside down.

In silent comedy, the look to the camera was the functional equivalent of the vaudeville aside. Chaplin did it frequently and the films of Laurel and Hardy are permeated with camera looks. Even when the use of sound came along they still retained the device rather than speak to the camera. With other performers though, verbal address to the camera became the dominant way of acknowledging the spectator's presence. In *Horse Feathers*, an early sound comedy, Groucho Marx frequently steps out of character to offer sarcastic remarks to the camera about the fictional situation and other characters. In *Go West* he stuffs a handkerchief in a villain's mouth and says to the camera 'you know, this is the best gag in the picture' [page 72].

Manipulation of the Media

As well as audience acknowledgement, comedy also allows the performer to adopt a knowing stance toward film devices and the production of the medium. Traditionally within a narrative film the work suppresses all traces of its telling, but with comedy it continually breaks such illusions. The Marx Brothers film *Duck Soup* foregrounds the techniques of its production through impossible visual effects. At one point there is a close up of a dog tattoo on a character's body. As we look at the drawing we begin to realise that it is in fact a live dog and it is moving on his body as if animated in some way. Later on during a battle sequence Groucho Marx exclaims, 'help is on the way!' The film then cuts to stock footage of fire



Groucho Marx's look to camera
Groucho Marx in *Horse Feathers*

engines, police, runners, monkeys, elephants and so on all running in the same screen direction. By manipulating standard visual and aural filmic devices in this way, the comedian is allowed to reference the fact that she or he is performing in a production. It is an illusion, not a reality, and the comedian plays visually and verbally to remind the audience of this. Steve Seidman puts it succinctly in his book *Comedian Comedy: a Tradition in Hollywood Film*:

In comedian comedy, both the comedian's awareness of the spectator's presence and the assertion of his own presence are factors which work toward described enunciation.³³

In narrative film the enunciators of the story are inscribed within it, without drawing attention to their roles. The writers, producers, directors, actors and so on all work towards telling their story, without referencing their existence, allowing the viewer to suspend their disbelief. Within comedy, however, very often the teller of the story is the comedian himself, who draws attention to his role as enunciator. He references the fact that he is performing for the viewer. He, as Seidman puts it, describes his enunciation.

Seidman summarises this type of comedy under two areas, formal conventions and thematic concerns. He says that formal conventions are the self-conscious acknowledgment of the performer as performer through direct address, masquerade and impersonation. Thematic concerns are the intervention between eccentric behaviour and social

³³ S. Seidman, *Comedian Comedy: a Tradition in Hollywood Film*, UMI Research Press, Oxford, 1981, p. 30.

conformity, the imperfect integration of the comedian into the adult social order.

Seidman's model concerns itself with the mediation between fiction and performance and with the negotiation between the conflicting demands of social conformism and counter-cultural impulses; for example, imagination, creativity, infantilism and excessive erotic desires. This analysis of comedy stresses the tension between the audience's knowledge of the performer as performer and the specific requirements for his or her personification within a particular filmic text.³⁴

Frank Krutnik writes in his article 'The Clown-Prints of Comedy' that the comedian is marked within the text as having a 'privileged status' compared to the other characters/actors. She or he is less fictionally integrated and has a relatively disruptive function in relation to the fictional world and its rules of behaviour and action. While realistic fiction defines the screen as a mirror of the real world, the comedian's performance redefines it as a playground, revealing its natural laws as arbitrary conventions that are open to disruption and playful appropriation. Comedian films (and cartoons and comics) provide the pleasure of watching the breakdown of classical narrative structures, offering a narrative exposition that is 'spoiled' by actors who 'step out of character'.³⁵

As I have said, direct address to the camera is often read as breaking the narrative and foregrounding the production of performance. Address to camera conflicts with the dominant narrative convention that

³⁴ See S. Seidman, *Performance, Enunciation and Self-reference in Hollywood Comedian Comedy*, in F. Krutnik, (ed.), *Hollywood Comedians: The Film Reader*, Routledge, London, 2003.

³⁵ See F. Krutnik, 'The Clown-Prints of Comedy', *Screen* 25, nos 4-5, July-October 1984, p. 51.

events have already happened; that they are plausibly motivated; that they take place in a self-contained fictional world; that narrative performance is intact and that direct address to the camera is prohibited. It is through the use of devices like these that the comedian becomes an unusual and privileged figure within the world of the films in which she or he appears, able to step outside its boundaries and to play with its rules and conventions.

The creators of the BBC television sketch show *Monty Python's Flying Circus* use similar techniques for comedic effect. They bring attention to themselves as performers and producers of a comic sketch show by making reference to the artifice inherent in the television medium they are working within. This produces comic implausibility and allows them to expose the random absurdities and limits of the television medium and its uses. Roger Wilmut comments in *From Fringe to Flying Circus* that:

The idea of taking a basic premise and reversing it is older than Python ... but a particularly Python development is to take the format of something like a television quiz programme or discussion – or indeed anything with a strong and recognisable style of presentation – and then empty the content out of it, replacing it with something ludicrous. The most suitable term for this would be a *format sketch*.³⁶

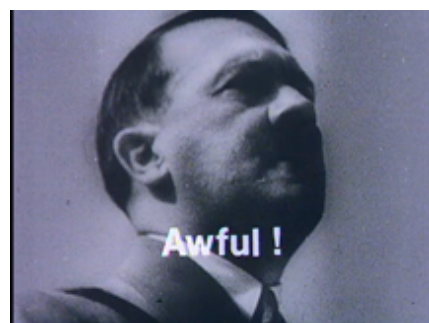
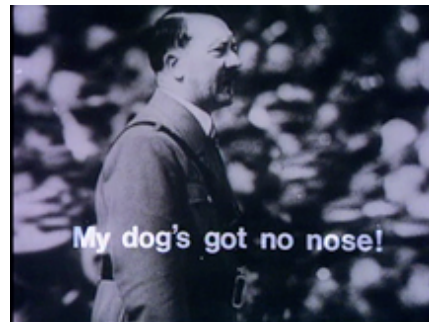
Season One of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* features a mock documentary about a man who writes the funniest joke in the world, but then dies as a result of laughing too hard at it. The documentary explains how the British Military hears about the joke and decides to use it to their gain in

³⁶ R. Wilmut, *From Fringe to Flying Circus*, Eyre Methuen Ltd., London, 1980, p. 198.

fighting the Germans during World War Two. The sketch shows how the joke is tested out on a firing range as if it is a lethal weapon and the safety measures that are required when transferring the joke out into battle. At one point Hitler hears about the new weapon the British are using with great success and attempts to manufacture his own lethal joke. There is then stock footage of Hitler at a rally with a voice over of him telling an age-old joke about his dog that has no nose [page 77]. The whole piece is based on the formal conventions of documentary filmmaking, and pokes fun at the stuffiness of the type of programmes the BBC made about the war (and not only the war, I might add). The fact that a serious style of film is used to deal with the absurd idea of a joke being used as a weapon generates the humour and makes the point very succinctly.

The Python programmes employ a comic foregrounding of the conventions of TV. Much of their work involves a demonstration of the processes involved in making television programmes. Often cameras and studio lights are seen in shot or the camera will pull back from a set to reveal the rest of the studio. Frequently characters can be heard giving editing instructions such as 'cut to me' or 'director, get ready' and stock news footage is regularly used in absurd situations (such as the above example of Hitler at a Nazi rally telling the crowd a clichéd joke).

There is also a comic foregrounding of the conventions of comic forms themselves within much Python work. Often characters from certain sketches appear in other, unrelated vignettes. This draws attention to the fact that the programme is a sketch show, yet flaunts the tradition that each vignette is an autonomous construct with no relationship to any other vignette. Similarly, characters from one sketch will direct the camera to another set in order for the next one to begin.



'The man who wrote the funniest joke in the world'
Monty Python's Flying Circus, The Complete First Series

This type of work stems from Spike Milligan's Q series, the first to abandon the use of the punch line [page 79]. In one sketch Milligan drags his screen wife down to the Travel Agent to complain that three times now he has booked a 'disappear without a trace' ticket for his wife to the Bermuda Triangle, and each time she keeps returning 'like a homing-sock from the Laundromat'. The Travel Agent explains that married women cannot take the trip unaccompanied and Milligan must go with her. The audience then see the pair in an aircraft accompanied by a variety of characters that have all been lost in the Bermuda Triangle: the Captain of a German U-Boat, the Pilot of a British Hurricane, a Pirate and some skeletons. The sketch ends with all the passengers on the doomed aircraft singing the British National Anthem, a sound that comes up through a drain at the beginning of the next sketch. In another sketch Milligan plays a burglar in the Louvre. He comes across the Mona Lisa and quickly cuts the painting from the frame. He then steals the frame, leaving the painting hanging on the wall and shouting, 'I'm rich! I'm rich!' Both sketches refuse the convention of punch line, preferring to end with devices such as self-reference and visual incongruity.

A certain kind of education is necessary to appreciate the type of humour of Milligan and Monty Python. Their work features the names of western philosophers, writers and artists in jokes, sketches and songs, and includes a format sketch in which the object of the local talent contest is to summarize a specific complicated work of literature by Proust. References are often made to the physicality of the television medium and the filmmaking process. Addresses to camera often involve directorial commands: 'cut to me' or 'freeze frame on my face, that's it'. Quotation



Monty Python's Flying Circus
Spike Milligan in *Q Series*

and intertextuality of this type are common devices used in their comic performances. The performer knows he is performing, the audience knows he knows and the performer knows the audience knows. To put it more succinctly: comic performance is often layered with knowingness and this is part of the pleasure.

I can see from Python and Milligan how the comic performer not only breaks the comic narrative through references to himself, but also severs it completely through direct references to the medium he is working within. He directs the audience's attention to both the comic medium and his comic physicality by directly addressing them visually or verbally. In this way, the comic performer manipulates his comic persona, a persona that is connected to both his actions and his appearance. It seems that the gag and the performer are inextricably linked. His excessive visibility allows him to manipulate the medium he works within. His body does not only assist with the creation of his gags, his body is essential to the creation of his gags.

It is now time to witness the comic body in action in the work of Buster Keaton. It is time to look closely at Keaton's comic visibility, at his comic body, and consider what it is that his gags might express to an audience.

Chapter Two: Buster Keaton

The silent film *Sherlock Jr.* is split into two sections. The first part features Buster Keaton as 'the boy', a cinema employee who harbours pretensions of being a detective. When the boy goes to visit his girlfriend, a rival suitor, 'the local Sheik', steals her father's pocket watch and frames him. The boy endeavours to clear his name through detective work but inevitably fails, which leads to the breakdown of his relationship with the young woman.

The second part of the film is effectively a dream sequence. The boy falls asleep while working in the projection room of the film theatre and becomes one of the main characters in the film he is screening. The other characters of the film morph into the people from the boy's day: his girlfriend; her father; the father's assistant and the love rival Sheik. This dream sequence mirrors the events of the day, with the twist of course being that the boy becomes a famous detective (Sherlock Jr.), solves the crime and gets the girl. The dream features some spectacular action, permitting the suspension of our³⁷ disbelief. In the final few minutes of the film the boy wakes from his dream and learns that the girl has cleared his name in real life. It is the ultimate dream-fulfilment fantasy: he fails in real life, goes to sleep and miraculously wakes to a blaze of glory (or at least an apology for the mistake and a tentative kiss).

The film, which has over eighty gags in it, is forty-four minutes long. Clearly it would be impractical, and possibly slightly

³⁷ I do not wish to be presumptuous in my use of the terms 'our' and 'we' when describing my reading of Keaton's work. However, these seem to be the most appropriate terms to use in order to speak of possible readings of Keaton's work and responses to it.

tedious for the reader, were I to discuss each one in turn. Instead I will focus on the gags I find most intriguing and which help me to theorise the relationship between the visual and the verbal within the gag. My focus will be on those gags that involve visual movement in some way. This movement is not only confined to the bodies of the performers; the movement of the film medium, i.e. the editing techniques, and the manipulation of camera angles to generate laughter will also be considered. It is through a close analysis of this type of visual imagery that I find a possible reading of the gags is revealed.

Keaton's Body

In the silent work of Buster Keaton, the best gag he has at his disposal is himself. It is the character of Buster that endures; he is the vessel through which all the other gags occur. Buster as gag is linked to a number of aspects of both physical appearance and behaviour. It seems safe to assume that the most enduring facets of the Buster character are his porkpie hat and deadpan expression. Both these features are used to comedic effect in a number of ways and help Buster to create a visual presence. Buster also has an air of awkwardness and innocence about him. Unfortunate events tend to follow him around through little fault of his own,³⁸ other than perhaps naïveté on occasion. However, Buster accepts these events and usually manages to surmount them, sometimes accidentally and sometimes through the demonstration of extreme physical skill.

³⁸ Unlike Chaplin's Charlie, who often came across as a petty thief and a violent bully.

Many of these aspects of Buster's character can be witnessed in the first scene of *Sherlock Jr.* It opens (after an introductory couple of title pages) with a shot of the boy sitting in an empty movie theatre. He has a deadpan expression and is wearing a porkpie hat and a false moustache, reading a book titled *How to be a Detective*. The audience reads the scene and knows that the boy is at his day job, daydreaming about a more exciting and challenging career. He licks his thumb and presses it to the back of the book, examines it with a magnifying glass and consults the book again. The simplicity with which Buster tries to learn sophisticated forensic techniques seems comically incompatible. Surely there is more to crime detection than saliva patterns and convex glass? [page 84].

Much of the first part of the film features small bodily gags such as this one. In fact, the gags seem to start small and progressively get bigger: the final gag of this part of the film involves Keaton running along the top of a moving train, then descending to the ground thanks to the force of a water spout.³⁹ Although the gags in the second part of the film are more ambitious and create more of a visual spectacle, many of them are repeats of gags we have seen in the first half, with revealing differences.

Repetition features a great deal in the film, as does a large amount of 'mirroring' imagery. The repeated elements are never exactly the same and allow the audience to recognise that repetition is occurring, recall the original gag and identify what it is that has changed since the original. Additionally, the repetition tends to move the narrative along and connect temporally with the previous

³⁹ Keaton actually broke his neck filming this gag – but did not realise until years later when he went for a routine check up.



Buster studies how to become a detective

part of the film. But what is it about the recurrence that provokes laughter? Repetition in itself is not funny. It can be, but it is not always. There can be something boring, infuriating or frightening about that which is repeated. Repetition can be disturbing, a *Groundhog Day*⁴⁰ nightmare with no end in sight. Alternatively, there can be a familiar delight with the repeated. How else are we to explain the popularity and success of *Little Britain*, a BBC television comedy show that seems to repeat the same sketches every week with the same characters and the same catchphrases? In fact, the repeated utterances of *Little Britain* permeate contemporary popular culture, soliciting laughter from their recognition.⁴¹ Running gags also produce a familiar laugh, such as those that the NBC television show *Friends* became known for.⁴² So what is it about the repetition within *Sherlock Jr.* that solicits our laughter?

The repeated gags in *Sherlock Jr.* are spaced out over time, temporally extended over the course of the film. These moments are variations on the same gag, creating a series. Each repeated gag reminds us of the previous one, creating a tension between the two. We remember the previous version and wonder what will be different about this version. If there is a difference, we are delighted. We find humour in the recognition of the previous gag, and we find

⁴⁰ *Groundhog Day* is a film from 1993 directed by Harold Ramis, starring Bill Murray and Andie MacDowell. Murray plays Phil Connors, a TV weatherman who covers the annual Groundhog Day event in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania and finds himself somehow repeating the same day over and over again.

⁴¹ Phrases that include (from the characters): Andy, 'yeah I know'; Carol Beer, 'computer says no'; Eddie (Emily) Howard, 'I'm a lady'; Vicky Pollard, 'no, but yeah, but no, but...'

⁴² *Friends* is an American sitcom about a group of six friends who live in New York. It ran from 1994 to 2004 and throughout that time utilised a number of running gags such as Ross Geller exclaiming, 'we were on a break!' and Chandler Bing's unusual speech intonation, 'the hills are alive, with the sound [pause] OF music.'

further humour in the difference between them, in the way the gag has developed. There is a humorous delight in a duplication of images or ideas, especially if in the duplication the image or idea has changed slightly and so becomes *clever* in its repetition. We can see this clearly in *Sherlock Jr.* in the dream sequence (the second part of the film), which is a repeat of the day's events, with a twist. The images being repeated snowball, layering themselves with their own mirror images and variations on a theme. The repetition becomes a comic glorification of what has already transpired. The first part of the film features the boy failing at everything he attempts, the second part features *Sherlock Jr.* succeeding where the boy went wrong. And when the gag is repeated, but with a twist, we laugh. It is the small gags in the first part of the film, such as the following, that provide the material for much of the repetition and mirroring later on.

Early on in the film the audience sees the boy sweeping up the cinema foyer. This marks the beginning of a comedy routine when a piece of newspaper becomes stuck to his broom. He tries to get rid of it, but each time it sticks to the body part he uses: left foot, right foot, right hand, left hand. Eventually he hears a cinema customer approaching and holds it to the floor where he anticipates the man will step. The newspaper sticks to the man's foot and he transports it away [page 87]. This gag demonstrates clearly to the audience the type of character the boy is. He tries his best at all times, and through no fault of his own, things go wrong, escalating from bad to worse the more he tries to deal with the problem. This creates an acceleration of comic effect throughout the sequence, provoking laughter from the audience as they watch the boy get increasingly frustrated.



Buster sweeps the foyer

The audience can see from the sweeping sequence the narrow viewpoint Buster has. His perceptions are limited to that which is directly in front of him, and it is this that causes him to fail. It is only when he widens his viewpoint that he is able to perceive a solution to the problem. It is the narrow viewpoint that provokes initial laughter from the audience. Buster is completely immersed in his work, performing his task so completely that he is almost mechanical. He carries out the task of sweeping (and trying to get the newspaper off his broom) in such a way that he does not take into account the results of his actions. The newspaper gets stuck on whatever he touches it with, yet he continues to try to get it off using the same method. He appears to be unyielding in his approach, inflexible to alternative solutions. He does not seem to be able to come up with a way out of his situation. Keaton shows the audience that rigidity of thought leads to failure, and this is where the laughter comes from. The audience knows a different approach is needed and laughs at Buster's single-mindedness.

A further layer of humour occurs when Buster finally manages to rid himself of the problem by transferring it to someone else. We (as an audience) identify with the position that Buster finds himself in and enjoy the fact that Buster manages to rid himself of an annoyance by inflicting it on someone else. We imagine ourselves in Buster's situation and laugh delightedly at him 'getting one over' on another as if it were us that were transferring the problem.

In a similar way, Buster's resourcefulness provokes laughter, which is associated with ingenuity and is prompted by the intelligent solution he comes up with. The audience starts off laughing at the

boy's incompetence and ends up laughing at his contrasting ability. There is a relationship between the comical awkwardness at the beginning of the gag and the physical skill Buster displays at the end. Keaton contrasts the ineptness of Buster's performance of the physical task with the quickly considered solution. Through failure and success Keaton demonstrates that adaptability leads to accomplishment.

There is a distinct articulation of gags at play in the sweeping sequence. Each stage of the gag is a gag in its own right and at the same time, a preparation for the next stage. James Agee talks about this type of gag development in his essay *Comedy's Greatest Era*, referring to the stages as rungs on a ladder.⁴³ Each gag is designed to top the one before, until the sequence reaches a climax. At this point, a new ladder begins to be climbed with a new sequence of gags. Within the sweeping sequence, each gag functions on its own and I suspect I would find each one amusing in its own right. It is in relation to each other, however, that their strength lies. Each individual gag develops, building on what has gone before, until the final gag punctuates the sequence.

Later on it is purely Buster's stupidity rather than ingenuity that provokes our laughter. The boy is resentful that the girl and the Sheik appear to be getting on well and decides to make a mockery of the Sheik by tricking him into slipping on a banana skin. Of course, his plan fails and he ends up slipping on it himself [page 90]. There is a contrast between Buster's plan and actual events; there is a contrast between Buster's view of the world, and the world. Here we

⁴³ J. Agee, *Comedy's Greatest Era*, in J. Agee, *Agee on Film*, Grosset & Dunlap, New York, 1969, p. 2.



Buster slips on the banana peel

feel humorous superiority towards Buster; we are sophisticated and he is naïve. Not only has he slipped in undignified fashion on a banana skin, he himself put it there. That is the ultimate in stupidity. This amusing irony is not lost on us and neither is the moral tale within this gag. Buster acted out of spite and was punished with the loss of his dignity. If only Buster had the insight that his amused audience does, this would never have happened.

Additionally, the loss of Buster's dignity strikes a chord. Who has not suffered a loss of dignity in some way? It is laughing at such a loss of dignity that makes it bearable to endure. By laughing at Buster's undignified fall, we laugh at ourselves and therefore exorcise that particular demon that might otherwise consume us. Of course, we still feel superior to Buster because it is him who has fallen *on this occasion*.

Bodily Movement

Keaton is aware of the meaning of movement and creates bodily gestures that reveal thought. His actions are not merely performed, but are to be interpreted. Much of the humour in the gags in the film results from Buster's literal interpretation of metaphorical language. For example, after the pocket watch has been stolen, Buster is consulting his detective manual on the porch when the Sheik emerges from the house. The manual instructs Buster to 'shadow your man closely', which he does. Buster literally becomes the Sheik's shadow. He is unable to make the distinction between the figure of speech and an exact translation. This gag marks the beginning of a sequence of mirroring gags.

Buster runs to catch up with the Sheik and falls into step behind him, about six inches apart. He mimics every move the Sheik makes with extraordinary accuracy. The sight of the two men is particularly striking. The Sheik is a very tall man with long legs. Buster is much smaller, with short legs and the disparity in the two figures provokes laughter. The Sheik bends over to pick up a cigarette butt from the ground. Buster stops abruptly to avoid colliding with him, sticking his rear out in the process. The Sheik takes a few puffs of the cigarette and throws it behind him. Buster catches it and does the same. Still walking in tandem, both men trip at the same time. Again this sight provides humour. If Buster is behind the Sheik, he should surely trip a few seconds later?

Crossing a busy road, the Sheik is nearly knocked down by a car and both he and Buster stop abruptly on one foot. They take a step to the left and continue, arriving at a railroad track. There is a train wagon sitting on the track, which Buster hides behind. The Sheik moves off and as Buster watches him another wagon is connected, nearly crushing him. He escapes with inches to spare and looks around in confusion, scratching his head. He runs to catch up with the Sheik, who has halted again abruptly. Buster skids to a halt and is immediately blasted with steam from the train they are standing beside. He uses his porkpie hat to cool off his posterior. Back in sync, the two men arrive at the platform steps. The Sheik ascends the steps, while Buster misses them and walks into a wall. He runs to catch up but is seen by the Sheik on the platform. Buster pretends he intended to board the wagon that is standing at the platform and the Sheik immediately locks him in.

Buster escapes the wagon through the roof hatch as the train pulls away from the station. He starts to run along the top of the train as it begins moving, effectively staying in the same spot. He reaches the last of the train carriages and leaps onto the spout of a water tank. The force of the escaping water drops Buster onto the tracks. He gets up and scratches his head in bewilderment as a handcart approaches with two men operating it. The water forces them off the cart and the scene ends with them chasing Buster in anger into the distance [page 94].

Much of the humour in this lengthy sequence is derived from Buster's energy expenditure and its relationship to his demeanour. Throughout the entire endeavour, Buster's expression remains in its usual mask-like state. He must be concentrating madly to perform all the complicated actions he does, but never gives any of that away in his face. Even when he is running wildly along the top of the train his expression remains static. His face remains motionless while his body articulates all that he needs to: melancholy in the middle of frenetic comic action.

Once again the audience witnesses in the sequence Buster's fixed attention on the task at hand. He takes what his detective book tells him literally and places himself a few inches behind his subject. He is concentrating so much on copying the Sheik's movements that he forgets the purpose of his shadowing. This single-mindedness leads him into danger several times, including nearly being squashed by linking train carriages and walking headfirst into a wall through his inattention to his environment.

Further humour is derived from the skill Buster displays in the physical mimicking of the Sheik's movements, which is



Buster shadows his man closely

contrasted with the incompetence he simultaneously displays. Despite the apparent failure of Buster in terms of shadowing the Sheik, he displays immense ability in terms of the physical actions he performs. The control Buster displays over his body is extremely skilled. He travels for yards behind the Sheik, mimicking him exactly, without being detected, displaying such ability as to be able to catch a burning cigarette in mid air and predict the Sheik's every move. They move together in such unison, with such mastery of body that Buster appears physically superior. And yet he still manages to get himself trapped in a train wagon and soaked to the skin, not to mention the thirty foot drop to the ground and subsequent losing of the Sheik.

Once again it is the contrast between ability and inability that solicits much of the astonished laughter from the audience here. A significant aspect of this gag involves automatism and a mechanical approach to bodily movement, precise and exact. This mechanism stems from Buster's inability to understand how the physical world works. Buster has no foresight. Everything for him happens in the moment and he is unable to think ahead. This is what leads him into trouble and creates our cringing laughter.

Playing with filmic conventions

As the second part of the film begins, the audience witness the boy return to the cinema where he begins to project a movie. While the movie begins, he leans on a projector and falls asleep. We see a ghostly Buster emerge from his sleeping body and begin to watch the action on screen. The actors in the film-within-film change into the characters from Buster's day: the girl and the Sheik are there, as are

the father and his assistant, who is now a butler. Ghostly Buster watches in amazement and tries to wake his sleeping self, to no avail. On screen the Sheik is making unwelcome advances to the girl. Buster is horrified and decides to do something about it. He walks to the wall where the porkpie hat is hanging and lifts a transparent version of the hat, leaving a more solid one for sleeping Buster. Once again the audience is reminded of Keaton's prevailing visual trademark.

A more solid version of Buster enters the auditorium and watches the action on screen. Horrified by the Sheik's ungentlemanly behaviour, he rushes up to the screen and jumps through it into the action. The Sheik immediately throws him back out and he takes a comedy tumble into the orchestra pit. Up in the projection room the sleeping Buster takes a jolt, but remains asleep. Back in the auditorium, Buster looks to the audience then runs at the screen again. However, as he enters the film for a second time the scene has changed and he is now at the front door of the house, from which the father is emerging. He seems to have forgotten something and goes back in. Buster runs up to the door and knocks, but there is no answer. He turns around and walks back down the steps.

Suddenly the scene changes and Buster finds himself standing on a bench in a garden. As he was previously in the middle of walking down steps, he falls off it. He looks around in puzzlement and moves to sit down on the bench. The scene changes and he finds himself sprawled in a busy street. He stands up and leaps out the way of a passing motor car, then walks along the pavement trying to figure out what is going on. The scene changes and he is now on a mountain, walking towards the edge. He stumbles in fright and

scrambles back up the slope, then treads carefully back down to the edge and peers over. The scene changes and he is now in a jungle in the middle of a lion's den. He walks to the back of the scene and as the lions see him and start to move towards him he walks quickly to the left. The scene changes and he is now in a hole in a desert, surrounded by cacti. He wanders around, trying to find his bearings and is nearly run over by a speeding train. He leaps out the way and sits down on the edge of the hole. Something bites him and he stands up, rubbing his posterior and kicking the sand where he sat. He moves to a nearby mound of sand and sits on that instead. The scene changes and he finds himself on a rock in the middle of the sea with waves crashing down on him. He stands up and stumbles around the rock. He makes his way to the edge and dives off. The scene changes to a snowy wood and he lands head first in a snowdrift. His legs flail about comically as he tries to free himself. He escapes and puts his arm up to lean on a tree. The scene changes back to the garden and he falls over. The scene fades out with Buster sitting on the ground scratching his head [page 98].

This sequence plays off the conventions of narrative film syntax. Every time Buster makes a move appropriate to the current setting the scene changes and the move is no longer appropriate, resulting in visual and contextual incongruity through a parody of film narrative. It has been suggested as a criticism that these scene jumps make the film incoherent, that the changing shots make no sense. I would suggest, rather, that this is the point. Keaton seems to be foregrounding the use of editing, playing with the techniques of the film medium for comedic effect, because incoherence does have comedic value. It seems to me that the random cuts that always land



Buster enters the projected film

Buster in strife are the way the film tries to force him out. Buster has found himself in a world that he should not be in and the film is pointing this out by playfully teaching him a lesson: an outraged film world using its unique abilities to do so. Buster is at the mercy of the film, which I find is an exploration (and indeed demonstration) of the powers of the medium. In fact, the film medium itself becomes an active participant in the action. It is not, strictly speaking, self-referential; but it borders on it. As I mentioned in Chapter One, classical cinema is totally dependent on making its audience believe in a world where the normal laws of the universe do not apply.⁴⁴ Keaton uses the artificiality of film to illustrate the principle here: what we see and feel and relate to onscreen constitutes a constructed world that relies on illusion for its potency. Keaton is reminding his audience that they are viewing a created product.

In this sequence the audience is startled to laughter as our anticipation and expectations are disturbed and our world is set awry. We find the scrapes that Buster gets into through no fault of his own (in fact the fault of a playful film medium) are incongruous. Our resulting surprise at what transpires for Buster leads to our laughter. Keaton forgoes the demands of a narrative for the more ephemeral pleasure of the gag.

Incongruity

Later on in Buster's dream we see a sequence involving a trilogy of perceptual gags. The sequence begins with Sherlock Jr. standing in front of a mirror, dressing. His assistant, Gillette, brings his cane and

⁴⁴ Avant-garde and other experimental film practices do not abide by this rule.

brushes his jacket down as Sherlock Jr. admires himself in the mirror. Sherlock Jr. then walks up to the mirror and steps right through it and we realise that instead of a mirror it is a doorway between two identical rooms. Sherlock Jr. then walks up to a large safe and unlocks it to reveal it is actually the front door to his house. He steps outside and walks up the road, where trolley cars and other traffic are passing. The last gag in the sequence involves the perspective of the scene. The dimensions and angle of the house in relation to the road outside are not quite right. In fact, they are impossible. The passing trolley car would have had to emerge from the side of the house to be travelling in the direction it currently is. Space is disrupted and Keaton uses this illusion to provoke laughter, twisting our expectations and causing us to question our assumptions [page 101].

These three visual gags all involve incongruity in some way. Incongruity is something that does not seem to fit in with or be appropriate to its context, but not all instances of incongruity are funny. Alexander Bain describes several instances of incongruity that are not funny in his book *The Emotions and the Will*:

There are many incongruities that may produce anything but a laugh. A decrepit man under a heavy burden, five loaves and two fishes among a multitude, and all unfitness and gross disproportion; an instrument out of tune, a fly in ointment, snow in May, Archimedes studying geometry in a siege, and all discordant things; a wolf in sheep's clothing, a breach of bargain, and falsehood in general; the multitude taking the law into their own hands, and everything of the nature of disorder; a corpse at a feast, parental cruelty, filial ingratitude, and whatever is unnatural; the entire catalogue of



Sherlock Jr. performs some visual illusions

vanities given by Solomon, - are all incongruous, but they cause feelings of pain, anger, sadness, loathing, rather than mirth.⁴⁵

I can see that there are many instances of incongruity that do not solicit laughter, so what is it about incongruity that creates laughter? Perhaps it is in the relationship between the elements that are incongruous that the answer lies? A gag that relies on incongruity arises from disjointed pairings of ideas or situations.⁴⁶ The mirror gag is incongruous because we do not expect someone to have gone to the bother of arranging his or her house in mirror image. Interior design habits differ greatly from what we see here. This behaviour is eccentric and bordering on strange. The second gag is incongruous for the same reason: why would anyone use a safe door as a front door? This object differs from what we usually encounter as front doors, and as a result we find it incongruous. There is a tension between the plausible and implausible about these gags.

With incongruity we see two elements that do not belong together, but we accept them (in this case) as belonging together in some way. When we acknowledge something is incongruous, we are also accepting the possibility that it might (in some minor way) also be congruous. In the gag where Sherlock Jr. opens the safe to reveal it is the front door, there is a clear relationship between the two objects. A safe has a door and a house has a door, and both primarily serve the same function: to protect the contents of the structure they are attached to and keep people out. It is unlikely that the two things

⁴⁵ A. Bain, *The Emotions and the Will*, Longmans and Green, London, 1865, pp 282-283.

⁴⁶ See J. H. Goldstein and P. E. McGhee, *The psychology of Humour*, Academic Press, London and New York, 1972, p. 51.

would display the same style (the level of security they provide, the style of locking mechanism and so on) but there is a similarity there nonetheless. If, for example, Sherlock Jr. had opened the safe door to reveal a window, the humour would not have been as great: there is no direct relationship between a safe door and a window. Safe doors and windows do not serve the same function. There would still be incongruity between the two objects, but I do not think it would create humour.

There is an element of condensation at play here. Two separate, physical objects have been amalgamated into one. The fact that this happens within a dream sequence brings Sigmund Freud to my mind. Freud tells us that we process much of our lives unconsciously in our dreams.⁴⁷ He says that dreams contain key images, which represent more complex thoughts and emotions. It seems that this is what is happening with the safe door. We have doors on our homes to keep us safe; the front door is a safe door. There is a condensation of two objects into one and simultaneously the use of one word (safe) that has multiple meanings. There is economy within this condensation that reflects the economy of the gag. We look at the safe door, standing in for the dwelling door, and we see immediately what has been achieved. Similarly with a (successful) gag, we see or hear the gag and immediately respond with our laughter. We understand instantly what is being expressed.

Another element of the relationship between the incongruity and the resulting surprise is resolution. We have to be able to recognise that there is incongruity within the gag, but also

⁴⁷ See S. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Wordsworth Editions, Hertfordshire, 1997.

acknowledge that in some way it is simultaneously congruous. So in the above example, we can see that the safe door functioning as a front door is incongruous, but we can also see how the relationship might be plausible. This recognition is the resolution in the gag. If *Sherlock Jr.* opens the safe to reveal a window, there is no resolution here because we cannot see why a window might have a safe door across it.

This leads me to comic intention once more.⁴⁸ Perhaps there is a further element to comic incongruity, and that is linked to the purpose of the incongruity. The audience knows that *Sherlock Jr.* is a comic text, and so is predisposed to laughter. However, if we encountered a safe door as someone's front door, would we find this as amusing as we do in the film? We might find it eccentric or strange, but would we laugh out loud? Perhaps we would if we knew that the owner of the house was renowned for his or her outlandish sense of humour and tendency to incorporate gags into the everyday. In this instance we would probably delight in the physical gag displayed in front of us. However, if we were not party to this information, I suspect we would not recognise that humorous incongruity was upon us.

These three visual gags play with our perceptions and our surprise derives as much from the narrative within the gag as it does from our knowledge of the outside world. Our view of the world is

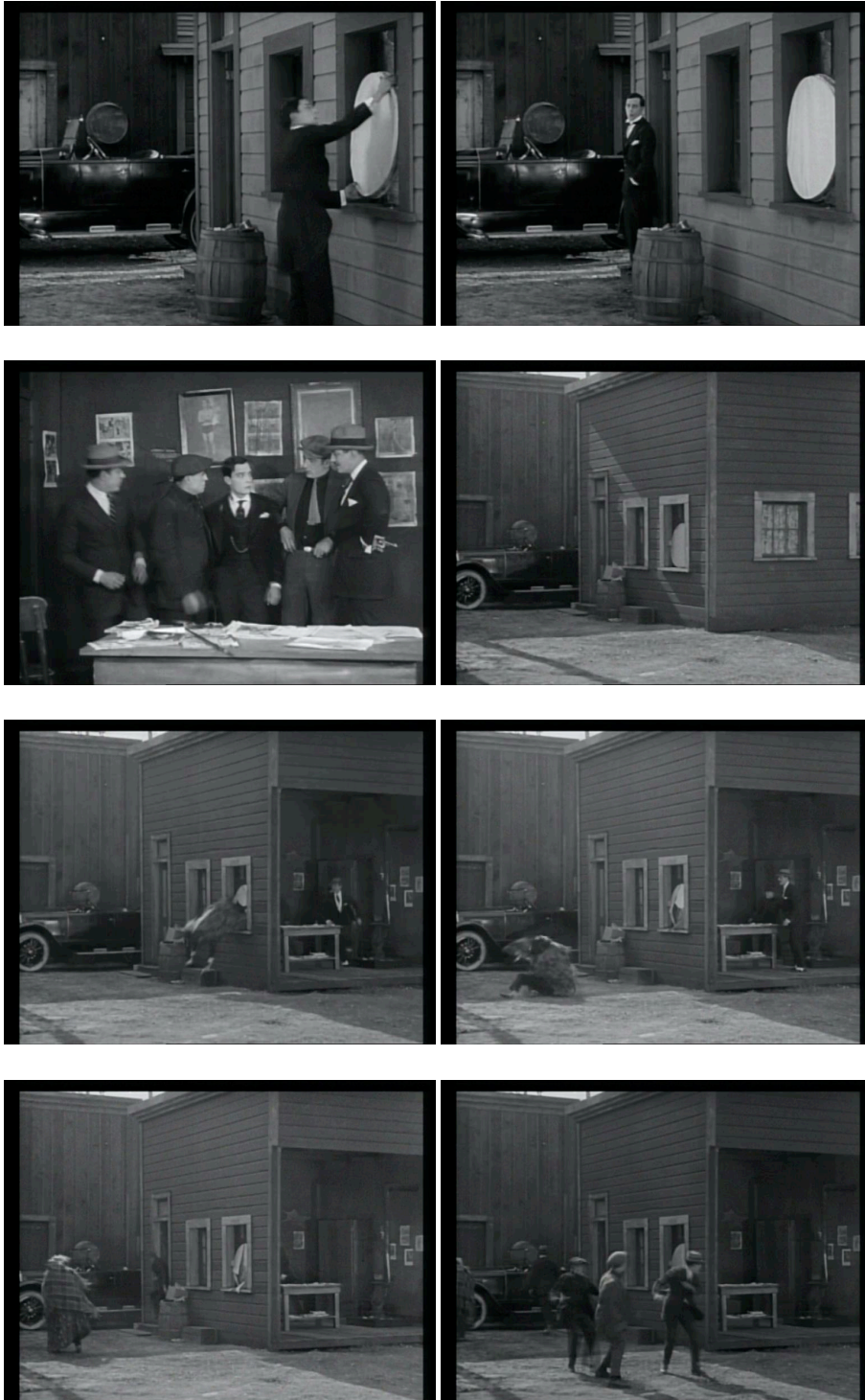
⁴⁸ Of course, now and again we encounter incongruous statements that were not intended to be humorous, but which we find enormously funny, such as the often quoted cricket commentator, Brian Johnston, who was introducing the next two players: 'the batman's Holding, the bowler's Willey'. Perhaps it is the unintentional nature of statements such as these that add to our amusement? Perhaps it is not only the humour of the phrase that has two meanings that we enjoy here, but also the indignity of the speaker who has uttered such a blooper without realising what he has said.

changed as Keaton shows alternative possibilities to us. This is not the only time in the film that Keaton does this. In fact, the transformation of one object into another is a theme Keaton plays with a great deal, largely due to the possibilities the dream sequence offers.

Transference

Within the dream, Sherlock Jr. finds himself outside the villainous Sheik's hideout. Sherlock Jr. places a white disc on the outside ledge of one of the building's windows before allowing the Sheik to capture him and drag him inside. Following an encounter with the Sheik's henchmen, a chase is required, beginning with Sherlock Jr. leaping through the window with the white disc on it, head first. One of the building walls has been removed so that the audience can see simultaneously inside and out, and we discover that the white disc has a disguise in it, which Sherlock Jr. is now wearing, having leapt into it through the window. The cut-away wall is to allow the audience to realise that there were no camera tricks used and that Keaton did in fact perform the stunt through acrobatic skill [page 106].

It seems impossible that Sherlock Jr. could leap through a window and emerge the other side wearing a disguise, but we can openly see that it happens, both in the story and in real life, for Keaton did actually perform the trick. The gag is absurd. How on earth did Sherlock Jr. predict that he would require the disc-disguise? How on earth did he come up with such an ingenious and unexpected means of escape? There is a great deal of insight and pre-planning on display here, as well as physical skill. Few of us



Sherlock Jr. escapes through the window

would be able to somersault effortlessly through a window, let alone dramatically change appearance from one side of it to the other. The adaptability and ingenuity Sherlock Jr. displays in overcoming a seemingly impossible situation, combined with the surprising way in which he does it, provokes laughter from his audience.

A lengthy chase ensues involving Sherlock Jr. on a motorbike and the villains pursuing in a car. The climax to the sequence occurs when Sherlock Jr. loses control of the motorbike and crashes through the window of a hut, where the heroine is coincidentally being held hostage. Sherlock Jr. grabs the girl and escapes in a henchman's car, closely followed by the Sheik in his own car.

In the excitement Sherlock Jr. fails to notice an approaching lake and the force of slamming on the brakes causes the car to leave its chassis and sail into the water. Looking behind him to check for traffic, Sherlock Jr. puts his arm out to indicate he is turning left. The car comes to a halt in the water and, after a brief, accidental dip in the water he erects the folding roof, which becomes a sail. Steering the 'boat' with the steering wheel, Sherlock Jr. surveys the scenery with a classic 'scout' pose and enjoys an embrace from the girl. The couple are enjoying their contact so much, they fail to notice that the car is sinking and in the final scene of the dream Sherlock Jr. grabs the drowning girl by the scruff of her neck and begins to swim [page 108].

This final sequence with the car-turned-sailboat can be described as a transference gag. The object of the car is shown to have a double meaning, or function, and one that we would never anticipate to be the case. Who of us have ever thought to try sailing our cars? Once again Keaton has condensed two objects into one and



Sherlock Jr. tries to sail his car

the result is a striking visual gag. As the car enters the water, a new way of seeing is required. Sherlock Jr. changes his way of thinking from the functional qualities of the car and transfers them to the object that he needs at the present time: a boat. This process involves a mental re-ordering of the visual world as it exists in front of him. Sherlock Jr. is required to re-organise the function of the car into the function of a boat. Once again the relationship between the two objects solicits laughter from the audience, whose expectations are disturbed by the transference. Keaton puts the object 'car' to new use and it is the juxtaposition of its two functions that creates the humour here.

Of course, despite the skilful way Keaton re-visions the car as boat, the fact remains that it is a useless transformation. There is no physical way the car can function as a boat, and further laughter is solicited from this and the way Sherlock Jr. behaves in the 'boat'. His actions are clearly absurd. Why would he possibly need to indicate his direction with an arm signal? There is something of the child at play in Keaton's gestures here. Buster displays the characteristics of a child through his imaginative transformation of objects, a transformation that occurs simply through his gestures. There is no physical transformation, it is all in Buster's imagination. Even if the car could miraculously float in the water, and feasibly use the folding roof as a sail, there is no possible way that the steering wheel could influence the direction the car goes in; it has, after all, been separated from the chassis and tyres. There is therefore a discrepancy between the perceptive way Sherlock Jr. re-conceives the car and the way it fails to adapt to being a boat. Even the slow realisation in Sherlock Jr. that the car is sinking provokes laughter from the audience. It

takes an inordinately long time for him to become aware that the car is sinking and it is in this 'slow burn' reaction to a rapidly changing environment that laughter is generated. Once again the audience sees in this gag insight versus ineptitude, intelligence versus stupidity. Sherlock Jr. makes an attempt at dealing with his changing environment, but ultimately fails.

The Physical and The Psychological

It seems that a large part of the humour in the film revolves around the relationship between Sherlock Jr. and objects. Keaton appears preoccupied with the physicality of the world and the interaction between his body and material things. Keaton is concerned with objects, and the transformation of objects. He shows us how things work and what their purpose is, and then he shows us alternatives. He shows us the physical world in a new light.

Much of the film is concerned with problem solving. It begins with a problem (the theft of a watch) and the entire plot is based around the solution of this problem. Objects, for Keaton, seem to serve as the equipment through which a solution can be achieved. And yet it is often Keaton's relationship with the object that leads to further failure. The banana skin is employed to solve the problem of the Sheik moving in on his girl, yet Buster slips on it himself. The car is employed to take Sherlock Jr. and the girl to safety, yet they both end up swimming for their lives in a lake. It seems to be as much the mechanics as the heroics of Keaton's encounters with objects that are important. The mechanics of the relationship Keaton has with objects are significant because they imply a relationship with the body, which in turn implies a relationship with bodily movement.

It is not only objects that Keaton transforms within the film. He also transforms his fantasies from the day into the dream sequence, projecting his desires upon the receptive plot of the film that he is showing in the film theatre. Buster changes from a clumsy cinema projectionist into a famously successful detective who gallantly solves a mystery and saves the girl from peril. The condensed action in the boy's dream sequence repeats events from his day. Key moments and people from Buster's day re-emerge in the dream with significant changes. These changes both solicit laughter from the audience and demonstrate how dreams can assist in the processing of specific information. The dream is Buster's wish fulfilment; moments from his conscious are transferred into his unconscious. Things that cause him difficulty during the day are easily solved by him within the dream.

I can see that Keaton places an emphasis on transference in relation to the objects he works with and much of the humour in the film involves transformative gags. Keaton uses objects and changes their usual function for something other (such as car into sailboat or wall safe into front door). For the most part, the context that the gag occurs in allows us to accept the absurdity and find humour in it, rather than finding the juxtaposition too shocking or distressing. Keaton possesses the ability to see things, not as they are, but as they *might* be or are in the process of becoming. This is done most successfully when the method is a visual gag. The gag is on the side of the visual, so any attempt to describe the gag in words would remove the reason that the gag exists in the first place. We would be confused and fail to see any humour. Describing the car being turned into a sailboat would not make any sense. We would not be able to

understand how or why such a transformation could or should be possible. The gag can only exist in a visual form.

It is clear, then, that the majority of the humour in *Sherlock Jr.* comes from the visual gags. However, the film does make use of linguistic structures. These structures both help to clarify the silent action and, on occasion, make use of humour themselves.

The Verbal

The verbal⁴⁹ appears in a number of ways within the film. The most overt use of language involves the title pages that crop up now and again, announcing an important point that it might be laborious to make using visual imagery, or to make a joke that again would be tedious done using visuals. However, the verbal also appears *within* images, such as the title of the detective manual and posters advertising the current movies being screened at the film theatre [page 113]. Also within visual images, language is signified through the actors' visible pronunciation of words. This speech is usually represented through short, commonly used words that are easy for the audience to lip-read such as 'no' or 'what', and occasionally accompanied by a gesture that further clarifies the word being pronounced. Such lip-reading never features in the humour within the film, and serves only to move the narrative forward.

The title signs are therefore the most frequently used linguistic device that incorporates humour into its function. Many of

⁴⁹ The term 'verbal' clearly refers to language, but more often to spoken language, not written language. It is concerned with words, however, and *can* be used to refer to the written word. It is the adjective 'oral' that more strictly refers to the vocal. Within the context of my writing, I will use the term in relation to the silent comedy of Buster Keaton, even although the verbal within the film is not heard by the viewer, but more often read.



"Say — Mr. Detective — before you clean up any mysteries — clean up this theater."

By the next day the master mind had completely solved the mystery — with the exception of locating the pearls and finding the thief.

As a detective he was all wet, so he went back to see what he could do to his other job.

His assistant —
Gillette.
A Gem who was Ever-Ready
in a bad scrape.

The crime-crushing
criminologist —
SHERLOCK JR.

Some uses of the verbal within *Sherlock Jr.*

the gags involve puns, the first of which appears early on in the film when Buster is reading his detective manual. The cinema manager sees him having a break and tells him, 'Say – Mr. Detective – before you clean up any mysteries – clean up this theatre.' It is not hilarious, true, but there is a deliberate pun on the use of the word 'clean', which cannot be ignored. Again we see condensation at play.

The next use of a pun occurs when Buster has escaped from the train using the water tank spout and lands, soaking, on the tracks. The title page informs us: 'As a detective he was all wet, so he went back to see what he could do to his other job.' Here the pun is on the use of the word 'wet', bringing our attention to the double meaning and also to Buster's recent failure in solving the crime.

As well as puns, the title pages also endeavour to crack a few jokes now and again. The first is when we are being introduced to the girl's father and his assistant. 'The girl's father had nothing to do so he hired a man to help him'. Clearly the idea of hiring someone to help you do nothing is absurd, and furthers the use of verbal humour in the film.

Text is also used to make fun of the protagonist within the dream sequence. 'By the next day the mastermind had completely solved the mystery – with the exception of locating the pearls and finding the thief.' The deadpan delivery of this mocking statement serves to point out that Sherlock Jr. might be the world's greatest detective, but he is sure taking his time to solve the case. It is paradoxical in nature. The detective cannot have *completely* solved the crime because he has neither found the missing item, nor who took it. In the same way that Keaton plays with the logic of everyday reality by transforming the world around him, he also plays with the

logic of everyday language; he turns language on its head. Once again absurdity plays a part in the humour, as well as an element of superiority.

Language is often manipulated within the title pages. ‘The crime-crushing criminologist – Sherlock Jr.’. Clearly a number of other phrases could have been used to introduce the protagonist, but this particular phrase is utilised for its playfulness in language. The words tempt us to read them aloud in order to hear the alliteration, foregrounding the sound of language and in doing so, invoking the body. Keaton manipulates language here for comedic effect.

Title pages are also used to reveal to the audience when comedic devices such as parody are being employed. When Sherlock Jr. is dressing in front of the mirror (or illusory mirror) we are introduced to his servant. ‘His assistant – Gillette. A Gem who was Ever-Ready in a bad scrape.’ We have recognized already that Keaton is parodying the Conan Doyle stories of Sherlock Holmes with his use of the Sherlock Jr. character. At this point in the film audiences of the time will realise that Keaton is also parodying William Gillette’s play *Sherlock Holmes*. Additionally, Gillette, Gem and Ever-Ready are all brand names of razor manufacturers. Keaton is punning the phrase ‘bad scrape’ with the references to razors. This is a multilayered joke that both refers to external sources and is slightly self-referential in the sense that it demonstrates that the film is aware of itself as a narrative medium with literary influences.

This mention of the external brings me to the voice of the inter-titles where there is a plurality at play. In some of the inter-titles the voice being used is that of a character from within the story. ‘Say – Mr. Detective – before you clean up any mysteries – clean up

this theatre.’ This is the voice of the cinema manager speaking directly to Sherlock Jr. In other inter-titles, however, it is an external voice to the story that is used. ‘As a detective he was all wet, so he went back to see what he could do to his other job.’ This is the voice of a narrator, someone external to the story whom we cannot link to a visual representation. This external presence implies a ‘telling’ of a story; it references audible speech, which in turns links the film to a linguistic event, to the tradition of storytelling.

Nevertheless, within the context of the silent *Sherlock Jr.* the verbal is still the visual. We can see this clearly by the gestures that are made with the actual text of the inter-titles. For example, within several inter-titles, dashes are used to introduce space and time. ‘Say – Mr. Detective – before you clean up any mysteries – clean up this theatre.’ These dashes are not syntactically correct, but they create pauses within the cinema manager’s speech. ‘By the next day the mastermind had completely solved the mystery – with the exception of locating the pearls and finding the thief.’ The dash here creates a pause before the punch line of the joke. It assists with the comic timing and introduces a temporality to the words.

Gestures are also indicated within the inter-titles. ‘His assistant – Gillette. A Gem who was Ever-Ready in a bad scrape.’ The dash here is particularly long and is suggestive of a ‘ta da’ type gesture, an arm sweeping as a magician introduces his next trick. The introduction of Sherlock Jr. himself is equally suggestive. ‘The crime-crushing criminologist – SHERLOCK JR.’ The dash and use of capitals have the same effect as that of Gillette’s introduction, and the use of capitals both assists the audience in recognising the importance of the character and references a private investigator’s

name stencilled on his office door. These devices all succeed in bringing the inter-titles closer to being images, to making them more visual, and to adding a further layer to the relationship between the two. The verbal is at once that, and the visual.

From these examples, then, I am reminded that words are embedded in traditions shared by the creator of the gag and the audience. If the tradition is not shared by both (i.e. if one speaks French the other English, or if one knows that *Sherlock Holmes* is a play by William Gillette and the other does not), then the words cannot communicate anything and the implication is lost, or, in this case, the humour is lost. Similarly, there may be visual references within that shot that are lost on the viewer. There is a proportionate relationship between the visual and the verbal. There is a disproportionate relationship between the visual and the verbal. And so I weaken both the verbal and the visual if I attempt to make common sense comparisons between words and images, between the voice and gesture: the visual language operates on a different level to the verbal one.

But what happens when the visual and the verbal are more inherently linked than is apparent in silent comedy? What happens when both body and voice can be seen and heard together? It is at this point that an examination of stand-up comedy is relevant, starting with a performer who uses both speech and gesture in equal measures: Richard Pryor.

Chapter Three: Richard Pryor

Stand-up comedy revolves around verbal communication, but is also inherently linked to visual communication. The stand-up performer is, by the nature of his work, physically present. His body is the irreplaceable instrument of the comic act, both in terms of using his voice and in terms of using his body. The viewer watches the performer as well as listens to his words, and much of the communication takes place through gesture and the relationship between gesture and spoken word. There are a wealth of performers I could draw on to examine the relationship between the visual and the verbal. The amount of source material is, at times, overwhelming. It is for this reason that my choice of comedians to work with must be extremely well considered. I cannot simply choose the ones I find the funniest, the ones with most recorded material to work from, or the ones I think most people may have heard of. I must carefully select the performers who seem the most essential for my research, that is, who bring the most to it. Richard Pryor is one such performer. Pryor communicates his understanding of the world from his own position within it. His material deals with his experience of being a black heterosexual man in late twentieth century America. How does Pryor use his body to communicate his perception of this experience? What issues does he raise through the physicality of his act? Does Pryor's comic performance allow his material to make a more powerful point? Do Pryor's gags challenge his audience's thinking?

Stand-up comedy is an intellectual art. It has to be thought about to be understood at all. Its appeal is to ideas rather than feelings and Richard Pryor's work is abundant with ideas. His performance style is as

much visual as it is verbal and many of his gags rely on the relationship between the visual and the verbal for their success. The performance I am going to use as source material is one from 1979. It is called *Live in Concert* and was recorded in Long Beach, California. There is a lot of substance in this performance and my discussion of it will demonstrate the social, cultural, ideological and educational significance that I find in Pryor's routine through his use of language and gesture.

Other writers have discussed Richard Pryor's work, and rarely has the temptation to connect genius with madness been more overindulged. Few comedians have been subjected to the type of pseudo psychological analysis that represents discussions of his life and work. He has been the focus of a great deal of unsubstantiated speculation surrounding his (occasionally) bizarre behaviour. This has led to much writing being produced about him that contemplates the connection between pain or eccentricity and comic genius. It is not this element of his work that interests me. I may make reference later on to Pryor's use of his life experiences in his performance, but it is his physical performance that interests me, not the relationship between his life and his art.

I am fascinated by Pryor's use of his body: his facial expressions, his energy and his gestures. I am fascinated by Pryor's use of language: his street vernacular, his intonation and his profanity. And I am fascinated by the relationship between Pryor's use of his body and his use of language.

Streetwise Vernacular

Richard Pryor's style of language echoes that of the black street hustler. He uses words and phrases that are common amongst those who consider themselves 'streetwise', the black urban 'common folks' of the lower

classes. His linguistic and stylistic patterns of speech are scatological, vulgar, profane and sexually explicit and as a result his performance is caustic and biting. Pryor takes this black street vernacular and shows us what it can signify. He takes taboo words and vulgarity and transforms them into an expression of a worldview, a worldview that is extremely common, but usually unexpressed publicly. Pryor takes this urban black style of speech and gives it a wider voice. He mirrors the obscenity and profanity of black street vernacular and manages to use it as a tool for his defiant message and exposition of his experience of being a black male in late twentieth century America. It is a mixture of vulgar language and social criticism. He uses the profane to rebel against society, to confront social restrictions and repressions. Pryor makes a particular intervention into society at the time of the Civil Rights Movement, at a time when black identity runs counter to what is being fought for, at a time when it is still unacceptable to talk about black identity positively. Stand-up comedy is usually placed within the register of 'entertainment'. I would suggest that the way Pryor intervenes using his comedy; the way he combines perceptive social commentary with streetwise humour; the way he uses this combination to comment politically, elevate his performance from entertainment to art. In doing so, Pryor becomes a professional curser, and as such he is very good at it. He knows how to curse.

Knowing how to curse suggests to me an element of linguistic fluency. Admittedly, the curse is fundamentally at odds with articulate speech. This is something I have been taught since an early age; only the lazy and inarticulate speaker uses swearing within their language. Curse words are removed from semantic and grammatical structures. They tend to exceed the message contained within a sentence; they add force.

Volume, tone, rhythm, pattern and timing are all elements of speech that are removed from the actual words being said, but change our perception of what those words may mean. Swearing works in a similar way. The addition of a curse word to a sentence changes that sentence, as Pryor demonstrates, in a way that is particular to our cultural knowledge. The way that Pryor uses the swear word implies a certain social awareness and understanding of that culture's speech patterns. I would hazard a guess that most people would consider the use of a swear word to be an insult. 'Bitch' and 'motherfucker' are not nouns we would normally wish to have directed at us. Pryor takes them, however, and turns them into terms of endearment.

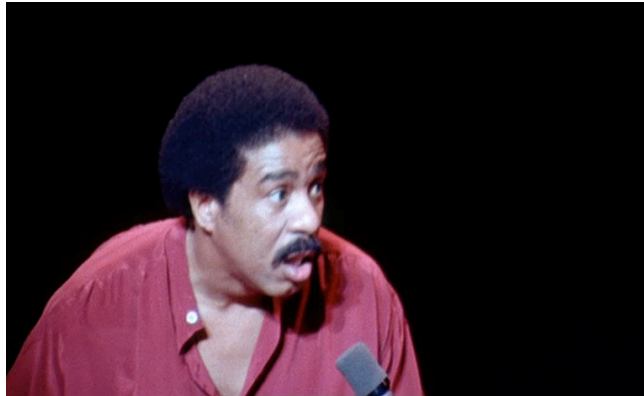
In the opening sequence of *Live in Concert* Pryor invites applause for Patti LaBelle's opening performance by asking the audience 'Patti be singing her ass off, don't she? And the band's a bitch, too, man. That band's a motherfucker she got.' Pryor takes words that we would normally associate with being insults and turns them into compliments, and he does this through an intimate knowledge of street language. He knows where the stresses on the sounds should be in order for us to know he is being complimentary. Intonation is everything here. He opens up the possibilities of language and turns a negative connotation into a positive one through his knowledge of how the tone of the words should sound. This is clearly very difficult for me to describe with the written word. I can transcribe what Pryor says, but I cannot transcribe his timbre of voice, the way he pronounces the words or the way he accents the words.

In the same part of the performance Pryor plays on this knowledge of swearing and intonation to comic effect when he does an

impersonation of a white man swearing. Once again I struggle to accurately describe the performance because coupled with the intonation and timbre, Pryor also incorporates particular stances and gestures in his impersonation. He tells us 'I love when white dudes get mad and cuss, 'cause you all are some funny motherfuckers when you cuss.' He then begins nodding his head in a way that I take to signify 'uncoolness' and tells us, 'they'll be saying shit like 'Yeah, come on, peckerhead. Come on, ya fuckin' jerkoff. Come on, son-of-a-bitch. Come on. Yeah, you're fuckin' A right, buddy'' [page 123]. Pryor's performance of swearing here puts a lot of influence on the speaker's body. It is not only the words we are hearing, but also the movement and gestures of the body that combine to form the impersonation. Judith Butler tells us in a discussion about hate speech (which I would consider Pryor's impersonation here to represent) that, 'there is what is said, and then there is a kind of saying that the bodily 'instrument' of the utterance performs.'⁵⁰ Pryor's 'bodily instrument' is exactly what I cannot describe in my writing. It is his tone of voice, his intonation, the way he walks across the stage, the way he nods his head awkwardly. What Pryor says and the particular way he says it are inseparable elements that combine to communicate his meaning.

I can see from his performance that Pryor considers white swearing to incorporate repetition and gentle name calling, with the insertion of the word 'fuckin'' to signify how serious the swearing is to be taken. I can also see that in the same way that Pryor inverts 'bitch' and 'motherfucker' to be terms of endearment, his impression of the white man has taken 'buddy' and turned it into an insult. In fact, it is agreement,

⁵⁰ J. Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, Routledge, New York, 1997, p. 11.



Pryor swears like a white man

consensus and friendship that have been inverted: 'yeah (agreement), you're fuckin A right (consensus), buddy (friendship).'

Although this performance is (presumably) intended to be comical, Pryor demonstrates here his perception of the capacity white men have to turn the positive into a sinister negative, and invite violence while they are at it. He describes the white male asking us to, 'come on, peckerhead... Come on' in an invitation to fight. Pryor's comical portrayal of this event would suggest that the threat of violence is only that, a threat. We suspect that the particular white man that is being portrayed here would run a mile should the encounter actually turn to violence. However, the hostile invitation is there. Pryor's comical portrayal of this situation registers, yet diverts, the violence associated with this sort of encounter through the ineffective way the white man is shown to curse. This subversively privileges the black male through the recognition that he knows how to curse effectively (as opposed to the white male, who does not) and therefore has a greater mastery of language.

In the same part of the show, the introduction to the performance, Pryor has taken the word 'motherfucker' and used it slightly differently. He has just arrived on stage after the intermission and has taken the audience by surprise. They are still filing back into the auditorium to take their seats when he remarks, 'this is the fun part for me, when the white people come back after the intermission and find out niggaz done stole their seats.' He then imitates an imaginary white couple reacting to the theft:

Uh, uh, weren't we sitting here dear? Weren't we uh, uh - we were sitting here, uh, weren't we?

Yes, we were sitting right there, yes.

And the black response:

Well you ain't sitting here now, mothafucka.

The white man's inquiry refuses to recognise that it is black people in his seats and his own racial fear of them. The white couple fail to acknowledge their perception of the blacks reclaiming something for their own, and their dread of such an occurrence. They state to the black couple that they were sitting there, but do not overtly state what they want done about it. The black response to the white man and its use of curse announces their presence and references social and cultural history. They are claiming an entitlement to the seats that legally they have no right to; the white couple after all have the tickets to these spaces. In this encounter, however, the use of the word 'motherfucker' has diverted attention from the legal right to the seats and asserted the black right to take them. Black people may have suffered years of oppression at the hands of the whites but here in this auditorium, at least, they can get a better seat than them. The curse word has transferred control from white to black, and we have no doubt it is staying there.

The response to this gag is enormous: guffaws and whooping sweep through the auditorium. Blacks and whites laugh together, and for the same duration. Pryor includes everyone by pointing out what divides them. He points out their different ways of dealing with the intermission: white people go to the bathroom; black people use the opportunity to get better seats. White people forfeit their claim to their seats when they answer the call of nature. Before the bathroom break they had a class

advantage. After the bathroom break they have become equal with the black people, who then use the opportunity to gain the advantage.

But Pryor does not divide the audience with this gag. It is clear from the laughter response that everyone in the audience recognises these characters, black and white alike. Even although Pryor is poking fun at the uptight white people, there is still a shared reference amongst the whites. They acknowledge through their laughter and applause that these types of characters do exist: they probably know some (or even are some). The blacks and whites that make up the audience are united through their recognition and identification with the characters depicted in the gag. Their communal laughter at Pryor's observations frees them from their social and cultural positions.

Another aspect to this part of the performance worth examining is Pryor's use of the word 'nigger'. In fact, Pryor's use of the word is not limited to this part of the performance. He uses it from the moment he steps on stage, 'you niggaz taking a chance being in Long Beach, man' and continues using it throughout the whole show. Although the word is in common use today amongst black (and indeed white) hip-hop culture, at the time of Pryor's *Live in Concert* performance his use of the word was far more controversial. Pryor used the term as part of his black urban streetwise persona, but his use of it was nevertheless shocking to much of his audience.

It is possible to argue that Pryor deflated the negative connotations of the word by using it to describe all black people. He referred to people in the audience as 'niggaz' as much as he did the characters from his anecdotes. By using a word normally associated with insult to describe individuals (and groups) he clearly holds in high esteem,

he could be said to be granting the word immunity from negative associations and as a result, makes black people immune to their oppressed circumstances. The word can no longer be used to oppress black people because Pryor has reclaimed that power and made it positive.

However, there is so much baggage attached to the word it seems to me to be impossible to get away from it. The power of the word is a cultural endowment that has grown over time. It has absorbed the history of its past speaking, and it is impossible to get away from this. Its force exceeds its immediate context. When Pryor says, 'you niggaz taking a chance being in Long Beach, man' he is not only referring to the recent brutality that black people had experienced at the hands of white police officers in the area, but his use of the word 'niggaz' references the black experience of a lifetime of violence and oppression. This is sometimes referred to as 're-claiming' the word. I can understand why this is so. If a word has been used for generations as a way of oppression, then when the oppressed group uses it to refer to itself, this could be seen to be 're-claiming' it. However, the negative connotations and power of the word 'nigger' is so strong, I am not convinced it is possible to re-claim it positively.⁵¹ Pryor uses the term in his performance to differentiate between black and white experiences of American life. If his point is that the black experience is largely a negative one, it seems to me that his use of the word re-enforces this negativity.⁵²

⁵¹ Even today, the word 'nigger' is often still referred to as 'the N-Word'.

⁵² Following a trip to Africa in 1979, Pryor returned to America and vowed never to use the word again. He said he looked around and saw lots of black people, but no niggers. He realised the word has nothing to do with black people. He was in the place where human beings originated and realised that using the word nigger to refer to black people belittled the importance of being descended from the first people on the earth.

I can see that Pryor's comedy performance is marked by its prevailing use of profane and potentially offensive language. This use of language is not only limited to Pryor's choice of words, but is also involved with his particular delivery of them; the inflections and intonations and the way he combines these with physical movement.

Street Gestures

In the same way that Pryor was fluent with black urban street language, his body language was equally as hip. As Pryor is beginning his act, telling us he enjoys watching everyone rushing back from the bathroom, he gestures to a young black male who is striding past the stage with a 'Black Power Salute'. He clenches his fist, holds it aloft and remarks, 'what's happening Blood? Right on.' The man turns back to the stage and returns the gesture. There would be the same level of communication here with or without the phrase Pryor utters to the young man. The essence of the communication takes place in the gesture the men make to each other. Toi Derricotte makes reference to this sort of encounter in her book *The Black Notebooks*. She says, 'we are black because we can talk to each other and understand each other so instantly and so well with so few words.'⁵³ This is precisely what happens in this moment between Pryor and the young man; they understand each other instantly. Derricotte's idea of black community embraces differences of class, which we also see in this moment. Pryor may live in a mansion surrounded by accountants and film directors, but he is capable of communicating instantly through gesture with the streetwise young man strutting through the auditorium. Pryor's

⁵³ T. Derricotte, *The Black Notebooks*, Norton and Company Inc., New York, 1999, p. 108.

gestures symbolise the 'black everyman' that he is, just as much as his language does.

In the routine where Pryor gives his impression of a white man swearing he describes the black male retort, which is to simply grab his own crotch and instruct the white man to, 'buddy this. You wanna buddy something, buddy up on this here.' Pryor begins to swagger across the stage, holding onto his crotch. He tells us, 'black men will grab them dicks, jack. Niggaz be walking down the street, they gonna hold them dicks, jack' [page 130]. There is no ridicule here, however. Pryor is simply stating a fact without judgement or condescension. He is giving over his physical presence to a character that the audience recognise and they approve of his depiction, clapping and laughing at his accurate portrayal.

At one point in the performance Pryor describes an event from his childhood when he went hunting with his father. This anecdote takes him into an aside, where he states that snakes bite few black people because 'black people stroll too cool in the woods.' The words alone create a laugh from the audience, but it is when Pryor demonstrates what he means that they really react. He begins to strut across the stage, swinging his arm and bobbing rhythmically. He looks down casually, utters the word 'snake' and deftly avoids it by stepping to the right in time with his swaggering gait [pages 131 and 132]. The audience guffaw, clap and cheer. Pryor gets to the end of the stage and tells us that white people get bitten all the time because they have a different rhythm. He walks back across the stage quickly, rocking awkwardly from side to side, barely bending his knees and taking very small steps. Halfway across the stage he grabs his ankle and jumps around as if having been bitten by a snake [pages 133 and 134]. Again the audience erupt, whooping and applauding.



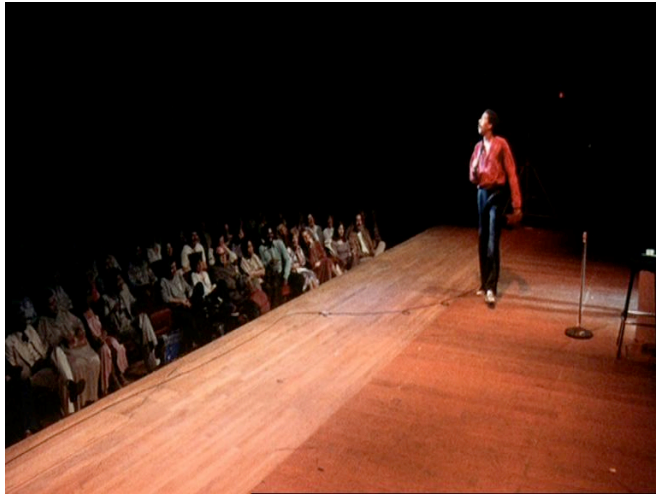
Pryor shows us the black male response to white male swearing



Pryor strolls like a black man



Pryor strolls like a black man, avoiding a snake



Pryor waddles like a white man



Pryor waddles like a white man and gets bitten by a snake

Is it the comic potential of human mechanisation that Henri Bergson introduced us to that the audience are laughing at here? Bergson tells us that humour depends on a reversal. He says the underlying cause of humour is 'something mechanical encrusted on the living'⁵⁴ where if a person behaves in a mechanistic manner, instead of a humanistic manner, we will laugh. A human behaving in a machine-like way solicits our laughter through the inversion of physical traits. Bergson puts particular emphasis on human rigidity and laughter. He tells us that the body 'in petrifying⁵⁵ its movements and thwarting its gracefulness ... achieves, at the expense of the body, an effect that is comic.'⁵⁶ If we are to believe Bergson then, Pryor's depiction of the white man walking mechanically through the woods is funny in itself. The rigidity of the man's walk is enough to solicit our laughter. The fact that it is this way of walking that inevitably leads him into harm's way simply adds to the humour: not only does he walk in a funny manner, but he also ends up suffering an amusing fate.

But what of the black walk through the woods? Is this human mechanisation of a different sort? Is Pryor suggesting that the unconsciously 'cool' black walk is mass-produced, inherently present in every black male and therefore equally as pre-programmed as the 'un-cool' white walk? And what does this then suggest in terms of the black superiority that is inferred from this gag? We can see that the black walk is superior to the white one, not only in terms of the perceived 'coolness' of the walker, but also in terms of how many times the walker is likely to

⁵⁴ H. Bergson, *Laughter, An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Green Integer Books, Los Angeles, 1999, p. 39.

⁵⁵ Bergson is using the term 'petrify' here to mean the changing of organic matter into a stony mass, to convert the organic into stone or a stony substance.

⁵⁶ H. Bergson, *ibid.* p. 31.

be bitten by a snake. Is Pryor suggesting from this routine that the black walk is simply more advanced mechanisation? It is not that blacks have acquired better rhythm and reflexes than whites, but rather blacks were 'designed' with a more advanced style of walking: not something whites can help, and therefore not something to be envious of.

Pryor exposes in this gag the fantasy of superiority that lies beneath racism. In bestowing a physical proficiency on black men that stems directly from their blackness he demonstrates the futility of investing in such a fantasy. The idea that black men get bitten less because they have a cooler walking rhythm is nonsensical. The audience know this, but they also subscribe to the idea. It is in this subscription that the exposition of the fantasy occurs.

Through this routine Pryor demonstrates to the audience how whites and blacks think of themselves, and how they think of each other. Both depictions are caricatures; the 'cool' blacks and the 'uncool' whites. The blacks like what they see and express this through whooping and cheering, the whites see a glimmer of recognition and are content to allow the depiction for the sake of the gag and for the sake of their guilt.⁵⁷ Both sides of the audience are compliant with Pryor's interpretation and reveal this through their laughter. They recognise both themselves and each other in the depiction. They are laughing together, but are laughing from different positions.

⁵⁷ The individual and collective guilt felt by white people for past and present racist treatment of black people.

Common Ground

It is not the 'street' gestures such as the clenched fist, crotch grabbing or swaggering walk on display here, though, that Pryor's comic performance is solely based on. Much of his work is character based through an advanced manipulation of facial expressions and bodily movements. A large part of Pryor's performance is involved with voices and characters. He modifies his speech through the invention of characters, and combines these voices with gesture and physical movement to build his comedy. He transforms his physical presence into a variety of personalities, creating character-based vignettes that infuse his gags with further meaning.

During his *Live in Concert* performance Pryor uses his gags to show the audience their faults and encourage them to examine those flaws, opening up the topic of race for discussion. Humour is an extremely effective device to use for this. Laughing at Pryor's gags together (even if they are laughing from different positions) demonstrates to a mixed audience that they share some sort of intuitive unity. There is a common ground between them where they can share laughter, and the realisation of this is a powerful moment.

A moment such as this occurs during the part of the performance when Pryor describes getting into a bit of trouble with the police. He tells us that he found out his wife is going to leave him, taking the car with her. Pryor's response to this is to take his 'big old Magnum' and shoot his car's tyres one by one followed by the engine. This will guarantee that if she is going to leave, at least she will not be able to take the car with her. Pryor describes the moment the police arrive:

I went in the house.

*Cos they got Magnums too.
And they don't kill cars.
They kill niggaz.*

Pryor plays with the words here, elongating the vowels of 'cars' and 'niggaz' in order to make them rhyme. The audience whoop and clap, delighted with both the word play and the fact that Pryor is saying something extremely controversial, yet ultimately true. Pryor continues the performance by explaining first verbally and then visually what he means. He tells us:

The Police got a chokehold they use out here though man. They choke niggaz to death. That mean you be dead when they through. Did you know that? The niggaz going, 'yeah, we knew', the white folks going, 'no, I had no idea.'

Pryor continues, 'yeah – two grab your legs, one grab your head, they go snap.' At this point he mimes the action of having someone in a headlock, then snapping his neck. He backs away from the imaginary corpse saying, 'oh shit he broke.' He stares blankly for a moment then turns to an imaginary colleague asking, 'can you break a nigger? Is it ok?' He mimes the action of taking a book from his back pocket and looks down at it suggesting, 'let's check the manual.' He finds the information he is looking for and walks towards his imaginary colleague to show him, 'yep, page eight, you can break a nigger, right there, see? Ok, let's drag him downtown, ok?' [page 139]. The enactment of this moment and Pryor's physical inhabitation of the police officer allows the audience to visualise the events described, but also challenges them. The audience is being asked to face up to the fact that police brutality against black people is a



Pryor holds a black man in a headlock, then breaks him

regular and institutionalised occurrence. Pryor's depiction of it may be exaggerated, but it is accurate in terms of its existence.

Pryor's performance here is topical and pertinent. He is commenting on a level of police brutality that is endemic, and yet one that white people are largely ignorant of. Pryor exposes an insider's view of the black community with shocking clarity and candour. He tells us that black people are only too well aware of this situation, but that white people 'have no idea.' The white people in the audience are depicted as being somewhat naïve, completely unaware that the blacks in the audience have actually taken quite a big risk to come and see Pryor's show. It is the way that Pryor manipulates the anecdote to incorporate the audience's situation that makes the piece so powerful and challenging. The power dynamic has been made personal. The political has been made personal.

This routine begins as an autobiographical description of the breakdown of a marriage and develops into a commentary on mistrust and dissatisfaction with white authority. It becomes a powerful critique of the difference in experience between being black and being white in America. The black laughter recognises the truth in the performance. The white laughter is uneasy, unsure whether this is exaggeration or accurate depiction. Through their joint laughter, then, the audience is forced to question their individual beliefs. They have found a common ground from where they can scrutinize themselves and their own perceptions.

Death

As adept as Pryor is at dealing with racially specific issues, he is equally as proficient at dealing with more universal concerns, particularly death. He

describes his experience of having a heart attack, telling us he was walking in his front yard when a voice said,

Don't breathe.

Pryor mimes the action of having someone in a headlock. He pauses, holding his body upright and rigid, looking from side to side with his eyes in confusion,

Huh?

The voice says,

You heard me motherfucker, I said don't breathe!

Pryor mimes the action of increasing the hold on the headlock. He gasps,

Ok - I won't breathe, I won't breathe, I won't breathe.

He twists the headlock again,

Then shut the fuck UP then!

He begins to stoop down, bending his knees,

Ok. Ok. Don't kill me, don't kill me, don't kill me.

He twists the headlock once more. The voice tells him,

Get on one knee and prove it!

Pryor drops to his knee, still whimpering,

I'm getting down, don't kill me.

Pryor drops to his knee, still whimpering, shaking his head rapidly.

You're thinking about dying now, ain't ya?

He nods quickly with his eyes screwed shut. He grimaces.

Yeah I'm thinking about dying, yeah.

He strengthens his hold on the headlock and twists his body violently.

You didn't think about it when you was eating all that pork.

Pryor falls backwards and lies on his back, writhing on the stage floor. His face is screwed up in apparent agony, his mouth wide open, gasping for air. He rolls from side to side, twisting his body.

You know black people have got high blood pressure, anyway, don't ya?

He twists the headlock even further, holding it as if squeezing the breath out of his victim.

Yeah I know that, I know that.

He pulls his body back in order to increase his headlock hold further, twisting forwards violently again.

You gotta watch your diet.

He twists the headlock once more,

I will, I will, don't kill me, don't kill me.

Pryor writhes about, throwing his head back, face grimacing and gasping for breath. He turns to the audience from his prostrate position and informs us that people think about things like that when they think they are about to die. He sits up and tells us that it is at this point that they usually put a call into God. He screams in a high-pitched voice,

Can I speak to God right away please?!

He turns back to the audience and tells us there is always an angel who says (in a nasal tone),

I'll have to put you on hold.

Pryor frowns at this news, expressing the inconvenience of not being allowed to talk to God immediately. He tells us it is at this point that the heart gets angry,

Was you trying to talk to God behind my back?

Pryor's eyes widen and he shakes his head rapidly,

No I wasn't.

He tightens the headlock again and twists over onto his stomach,

You is a lying motherfucker.

Pryor falls back onto his side, writhing again and grimacing, his eyes shut and mouth wide open, baring his teeth. He brings his legs to his chest to create a foetal position and throws his head back before telling us that he wakes up in an ambulance and when he looks around he sees that everyone there is white. He thinks to himself,

Ain't this a bitch? I done died and wound up in the wrong motherfuckin' Heaven. Now I gotta listen to Lawrence Welk the rest of my days.⁵⁸

Pryor's re-enactment of a heart attack is an extraordinary piece of work and functions on a number of levels. The genre of stand-up (as indicated, surely, by its name) does not permit the falling down of its performers. In this routine, however, Pryor sacrifices his up-right posture and spends most of the duration of the gag on the floor, prostrate. Pryor inverts our expectations of him in order to create a more powerful comic moment. In eschewing the upright position he shows the black man as vulnerable, castrated—gone is the permanent erection that is the white fantasy of the black male.

In amongst the writhing and grimacing, however, Pryor introduces a voice, the voice of his heart. It is a malevolent voice, messing with Pryor's body simply because it can and expressing displeasure when it suspects Pryor is attempting to negotiate his way out of the situation

⁵⁸ Lawrence Welk was a white broadcaster who starred in his own variety television show called 'The Lawrence Welk Show' on American National TV from 1955 to 1971. The show was extremely wholesome and quite possibly the antithesis of a Richard Pryor performance.

through direct conversation with a higher being. Despite this malice, however, the voice gives Pryor advice about his diet, suggesting that it is offering him a second chance for survival. It is through the use of this voice that we are privy to Pryor's interpretation of his heart attack not as being an attack *on* his heart, but rather *by* his heart. His heart becomes separate from his body with its own consciousness and agenda, punishing Pryor for his blatant disregard for his own health, chastising him, yet offering him a second chance. Pryor's body becomes wretched, close to death through self-abuse. His mortality, and his recognition of coming brutally face-to-face⁵⁹ with his own mortality, is blatantly on display here and as a result, our own mortality is blatantly on display here. We are forced through Pryor's routine to consider our own impending death.

But it is not an anxiety-producing consideration. Pryor's concept of death here is abstract and humorous. It is graphic and violent, but it is also comical, and it is the presence of this humour that removes the horror that may otherwise be present in such a situation. The relationship between Pryor's terrifying physical depiction of impending death and comic anthropomorphic personification of his heart through the use of the voice he gives it creates a humour that diffuses the fear surrounding (our) death.

Pryor's gag serves as a customary way of dealing with mortality. In Freudian psychoanalysis people cannot imagine their own death; in fantasies and dreams of death, they typically look upon their own death as if from the position of a spectator. They are unconsciously convinced of their own immortality and any threats to this perceived immortality might

⁵⁹ Or voice-to-voice in this particular depiction of it.

be damaging.⁶⁰ Pryor's enactment of his own death helps us deal with this psychological issue, then, by reminding us of our mortality in a humorous way, which diffuses the angst surrounding it. Our laughter at Pryor's conversation with his heart while he writhes about in agony disperses our unwelcome thoughts surrounding our own death (and there is always the possibility that we could talk our heart out of killing us!).

Pryor furthermore manages to infuse an element of racial specificity towards the end of the gag. His idea of a white Heaven would be Hell for a black man; surrounded by white people listening to bland entertainment for eternity. Once again we are reminded of the differences between white and black, even while we are being reminded of the similarities; we are all going to die, but where we end up after that may vary.

Animal Bodies

In *Live in Concert*, Pryor's expressions and gestures are so dramatic that he can indicate a shift in mood or change in character without even saying a word. He morphs between people, animals and objects with ease, miming each one extraordinarily convincingly. Much of Pryor's performance involves the anthropomorphic personification of animals and objects, which are rendered comical through his physical depiction of their forms. He emphasises his perception of their visual embodiments to maximise this comic effect and through this emphasis physically transforms his body to portray the object of his mimicry. At one point in the performance he is describing the guard dogs he bought for his house who do everything but

⁶⁰ See S. Freud, 'Thought for the Times on War and Death', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume 14, Hogarth Press, London, 1957, p. 289.

guard the property. He tells us that when a burglar calls round the dogs welcome him, usher him into the house and show him where Pryor keeps all his valuables. He runs across the stage like an excited child, beckoning with his hand and shouting, 'come on in, come on in. Let me show you where the money is.' He runs the other way across the stage shouting, 'come on, come on, hurry up – get the silver' [pages 147 and 148]. It is when the burglar tries to leave, however, that the dogs turn nasty. He tells us:

They wait for the burglar to hit the door. That's when they turn into the exorcist, right. The burglar goes and they go (in a deep growling voice) 'you can't leave ... Grrr ... I want to play.'

Pryor demonstrates the dogs' expressions, contorting his face into a Doberman's scowl. His eyes open wide and he looks from side to side wildly. He manages to inhabit the dogs through his demonstration of their demeanour, allowing the audience to picture the scene. He then changes from an impression of the dogs to an impression of the burglar, frozen in horror at the door, using his whole body to express how the burglar stands erect, his body rigid with fear and his arm outstretched with his hand on the doorknob, unable to turn it for fear of inciting the dogs to attack him:

And that's how you find the burglar when you get home, right. They be talking about: (in a squeaky voice) 'help me, please help me'. The mothafucka sound like the fly: 'help me. The dog is going to bite my asshole out, help me.' Them pets is something else, man.

This part of the performance is one small part of Pryor's routine that is based around impressions and characterisations of a variety of animals:



Pryor shows us how his dog escorts the burglar through his house



Pryor shows us how his dog escorts the burglar through his house

Dobermans, German Shepherds, Malamutes, Great Danes, Shetland ponies, deer and squirrel monkeys. Pryor is playing here with a (white) culture that has for years – centuries – ascribed the status of animal to the black male. He reverses this animal position, ascribing 'blackness' to the animal, undermining the assumptions of the dominant culture. Pryor switches between each animal he portrays. He does not literally represent the characters he is describing, but he does enough with his voices, facial expressions, and bodily gestures to allow the audience to picture the scene he is describing for them and to see the humour in it.

Pryor begins an anecdote about a pet squirrel monkey he had that he called Fran because the first time he opened the cage he ran up Pryor's arm and 'stuck his dick right in my ear.' Pryor shows us how the animal attempts to have sex with him. He jerks his body rapidly up and down, thrusting his pelvis whilst making a corresponding squeaking noise, 'ni ni ni ni ni.' He says it felt like a wet Q-tip⁶¹ and mimics the monkey again visually and verbally, 'ni ni ni ni ni.' He says the monkey urinated down his cheek and he had to throw him up into the air to get him to stop, 'ni ni ni ni ni.' Pryor tells us the monkey did this to everyone he came in contact with, so Pryor got him a 'woman' squirrel monkey companion and called her Sister. When Fran was introduced to Sister, we are told, he did exactly the same to her, ran up to her and started having sex with her ear. At this point Pryor mimics Sister, slightly bent over with his arms extended. Sister says, 'Freeze. First thing I gotta show you where the pussy is.'

⁶¹ 'Q-tip' is a brand name for cotton swabs in the USA. It is often used as a generic term for cotton swabs in the same way that 'Tipp-Ex' is used to refer to correction fluid in the UK.

Pryor continues this anecdote by explaining that the monkeys died when he left them with some friends.⁶² He tells us he was very upset about it and went out into the garden to cry when the German Shepherd from next door saw him and came over the fence. He tells us the dog came over and looked up at him and said,

What's the matter, Rich?

Pryor's face demonstrates bewilderment and worry while he represents the dog's concern for him. He frowns and his forehead creases with lines before looking up at Rich with eyes open wide. Pryor's expression then changes into one of inconsolable grief as he replies,

Say, my monkeys died.

Pryor looks down at the dog, closing his eyes and sticking his bottom lip out as if crying. The dog looks back at Pryor in shock, eyes and mouth wide open,

Say what? Your monkeys died?

He looks around thoughtfully,

Ain't that a bitch? You mean them two monkeys that used to be in the trees? They died?

Pryor nods, his face changing back into grief-stricken.

Yeah, they died.

The dog looks around in disappointment, his eyebrows drooping, mouth closed,

Shit. I was gonna eat them too.

⁶² The monkeys were left in a room with a gas heater, which they managed to turn on, 'but didn't have no matches' and the fumes killed them.

The dog shakes his head and tells Pryor not to think about it for too long because, *'that shit will fuck with you'* before heading back to the fence to return to his own yard.

In this performance Pryor does not only give voice to the animals, but also assumes their physical appearances. He alternates between his own and the animals' facial expressions and demonstrates physically their actions. His face appears to transform between characters and he contorts his body to reveal the frantic movements of Fran the squirrel monkey and the authoritative stance Sister takes on her first encounter with Fran. He switches verbally equally as quickly. In one moment he is squeaking in a high pitch as he mimics the noise Fran makes while he has sex, in the next moment his voice has dropped several octaves while he represents Sister's verbal response to Fran's treatment of her.

Pryor's engagement with Sister is particularly interesting. The voice he gives her is that of a black male. Her voice is low, even lower than Pryor's usual pitch. And the language she uses is typical of Pryor's streetwise vernacular, both grammatically and with her use of the word 'pussy' to refer to her genitalia. Sister does not say 'my pussy' here, but instead 'the pussy', which distances her from it and has the effect of masculinising her speech. Her genitalia have been objectified.

Pryor often uses the word 'pussy' in a sexual context. He tells us that the woman who was having sex with his father when he died, 'couldn't give away no pussy for two years' and suggests to his partner when she doesn't orgasm through sex with him, 'maybe yo' pussy dead.' These examples are suggestive of a problematic gender politics. During his performance Pryor often refers to women in terms of men's sexual use of them. This attitude is informed by the black machismo of Pryor's urban

black streetwise persona. He does not exhibit hatred of women, which would suggest that his comedy is not misogynistic and his use of the word pussy does not reduce women to the sum of their reproductive parts, rather he uses the word only to refer to their reproductive parts. It is possible then, that Pryor uses the word in order to satirise the black male attitude to women. The sexism is intentional in order to demonstrate the flaws in the black male approach to women and serves to ridicule the prevailing concept of black sexual supremacy.

This black sexual supremacy is something that Pryor can perform, but never claims to represent himself. In fact, this anecdote about the squirrel monkey demonstrates Pryor's inadequacy. His pets mistake him for a sexual object⁶³ and try to have sex with his ear, before urinating on his face. And this is not the only example of his ineptitude. He shoots his car to prevent his wife from leaving, he tries to go out running but the stitch in his side tells him, 'I'm gonna be fuckin' with you,' he jumps into his swimming pool forgetting he cannot swim and nearly drowns. His body is the scene of failure.

Once again I find Pryor to be intervening in a cultural stereotype. White culture has ascribed to the black male an extraordinary sexuality: black penises are larger than white, black sex lasts longer than white, black men have multiple partners in order to satisfy their excessive libidos. And yet the majority of Pryor's performance has shown him to be sexually inadequate. Pryor reverses the stereotype and undermines both the white and the black position. Pryor shows the whites how ridiculous the stereotype is, by playing with the reverse (inadequacy) and shows the

⁶³ In the same part of the performance Pryor describes his pet dogs also trying to have sex with him, discussing it between themselves when they are in the garden, before jumping on him.

blacks that they do not need to allow the perpetuation of the stereotype by brazenly admitting to his own insufficient sexuality. Pryor's body disrupts the supremacy it is supposed to exemplify and reveals its vulnerability. Pryor does not just tell us what he means, he show us with his body.

Another stand-up performer whose work is intrinsically linked to the body is Jo Brand. Brand uses her body in a very different way to Pryor and it is time to look at that difference and discover what effect Brand's use of her body has on her audience.

Chapter Four: Jo Brand

On first encountering Jo Brand's work as a stand-up comedienne, the most striking thing about her visually is her physical size. She is a large woman, she knows it, and the majority of her act centres on it. The relationship between Brand's visual appearance and her spoken material is key to her performance. Brand's work deals with her body in a number of ways; she begins her performance with gags that appear to be self-deprecating, and then moves on to use gags that challenge gender stereotypes and confront her audience with her large body unapologetically. Brand's relationship to her body is worked out through her comedic performance and she uses this relationship to explore her politics.

As with Richard Pryor, other writers have dealt with Jo Brand's work. The majority of texts that discuss her work are newspaper reviews of her stand-up shows or brief mentions in scholarly texts that question why female comedians are not as prevalent as male ones. Although this is an important question, it is not one that I am concerned with in the context of this writing. I am also not interested in questioning why Brand has been labelled by the media as 'lesbian comedienne' or why she may appeal more to female audiences than male. As with Richard Pryor, it is what happens in the moment of Brand's performance that I am interested in: what she communicates to her audience through her use of her body and her voice; what the relationship is *between* her body and her voice.

It is Brand's use of her body and its relationship to her verbal material that I will be examining in order to discover what lies beneath this relationship. How does Brand use her body to communicate? What issues does she raise with her relationship to her body? Are there things

she can say as a large woman that a smaller woman would not be able to say? Does Brand's large body give her verbal material more comic potential?

In order to answer these questions I will be using one particular performance as source material: the 2003 recording of her stand-up show *Barely Live*. Brand uses her body in a particular way during this performance that offers me the opportunity to examine a number of specific issues relating to femininity and the experience of being a woman. The most overt themes running through Brand's performance are her body politics. Brand uses her large body to challenge stereotypes surrounding large women, and indeed stereotypes surrounding all women, and allows her material to explore culturally determined responses to body size. Brand's relationship to her own body is worked out through her comedy, and in doing so she questions how a large female body is viewed and treated within society. Brand does not laugh at the fat female body, but with it and through it. Her gags are totally dependent on her own physicality, giving her work authenticity and legitimacy.

Unruly Body – The Visual

In the opening sequence of *Barely Live* Brand immediately foregrounds her physical attributes with the introductory comment to her live audience, 'yes I know, I'm a lot thinner and prettier than I seem on telly.' She raises a hand in a 'wait' gesture and instructs her audience to 'calm down.' She then moves the microphone stand to the side of the stage, remarking, 'let's move this right out of the way actually, cos if I get in front of it you won't be able to see me properly will you?' [page 156]. In this foregrounding of her body, Brand intervenes within a particular set of



Moving the microphone stand

assumptions. Brand's status as performer, as *female* performer, bestows on her an element of expectation in terms of sexuality and desirability.⁶⁴ A woman in the public eye, performing, on stage, on television, requires a certain amount of 'beauty' in order for society to accept her in this public position. Yet through the sarcastic remarks Brand makes here, Brand points out that she does not conform to these expectations. Brand explicitly reminds us (as if we needed to be reminded) that she is somewhat on the heavy side and is not 'classically beautiful'.⁶⁵ In doing so she shifts her position from comic object to comic subject, inverting her objectification and making it the subject of her work.

◇ As a female performer, and as a *fat* female performer, Brand occupies two objective positions: as spectacular object (performer) and as comic object (fat female). Brand still 'makes a spectacle' of herself, but she does it in a subjective way.

When Brand enters the stage in *Barely Live* we see her wearing baggy black trousers, a baggy black, long-sleeved cotton top that comes down to her knees and black shoes. This is a consistent look for Brand, so much so

⁶⁴ This can be recognised based on the appearances of women who are successful actresses, popular music performers, and television presenters, to list but a few. Laura Mulvey discussed the notion of the female performer existing to be looked at, to be the object of desire, in her influential essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. See L. Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1989.

⁶⁵ The use of this term is my attempt to avoid the word 'ugly'. I do not actually think Brand is in any way ugly, despite her many jokes that she is. However, Brand does not display many of the facial characteristics that would allow her to be labelled 'classically beautiful' such as a narrow face and nose, full lips, high cheek bones or large eyes with long, thick eye lashes.

that in 2003 Trinny and Susannah⁶⁶ gave her a makeover and instructed her never to wear black again, 'so bollocks to those posh old twats, eh?' [page 159]. The style and shape of Brand's clothing are loose fitting, unflattering and hide her curves. These shapeless clothes emphasise her large body, rather than hide it. The material of her top hangs down vertically from her breasts instead of going in at her waist, adding to her size, and as she walks up and down the stage, the material swings about, further emphasising her laboured walk, which is affected due to her heavy weight [pages 160 and 161].

Brand's clothes conceal her figure and appear to assist in an evasion of her femininity. She refuses to wear what Trinny and Susannah have suggested for her, and in doing so she refuses to play her part in their attempted manipulation of her image. Brand reclaims her control and defies their advice, reverting back to her 'banned' black, baggy clothing. Brand refuses to fit in, both literally and metaphorically. She refuses to fit into the tailored clothes that are selected for her, and in doing so, she refuses to fit into the culture that expects her to wear the clothing.

◇ In the way that humour is a social and cultural construction, fat is also a social and cultural construction. Without delving too deeply into a worldwide history of women's bodies, it is possible to see a change even as recently as the 1950s in terms of 'acceptable' body size. Female film stars, for example, in the 1950s were larger and far more

⁶⁶ Trinny Woodall and Susannah Constantine, two British fashion designers, television presenters and authors. Brand featured in their BBC television show *What Not To Wear* in which she was given a fashion makeover.



Brand's stage outfit



Brand's stage pacing



Brand's stage pacing

curvaceous than female actresses today. And in Mauritania, female obesity is so revered among the Moor Arab population, young girls are sometimes force-fed to obtain a desirable weight. There is no absolute definition of 'fatness'. Each society produces its own understanding of what constitutes 'fat', and how that society approaches it. It is not only a matter of degree of fatness that is labelled 'fat', but also the meanings ascribed to it. Our perception of 'fat' is as constructed a notion as our perception of 'beauty' or, indeed, 'humour'.

Following her introduction, Brand paces slowly and laboriously across the stage. She tells us, 'my personal trainer said if I walk up and down a lot I'll burn up fifteen calories, so hang on.' When she gets half way across the stage she stops and turns around, telling us, 'there we go. That'll do for one night.' Brand is referencing our expectation that she needs to manage her weight. In our twenty-first century culture we are bombarded with evidence that it is possible (and desirable) to control our bodies. We can join Weight Watchers and in a matter of months be our 'ideal' weight (thin). We can go for a spray tan and a new hair cut and 'look ten years younger'. We can buy a balcony bra and control top knickers and 'look good naked'. The underlying insinuation is that if we do not choose to do these things then we are inadequate, failing to reach our true potential as women. If we have allowed ourselves to accumulate fat, we have failed to exercise self-control and we should be ashamed. In this gag, however, Brand can be seen failing, and not particularly caring about it either. Her

personal trainer describes a way to lose weight; Brand tries it (moving her body) and tires very quickly of it, declaring 'that'll do' (verbally declaring her refusal to exercise). In this way she intervenes within our assumptions that she must surely be trying to lose weight; that she can't be happy with her body the size it is.

◇ Brand exceeds the comic space she is in during her performance because after the performance, she is still fat. Her body refuses to reinstate the status quo. Her body overrules the licensed transgression her comedy is a part of.⁶⁷

Within Western society, women are expected to be aesthetic objects, beautiful objects. If a woman fails to live up to a culturally imposed notion of beauty, she fails as a woman. And a major indication of her success in the beauty stakes is her physical size. If she breaches the ideal, she is labelled 'fat'. And fat equals unattractive. In fact, fat equals a whole lot more. It equals unhealthy, greedy, undisciplined, unrestrained, and lazy. Fat is linked to excess and loss of control, a lack of care of oneself, a lack of pride in ones own appearance. Fat is linked to failure. Yet Brand does not appear to see things in this way. She paces up and down the stage, a laboured walk, awkward due to her weight. Moving across the stage, left to right, right to left, her large body is ever-present. It paces, pausing occasionally in order to turn to the audience. It seems to me that Brand is

⁶⁷ For further discussion of transgression in relation to the body and comedy see J. Arthurs, 'Revolted Women: The Body in Comic Performance', in J. Arthurs, and J. Grimshaw, (eds.), *Women's Bodies: Discipline and Transgression*, Cassell, London, 1999, pp. 137 - 164.

using her own body to rebel against society's expectations of her, flaunting her failure to attempt to conform by defiantly parading her large body across the stage.⁶⁸

Brand's introductory gag foregrounds her size visually and in doing so foregrounds her appetite. In this way Brand proves the existence of female desire and is clearly happy to satisfy it. She does not hide her large body away from sight; rather, she gets up on stage and draws attention to it both visually and verbally. And in doing so, she challenges her audience's perceptions of appropriate behaviour. The obedient woman denies her appetite; the disobedient one satisfies it. This indulgence is clear to see in her body size and in Brand's case, in her public flaunting of it. Through both her physical gestures and her verbal references to her body, Brand challenges culturally constructed notions of beauty.

Brand's unapologetic, defiant attitude to her size allows her to create material that questions the pressures that exist for women to conform to a certain culturally constructed ideal. She refuses to glamorise her appearance when on stage, wearing shapeless black clothing and pacing inelegantly. Her combination of verbal utterance and physical gesture to signify her attitude to her own body (as demonstrated through her gags) sets up a tension between the way society views women of her size and the way she responds to society's judgement of her. It is within this tension that Brand's comic material is situated, and where it is most effective.

⁶⁸ Certain lesbians in the 1980s expressed a similar rebellion against society's expectations of women when they took hormonal supplements to encourage facial hair growth as a visual comment on the ways women's bodies are constructed socially and culturally through the dominance of patriarchy. For a fuller discussion of representations of gender see M. Kidd, *The Bearded Lesbian*, in J. Arthurs and J. Grimshaw, (eds.), *Women's Bodies: Discipline and Transgression*, Cassell, London and New York, 1999, pp. 195 – 207.

Unruly Body – The Verbal

As we have seen, Brand begins her performance *Barely Live* focusing exclusively on her physical appearance. She refers to the objectionable things critics have said about her body such as making reference to her having ‘a double chin and a rucksack on [her] back which turns out to be skin.’ She tells us that she seems to have a psychological problem that is similar to anorexia, ‘cos anorexic people look in the mirror and think they look fat, and so do I.’ Brand tells us that she burned her bra in the 1970s in solidarity with feminism; that the resulting fire heated a small village in Cumberland for two weeks; that Greenpeace firebombed her knicker drawer due to the amount of whale bone she needed for her corsets. These gags would all appear to be self-deprecating in style, but I do not find them to be so. Brand articulates the hostility and disgust with which her body is regarded with a matter-of-fact tone of voice that comes across to me as defiant. In the same way that she foregrounds her large body visually, she foregrounds it verbally (using grossly exaggerated anecdotes), and is unapologetic about her size. She is a large woman, and although people may judge her for it, she does not judge herself for it. This attitude to her body creates the basis for her material and adds authenticity to her work. Her physical size allows her to generate gags about over eating, exercise, eating disorders and other issues that affect fat women in an image-obsessed (and by that, I mean slim-obsessed) culture that would not make sense coming from a slimmer woman.

If Brand’s gags about her size initially appear self-deprecating, this may be for a specific purpose. There is a risk that Brand’s unapologetic attitude to her size may alienate her audience, who are, after all, from the very society that judge fat women harshly. This audience may not be

particularly sympathetic to Brand's body politics, or the gender politics that are integral to her routine. It may be, then, that Brand is easing her audience in gently, introducing them to her work through self-deprecating gags that are often assumed to be self-defence,⁶⁹ but that in this case, actually mark the beginnings of offence.⁷⁰

Early on in the performance, Brand spots a group of young men in the front row of the audience. Presumably she knows that much of her material will not suit these men and she diverts any hostility she may encounter from them by addressing it head on:

I've got a little group of lads down here, which is a bit scary.

She stands facing the audience, pointing down at the group.

You obviously got free tickets, cos lads do not come to see me. Willingly.

She looks down towards the men and puts her left hand on her hip.

So welcome. I hope you have a good night, alright?

She turns her body slightly and moves closer towards the edge of the stage, leaning into the audience.

And don't worry, I can't run either.

She turns her body and starts walking towards the other side of the stage.

So if I start winking at you and looking slightly middle aged and hormonal...

She turns back to the group of men and leans in towards them.

⁶⁹ In Freudian psychoanalysis, defence mechanisms are unconscious strategies used to cope with reality and maintain our own positive self-image. Self-deprecation and humour are two of these strategies. See S. Freud, 'Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume 20, Hogarth Press, London, 1959, pp 87 - 172.

⁷⁰ I mean this in both senses of the word, as in offensive attack and as in to take offence from a risqué remark.

Just leg it, alright?

She points to the side of the stage and then backs away. The audience erupt in laughter and the camera cuts to the group of young men, who are laughing and looking at each other. This gag is achieved through a combination of the words Brand utters and the gestures she makes. The majority of the communication takes place through the words, however the ideas are heavily supplemented by her actions, particularly at the end of the gag where she not only suggests that the men run away from her, but also indicates the direction in which they should run.

◇ I find there to be something of the abject in the work of Jo Brand: in her attitude to her own body; in the subject matter she deals with and in the way she communicates. The abject is a complex concept developed by Julia Kristeva in her book *Powers of Horror*.⁷¹ Kristeva tells us there are three main categories of the abject: food, bodily waste and signs of sexual difference. Each category addresses those elements, particularly of the body, that threaten our sense of cleanliness and respectability. The abject covers all the bodily functions, or aspects of the body, that are deemed impure or improper for public display or discussion. This includes both bodily fluids such as vomit, excrement and menstrual blood and also the orifices from which these fluids emerge

⁷¹ J. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1982.

such as the mouth, anus and vagina. Additionally, actions can be considered abject if they offend our sense of morality such as cannibalism, murder, incest and sexual perversion. More significantly in terms of the work of Brand, the third category of the abject deals with corporeal signs of sexual difference, signs such as cultural horror at menstrual blood. Brand's work deals directly with sexual difference. She bluntly addresses a group of young men in her audience with references to her menopause and tells us she was going to call her double act with another menopausal woman 'The Leaky Girls'.

There is an element of the abject in the fat female body, which is a site of shame and guilt based on society's expectations of women. The fat female has devoured excessively, has failed to control her behaviour, gorging in excess of her physical needs. She is culturally represented as flawed, requiring 'fixing' (weight loss). She should feel shame and aspire to reduce her 'disgusting' bulk.

Brand takes the disgust we feel towards her body and transforms it into laughter. She refuses to condescend to the social norms of femininity, using her self-deprecating gags to articulate the general hostility and disgust with which her fat body is regarded.

Brand deals with the situation of the young men by foregrounding her physicality once more. She anticipates any possible negative response from her audience and deflects it with her apparent self-mockery. She points out that she is approaching menopausal age, which means she may start acting a bit 'hormonal', but this will not be a problem for the young men, because her lack of physical fitness means that they will easily out run her. Once again Brand does not apologise for this behaviour. She is not ashamed that her impending menopause may cause her to behave strangely, nor is she embarrassed that her physical fitness will not allow her to chase the young men.

I can see, then, how Brand has successfully moved herself from comic object, the butt of her jokes, to comic subject, the instigator of jokes. Brand uses her body and its place in society, its awkwardness and difficulties, and manages to make her audience laugh with her, even the ones that may threaten⁷² her most. The audience have been situated on Brand's side; they are allied with her now. It is within this position that the political⁷³ elements of Brand's work will function most successfully. By allowing the audience to laugh at her body, Brand has created a site of comedy that also has the potential to comment politically.

Politics

Brand uses her body within her work to engage in a comedy that is politically motivated. She does this overtly in several routines such as the

⁷² I do not mean threaten physically, here. I mean threaten in terms of potential heckles, or in terms of audience members least likely to find her material funny.

⁷³ I find Brand's work to epitomise the feminist statement that the personal is political. Much of Brand's material deals explicitly with her relationship with men, her role in her marriage, and her feelings about child rearing and homemaking: all of which were major concerns of the feminists writing in the 1960s and 1970s.

one about little girls' toys and how they should not play with dolls and prams, but rather with train sets and guns:

Barbie to me is so dull.

Brand walks across the stage, leans into the audience and narrows her eyes.

The kind of categories of Barbie you get

She continues walking across the stage, gesturing with her right hand in an emphatic motion.

You get In-The-Kitchen Barbie

She pauses, grimaces and holds her right hand in the air.

Going-Out-With-Ken Barbie.

She tosses her head and wiggles her hips, turning her body and beginning to walk the other way across the stage.

It's not exactly challenging...

She turns her body and head to the audience and leans into them as she walks.

Why do we have to have this dullness?

Brand throws her right hand up in the air in an exasperated gesture and leans into the audience again, smiling.

Why can't we have Feminist Barbie?

She turns her body and begins walking back the other way, moving her right arm in another emphatic motion.

Sits in a tower, lets down her armpit hair...

She gestures emphatically again, stops walking and moves her right hand into her armpit. She moves her hand from here downwards in a sweeping motion, indicating the length of the armpit hair. She pauses as the audience groan, laugh and applaud.

... And Germaine Greer could come and climb up it and read us all a chapter from the Female Eunuch.

Brand makes an upward sweeping motion with her right hand towards her body and begins to walk the other way.

Wouldn't that be marvellous?

She slows her walking pace down and turns back towards the audience. Once again we see Brand use her body to emphasise what she is saying. Her use of emphatic hand gestures indicates that she feels strongly about the topic. The way she wiggles her hips indicates that she considers the personality that has been ascribed to the toy to be vacuous in nature. She leans in to the audience, genuinely asking why we put up with such things, which in turn causes the audience to question it too.

Of course, the most physical reaction from the audience is when Brand gestures the length of the armpit hair of the imaginary doll. Her action creates a very strong visual image in the mind of the audience and they react instinctively, initially with groaning and then laughter and applause. They are delighted that Brand has managed to affect them in this way. It seems to me that this type of physical reaction to the gag allows the point Brand is making to be made more forcefully. This gag will remain in the memory of the audience for longer, and as a result, so will the question Brand is posing: why do we reinforce gender stereotypes to children at an age that we are the most impressionable? Clearly Brand is tapping directly into feminist discourse here.

◇ There are clear links between Brand's material and that of the Carnavalesque, both in terms of the transgressive space and in terms of the

scatological. Carnival was a licensed space: a time and place set aside for the expression of ideas that were normally taboo. The world was turned upside down. Men dressed as women, peasants became Lords, fools became Kings. It was a release for ideas and behaviours that were normally suppressed the rest of the time.⁷⁴ But if Brand's comedy is carnivalesque, does this mean that it is subject to the same temporary transgressions? Carnival allows for short-lived transgression, at the end of which order is restored, stronger than ever. Once Brand comes off stage, once she stops performing, does order return? Is the status quo reinstated? Or does her large body allow her to continue with the transgression? Her body refuses to reinstate the status quo – it is still large, even off stage. It blurs the boundaries of stage and real world, keeping her rebellions and transgressions going even after her comedy's licensed space has ended.

Brand also taps into feminist discourse in the way she deals with her own life and her personal experiences. The majority of Brand's material deals with her recent experiences of marriage and motherhood and it is with this subject matter that Brand is at her most political. It is with this subject matter that Brand is able to question what it means to be a woman in contemporary Western society, and how women are expected to relate

⁷⁴ See M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1984.

to culturally constructed notions of femininity. Brand does this most successfully with the material that deals with her own body and with the ways her body responds to domesticity.

Brand tells us that she has recently given birth to two daughters, Maisie and Snappy⁷⁵ and that on becoming a mother she discovers she has no idea what to do because she finds children terribly dull, so she has to consult books on parenting:

So you don't just get one ordinary book that tells you what to do.

Brand has been pacing, but she stops and faces the audience, holding her left hand out towards them, gesticulating with it.

You get seven hundred written by, oh, the whole spectrum.

She moves her left hand round in a sweeping gesture.

Hippies that end.

She takes a step stage left and holds her left arm out.

Nazis that end.

She takes two steps towards stage right, swapping the microphone over to her left hand and holding her right arm out. She puts her hand down and begins walking back towards the middle of the stage.

So you can choose.

She stops and begins making a sweeping motion with her right arm.

Put it out in the garden with some rabbits, and see what happens.

She bends over at the waist and continues gesturing with her right arm, as if she is putting the child outside. She walks the other way again and turns her body back to face the audience.

Put it in the cupboard.

⁷⁵ The second daughter is not really called Snappy, this is a gag that relates to an earlier part of the routine when Brand tells us that the child of a friend, on discovering Brand is pregnant, asks her to name her baby Snappy if it is born a crocodile.

She steps sideways slightly, holing her right arm out with the palm of her hand facing the audience.

If it makes a noise, kill it...

She stands still, then makes a chopping motion with her arm.

... So I just had no idea what to do.

Brand begins pacing again, holding her right hand up with the palm facing upwards.

And I just, basically, I just had to guess really.

She moves her right hand up and down in quick succession.

All the while being incredibly fucking irritable, right.

She stops walking abruptly and turns sharply to face the audience, leaning in towards them slightly. Brand uses the width of the stage to visually demonstrate the metaphorical distance between the two most extreme types of parenting styles, assisting the audience to see how varied the options are that Brand finds herself having to choose between. Brand demonstrates visually and verbally exactly how confused she was on becoming a mother and how unprepared she felt. These feelings are exacerbated by her permanent irritation.

This response to motherhood appears to contradict everything we (as women) are supposed to hold sacred. We are supposed to want to be parents, crave it, even. We are supposed to know instinctually how to be mothers. We are supposed to relish the experience, nurturing our children and savouring every moment. Any deviation from this expectation is considered abnormal, yet Brand explicitly states she has no innate knowledge of parenting, she has to consult ludicrous books on the subject and worse still, she does not appear to enjoy the experience,

feeling perpetually angry. Her body does not respond to mothering the way it 'should', or the way society expects it to.

Brand's body responds in a similarly rebellious way to housewifery. She can't cope with looking after a bunch of flowers because when she looks for a vase, it has a fungal growth in it from the last time she used it. Brand tells us that she ends up swallowing half of the plant food because she cannot open the sachet successfully and when she does finally open the packet she fails to follow the instructions and ruins the mixture anyway. Her advice to the audience is to throw away any flowers they are given in order to avoid having to deal with them. Brand then tells us that one of the few good things about having children is that there is someone to blame the unpleasant smells in the house on:

I was actually quite pleased, once I had children.

Brand is pacing. She stops and turns to face the audience and gesticulates with her left hand.

Cos I could pass the poo smell off on them, you know.

She gesticulates emphatically and then holds her arm still, as if gesturing to her children.

And I hadn't been able to do that for a number of years.

She turns and begins walking again, turning her head back towards the audience. She raises her eyebrows and nods several times, then smiles.

You don't clean your house, either.

She turns and walks the other way then stops and faces the audience. She gestures upwards in a sweeping motion with her left hand.

I haven't cleaned my house for two years. It's bloody brilliant, right ...

She continues walking, turning her head towards the audience, nodding and smiling.

... Yes, that is poo on the carpet.

She stops and turns, pointing to the floor. Brand's gestures here are used in conjunction with her words to complement what she is saying. The gestures do not appear to assist in any visualisation until the very end of the gag when Brand points to the floor, as if pointing to the faeces that she is referring to. This single gesture, however, brings the imaginary faeces directly into the imagination of the audience. It is almost as if there actually is excrement on the stage floor. This visual gesture has made Brand's anecdote far more shocking because the filth is almost present in front of the audience. And this demonstrates more vividly what a monstrous housewife Brand must be.

The concept of housewife is central to the culture of Western women, and the success of a woman is judged according to her expertly kept home and the well being of her family. The fact that Brand cannot cope with caring for some cut flowers indicates her lack of interest in traditional notions of 'home making' and the fact she tolerates faeces on the carpet, indeed, defiantly admits to its presence, hints at a lack of concern for her family's health.⁷⁶

◇ Brand's confession that she does not clean her house reminds me of Mary Douglas' assertion that dirt is 'matter out of place.'⁷⁷ Douglas tells us that the concept of dirt suggests an order of things and a

⁷⁶ Typing 'housewife' into the search section of the shopping website <http://www.amazon.co.uk> on Monday 6th June 2010 provided a result of 27029 book titles featuring 'housewife'. The majority of them seem to be 'how to' guides, (both tongue-in-cheek and serious) instructing women how to keep their men happy and their home well maintained.

⁷⁷ M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, Routledge, London, 2010, p. 44.

contravening of that order. Dirt is part of a system of classifications. When something can be found outwith its classification, this is when it becomes dirt:

Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining-table; food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing; similarly, bathroom equipment in the drawing room; clothing lying on chairs; outdoor things indoors; upstairs things downstairs; under-clothing appearing where over-clothing should be, and so on.⁷⁸

In addition to the matter out of place that occurs in Brand's home in the form of a messy house with faeces on the carpet, there is matter out of place in the form of the taboos that Brand discusses in her performance. This is a different type of dirt: this is the dirty joke.⁷⁹ And this leads me back to the licensed space in which the matter out of place occurs, because in the context of a comedy club, the dirty joke is not matter out of place. It is matter in exactly where you would expect to find it. Perhaps Brand physically demonstrating her least favourite part of sex would be out of place in Church or at a

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ A joke that is considered to be in poor taste, vulgar, obscene or scatological by the prevailing morality of a culture. I use the work 'joke' here because this is the expression. Of course, I really mean 'dirty gag'.

funeral, but on stage at a comedy performance, it is perfectly acceptable.

Brand uses this routine to renegotiate what it means to be a housewife. Not only does Brand fail to revel in household tasks, but she also throws something away that would make her home more pleasant in order to avoid having to deal with it. She appears to care so little for the health and comfort of her family, she is content to leave excrement on the carpet and tolerate the smell it infuses throughout her home. The groans from the audience when Brand discusses the faeces on the carpet seem to suggest their disgust and discomfort at this breakdown of order. Brand has crossed a line in terms of acceptable behaviour, she has stepped outside a boundary of housekeeping standards. This disgust the audience feel helps Brand confront the notion of the perfect housewife and the ideal of the effortlessly happy home. She challenges the myth of the skilled, multi-tasking, hard-working mother, who delights in the tasks involved in running a successful household. Brand challenges the perception of the unsuccessful woman failing at being a mother and deconstructs through her verbal material the fiction of the perfect family life.

The (Un) Feminine

The way in which Brand refuses to conform to a socially constructed concept of 'mother' or 'housewife' reminds me of Kathleen Rowe's notion of the 'unruly woman'. Rowe identifies eight separate qualities that an unruly woman may exhibit in her 1995 work *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*:

1. *The unruly woman creates disorder by dominating, or trying to dominate, men. She is unable or unwilling to confine herself to her proper place.*
2. *Her body is excessive or fat, suggesting her unwillingness or inability to control her physical appetites.*
3. *Her speech is excessive, in quantity, content, or tone.*
4. *She makes jokes, or laughs herself.*
5. *She may be androgynous or hermaphroditic, drawing attention to the social construction of gender.*
6. *She may be old or a masculinised crone, for old women who refuse to become invisible in our culture are often considered grotesque.*
7. *Her behaviour is associated with looseness and occasionally whorishness, but her sexuality is less narrowly and negatively defined than is that of the femme fatale. She may be pregnant.*
8. *She is associated with dirt, liminality (thresholds, borders, or margins), and taboo, rendering her above all a figure of ambivalence.⁸⁰*

I can look down this list that Rowe has suggested are the signifiers of an unruly woman and check them off one by one in terms of Brand's material and, indeed, her body. I can think of at least one gag from *Barely Live* that would illustrate each of the eight points in question. But it is not Brand's unruliness that is in question here for me, it is what this potential unruliness may communicate to her audience that I want to look at.

When Brand talks of being inept at caring for a bunch of flowers, when she tells us that her house smells badly, and she does not seem to care, Brand causes us to question her femininity. She is a woman behaving in an unwomanly way, in an unfeminine way. There is the sense that she is a woman behaving badly, and that she relishes it.

⁸⁰ K. Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*, The University of Texas Press, Texas, 1995, p. 31.

At one point Brand is discussing her aging body and what she is looking forward to happening to her as she ages. The thing she most looks forward to, she tells us, is stress incontinence, which she is planning on making a feature of. She wants to be able to leave her house in the morning to go for a paper, and for everyone to know she is incontinent. She waddles across the stage with her legs wide apart, mimicking how large a protective pad she would need, 'a proud mattress of incontinence' [pages 181 and 182]. Brand comments that as women age, they become more and more invisible within society. Her point here, then, is that by overtly demonstrating the effects of old age on herself, by physically demonstrating a taboo such as incontinence, she is less likely to be invisible to society when she is older. Brand's use of her body is very effective. She staggers around the stage showing the audience that there will be no avoiding the issue of incontinence; there will be no question that she has it. She is quite prepared to urinate in public and bring it to the attention of passers by. She is prepared to make a spectacle of herself in order to remain noticed, to remain a valid member of society.

◇ Much of Brand's work takes place around orifices and bodily fluids. She tells us people assume she got pregnant by artificially inseminating herself using a turkey baster and that she is nearly menopausal and a bit leaky 'down there'. She tells us that she raped her boyfriend with a dildo because he told her he wanted to try anal sex and that when she goes to hospital for a smear test she gets so drunk before hand she ends up gesturing crudely at her



Brand's 'incontinent' walk



Brand's 'incontinent' walk

genitals and screaming 'fucking get in there' to the hospital staff.

The dominant culture suppresses visual and verbal references to body cavities: Brand foregrounds them. Everything that should stay hidden is brought to the surface through her words and gestures. Brand breaks the rules where standards of acceptable behaviour are concerned. The existence of these rules is a sign of a civilised society; breaking them causes feelings of horror and repulsion in non-comic contexts. But Brand is performing within a comic context, where things are slightly different. Again we see licensed transgression at play here: the unsayable can be said without reprisal. Breaking the rules within this comedy context, transforming feelings of revulsion into laughter: this operates within the realms of the grotesque, which particularly embraces anything excremental and excessive. Brand herself is excessive, championing her large appetite and flaunting society's rules. She speaks of excrement, incontinence, and of breast-feeding a grown man. She snorts on stage and jokes about breaking wind. She points to her vagina and shakes her arse at the audience.

Once again it is Brand's femininity that is questioned within the incontinence gag. Women do not urinate voluntarily in public, and if they do happen to suffer from stress incontinence, they deal with it discretely. Yet Brand expresses a desire to flaunt the hypothetical condition. This is not feminine behaviour. Brand is proposing to make a spectacle of herself and in doing so, exposes the fact that when women suffer from incontinence, they feel the need to hide it in order to preserve culturally constructed notions of femininity and etiquette.

It is not only behaviour that is linked with femininity, but also aesthetics. Beauty and femininity are inextricably connected, and so a failure in appearance is a failure in femininity. Women are expected to conform to an aesthetic code in a way that men are not. And this aesthetic code requires maintenance and upkeep in ways far more complicated than simply maintaining low body weight. Masculinity is natural. There are no layers, only man. Femininity, however, is a good haircut, flattering makeup, painted nails. Femininity is a performance. Brand reminds her audience that women do not like their genitals being seen by anyone (specifically in terms of going for a smear test) unless they have 'tended' their pubic hair:

We like to think that if we're gonna do that, Ground Force⁸¹ has been in and tidied it up a bit, don't we really?

Brand is standing facing the audience. She has put most of her weight on her left leg and is holding her left hand out at waist height with the palm facing upwards. She moves her hand round to the front of her body and gestures down towards her genitalia, then puts her hand on her hip.

⁸¹ A BBC television programme hosted by Alan Titchmarsh, Charlie Dimmock and Tommy Walsh involving the refurbishment of viewers' gardens.

You don't want to think it's a bit straggly and arid down there, do you?

She leans in slightly to the audience and tilts her head to the side.

And that people are going to look on you unkindly and think you haven't kept it in very good condition.

She lifts her eyebrows and nods her head. She looks directly at the audience with wide eyes then looks down to the floor.

Women, it seems, cannot even go to their doctor without adhering to certain aesthetic standards. To fail to be attractive is to fail as a woman. And yet, Brand tells us, she is denied the option of even trying. When Brand wears lipstick, people look at her in surprise:

There are radical lesbian separatist feminists right.

Brand is pacing the stage and gesticulating with her right hand emphatically. She stops and turns to the audience.

They wear dungarees (possibly).

She gestures down with her right hand towards her feet and begins walking towards stage right. She stops and turns her face to the audience.

And DMs and they have quite short hair.

She gestures down to her feet again and then up to her hair.

And then along at the other end you get liberal feminists, right.

She sidesteps across the stage to the left and gestures to the left, across her body, with her right hand. She nods her head and begins walking towards stage right.

And they like to wear a bit of lippy and a pretty dress and go 'hehehehehe', like that, right.

She stops again and looks at the audience, leaning in towards them. She then leans back, tilting her head back. She screws her face up, her eyes shut and her nose wrinkling.

Now the problem with me is that I'm one of those.

She leans in to the audience again, placing her right hand on her chest. She points to herself.

But I look like one of the others.

She gestures away from herself with her right hand, her fist closed and her thumb extended in a pointing motion. The audience erupt in laughter.

So people get a bit confused you see.

She walks the other way and turns back to the audience, her right hand held at chest height with the palm facing the audience.

Cos I come along and go 'hehehehehe. Lippy' and they go 'I'm sorry?'

She screws her face up again and moves her hand towards her lips quickly, then furrows her face to indicate confusion, leaning in to an imaginary person. This is an interesting gag because the punch line is actually Brand's body. This gag would be nonsensical if uttered by anyone else; it relies on Brand's physicality for its success.

Once again Brand uses the width of the stage to visually demonstrate her perception of the disparity between 'liberal' and 'radical' feminists.⁸² This use of the visual shows us how widely different they are and serves to make the punch line even more effective. Brand, she tells us, aligns herself with the 'liberals', who she describes as being quite

⁸² At the risk of further simplifying a complex issue, liberal feminism asserts the equality of women and men, looking at existing relationships between the sexes to build towards a more gender-equal society. Radical feminism focuses on the theory of a patriarchal society (where men oppress women) and calls for a re-ordering of society that overthrows the patriarchy. Brand references complex feminist politics, demonstrating different political positions through the suggestion of stereotypical physical appearance.

superficial and silly (they are concerned with their appearance as demonstrated by their use for makeup and pretty dresses and act stupidly as demonstrated by their giggling 'hehehehehe'). So when Brand declares that she looks like one of the others, the contrast (in our mind) is so extreme, we erupt in laughter. We cannot reconcile Brand's politics with her appearance; she considers herself a 'liberal', but her physical appearance aligns her with the 'radical'.

This gag makes a strong point in terms of the expectations people have based on physical appearance. And thanks to her large body, Brand is not expected to bother attempting to meet the standards of slimmer women, feminine women. Her short hair and shapeless clothing have caused her to be labelled 'lesbian' and tied into this stereotype is the expectation that she does not care about her appearance. She is not required to attempt any sort of beautification; in fact she is denied it. Brand's large body and choice of clothes have removed from her any expectation that she attempt to make herself more beautiful or feminine.⁸³

Sexual Ambiguity

There is an ambiguity to Brand's body. Her large mass evades femininity, yet her big breasts and hips speak of sexuality. There is a complexity to her body that is linked to uncertainty over where her body's sexuality lies. On one hand, Brand's body exceeds a size considered feminine (and therefore sexually desirable) by society, but on the other, her body's large breasts and hips suggest the maternal that is, of course, linked with sexual

⁸³ It may be this expectation that Brand should not bother to try to make herself beautiful that lead to her involvement in Trinny and Susannah's television programme *What Not To Wear*. How better to demonstrate your skill at beautification than to choose someone outwith the realms of beauty?

activity. At one point during her *Barely Live* show, Brand is discussing her recent marriage and the 'weird comments' that people made about her becoming pregnant. When her grandmother hears that Brand is pregnant, she remarks, 'eating for two now, are we?' to which Brand retorts, 'fuck off. I'm not cutting down.' Sex and food are mutually exclusive desires within traditional notions of femininity. If a woman is to be considered sexually attractive, she must be thin, and therefore she must deny herself food. Should she not deny her body its food, she must then accept the food as a substitute for sex. It is one or the other. And yet here we see that Brand is perfectly happy to indulge in both. She is pregnant, and therefore sexually active, yet also willing to indulge her large appetite. In fact, eating enough food for two people would be cutting back for her. Brand embodies female desires satisfied. She has both a hunger for food and an appetite for sex, and she is happy to gratify both.

◇ Being outside notions of femininity and desirability offer Brand the opportunity to resist objectification and construct her own concepts of identity. It could be that she is, in a sense, liberated from a culturally constructed sense of herself, liberated from both the male and the female gaze and able to construct her own sense of herself.

At one point during her performance Brand tells the audience about the occasions when she was not fully in control of her own behaviour due to excessive alcohol consumption:

I mean when I was at college I would do things like

Brand is pacing across the stage gesturing with her right hand.

I would end up on the bus with no knickers on and one shoe the following morning thinking 'Christ, what did I do last night?'

She continues gesturing as she turns her body and begins walking the other way. She stops and faces the audience.

You know - carpet burns all over my chin.

She moves her right hand up to her face and gestures towards her chin.

Where some bloke had tried to drag me out of his flat, obviously.

She turns her body again and starts walking the other way, her right hand extended with the palm facing upwards in a gesture that indicates she is stating the obvious. The audience erupt in laughter.

Brand's use of the word 'obviously' and the gesture she makes to signify it punctuate this gag. It is not enough for Brand to say that the man had tried to drag her out of his flat, she has to add 'obviously' to further make the point that it is inconceivable that Brand be the subject of male sexual desire. Brand's words alone are enough to make this point, but the addition of the gesture enriches the way Brand communicates it.

Brand reverses traditional gender behaviour here with this gag, demonstrating that it was not she who was being pestered for sex, but was the one doing the pestering. In patriarchal society, women are the sexual objects of men but in this gag, a man is the sexual object of a woman. And he is not particularly happy about it. Not only that, but Brand was also too heavy for the hapless subject of her affections to be able to drag her out of his home. She has managed to emasculate him twice. Firstly by denying him sexual performance, and secondly by denying him physical strength. The laughter response from the audience to this gag demonstrates that they recognise the large sexual appetite attributed to her large size.

Brand's supposed lack of sexuality creates ambiguity when she then demonstrates sexual desire.

Brand could potentially be embarrassed by this tale (were it true). Her romantic suitor has rejected her and attempted to get her out his flat, but she is too heavy for him to move; she is both fat and unattractive. But this is not the stance Brand takes. Instead she reclaims the situation and she reclaims her body. By referencing her physical size and displaying her sexual desire in this way she creates her own subjective position. Her physical size and sexual needs are a threat to the masculinity of the male she encounters. Hers is a body that consumes, that takes what it needs, that satisfies itself. And this is a threatening concept to the male, an uncertain concept, an ambiguous concept.

Brand demonstrates further sexual ambiguity when she tells us about her stalker, who is getting very annoyed with her due to the lack of stalking he manages to get done in a day. Brand's stalker finds her sexually attractive. He has written to her telling her that he thinks she has 'very lovely breasts' and that he would 'like to put [his] head in between them.' Yet Brand is so lazy and fat that she hardly ever leaves the house, and when she does, she walks incredibly slowly. Brand staggers across the stage gradually, lifting her feet as if she has weights tied to them [page 191]. She stops and turns to the audience, 'he only gets about ten yards stalking in a day.' She tells us that she sometimes leaves the house to go to the newsagent, but then changes her mind and goes back home, and so he has to buy a chair to sit outside her house. We would expect any frustration on the part of a stalker to be sexual, but in this gag Brand presents the frustration of her stalker as occupational: he cannot get his



The limited distance covered when Brand leaves her house for a walk

job done properly; he cannot get any stalking done due to Brand's unwillingness to go any where.

It is the combination of the fat and lazy Brand (as she describes herself) with the stalker's sexual attraction that is ambiguous here. Fat and lazy are not adjectives usually associated with sexuality. The audience recognise this, and laugh at the incongruity. Brand demonstrates traits that confront our expectations of what a man should find attractive. Brand's body is not what society expects to be representative of male desire. And neither is her behaviour. The audience tries to make sense of these opposing concepts: fat and attractive; lazy and desirable. I can see from their laughter that they consider Brand to be devoid of sexuality, to be an unworthy recipient of her stalker's (male) gaze. This is what makes her appeal to him so ambiguous: the audience cannot reconcile her size with his attraction to her.

The (Un) Masculine

It is not only Brand's stalker who finds her attractive. Her husband also does, the proof being his two children she has recently given birth to. Brand uses her marriage as the basis for further material that questions gender relations. Brand introduces the concept of her having a husband to her audience with trademark self-deprecatory gags, telling them 'I got him fairly pissed, paid him a lot of money, but got one, so that was alright'. She then leads onto a number of gags that reverse traditional gender roles and demonstrate her to be the dominant one in the relationship.

Brand tells her audience that prior to the wedding the couple had a long argument about leaving the word 'obey' in the wedding vows, at which point Brand tells her fiancé, 'look, either you obey me, or we're not

getting married'. She tells us she recently had to spend seven hours in casualty with her husband while he waited to get seventeen stitches removed from his face, 'that'll teach him to buy [her] a fucking sewing kit for [her] birthday'. She burnt his back rather badly the other night, making him stand bent over at the waist, because the ironing board was broken [page 194]. Brand's husband has lost his power. Like the young man before him, he has become emasculated. His impotency is a result of her physical power: her body exceeds the feminine and overpowers his masculinity. Her body surpasses the space allowed for a woman, she appears big and powerful and as a result she is a threat to his manliness. Brand uses her size to assist in the domination of her husband. Through her gags about the physical (and mental) command of her husband she has inverted gender roles.

It is not only her husband who finds himself dominated by Brand's physicality. Even a murdering rapist finds himself submissive to her. Brand tells us that she once ended up down a dark lane with a man who had tattoos on him that said 'kill', which she had initially thought were meant to be ironic:

And you never have anything useful in your handbag with which to kill your assailant, do you?

Brand is standing facing the audience. She gestures with her left hand emphatically, moving it up and down in quick succession, then leans in to the audience, looking at them directly.

You never brought the Moulinex mixer with castration attachment with you, did you? No!

She leans back then leans forwards again, looking around the audience as if for an answer to her rhetorical question.



Brand demonstrates her treatment of her husband

All you've got is a bit of lippy, so your corpse looks quite attractive.

She turns her body to the side then turns her head back to the audience. She begins to walk across the stage towards stage left.

And in this situation I thought, 'Well, I'm going to be killed. I might as well be cheerful about it.'

She stops and turns back to the audience. Her right hand is held aloft and she makes a sweeping motion with it as she rotates her body. She turns her head to the audience and tosses it in an optimistic manner.

I said, 'right, what you gonna do now then?'

She stops and faces the audience, addressing them directly with a forced smile.

And lucky for me he started crying.

She gestures to her chest with her right hand and then gestures towards the audience.

And a friend of mine said, 'had he just put his glasses on?'

She leans back slightly and tilts her head.

Yes, I thought that was rather unkind as well.

She turns her body towards stage left and begins to walk across the stage. Brand's use of her body here is quite telling. She is describing through her narration a potentially frightening and traumatic experience. Yet her body gives little hint that anything alarming is occurring. She stands tall and confident; she paces slowly; she uses arm gestures that are sweeping and controlled. There is no demonstration of fear or panic here. Her words and actions reveal a philosophical outlook: she ponders the fact that she has not brought any weapons; she wonders what will happen next. Brand reveals through her actions a command of the situation. She is not afraid,

she is in control. And through this control she has rendered her assailant impotent.

There are two elements to this male impotency. The first is Brand's question, 'what now?' which can be read as a demand for sexual activity. Brand is not scared of sex with the man: she wants it; she challenges him to it. This domination inhibits the male, who breaks down in tears. Brand has again reversed the gender roles. It is not the male raping Brand here, but Brand who demands sex from him. Her demonstration of sexual desire has undermined his ego and created the fear that he will not be able to fulfil her, he will not be able to perform sexually to her satisfaction, he will not be able to maintain arousal. Brand's role reversal has rendered him powerless.

The second element to the male impotency is the friend's suggestion that it is Brand's looks that saved her from her attack. The male realises that he does not find her attractive and instead of fearing that he will not be able to satisfy her sexual needs, he fears that he will not be able to attain arousal at all. Once again, the role reversal has rendered him powerless. Brand has shifted her position from powerless to powerful through her relationship to her body. Brand uses this gag to invert gender relations, give patriarchy a taste of its own medicine and points out society's double standards with regards acceptable gender behaviour. Brand challenges our acceptance of gender stereotypes by adopting the opposing position, causing us to reflect on our own assumptions.

Brand's gags are an unapologetic articulation of her own physical stature, which mocks these established attitudes towards the female body. Brand rejects the notion that she is supposed to be in someway

embarrassed by her size or her attitude to food. Not only does she refuse to attempt to conform to society's bodily expectations in terms of her weight, but she also reinforces her refusal through her comic material. Brand's refusal is a challenge to social order and allows her audience to question their assumptions and attitudes towards her based on their inherited ideas about size and beauty and their relationship to femininity. Brand's gags do more than make her audience laugh. They make them think, they make them re-evaluate their own position within their society. Brand intrudes on our presumptions with her own ideas surrounding femininity, sexuality and desirability and through a combination of her verbal material and her use of her body; she disrupts those presumptions.

Conclusion: The Visual and The Verbal

The relationship between the spoken utterance, bodily gesture and facial expression has been at the forefront of the research. The project has evolved through intense looking and listening, my readings of the three comedic works having informed and transformed my practice, which in turn has fed back into the writing.

When I began making my practical work I concentrated on generating still images that involved text in some way, either within the physical image or in the relationship between the photograph and its title. I was interested in verbal jokes, visual and verbal puns and in generating humour through the production of my work. I wanted to make my viewer laugh. It was when I turned my attention to silent comedy, to *Sherlock Jr.* in particular, that my methods changed and I was able to begin producing work that addressed my research concerns directly. It was at this point that I realised the importance of bodily movement to my project. I stopped trying to make my viewer laugh and started concentrating on really looking at the gag. My attention was now focused on the concept of a gag being a constructed moment in time, with a beginning, middle and end – all of which contributed to the effect the gag had on its viewer. This was when I realised that I needed to insert my own body into my work because the gag always implies a body in movement. It was at this point that the methodological potential of the video medium became clear to me, and I began to make what was to become *Shorts*.

The work began as a series of video sketches. I performed a gag to camera, studied my performance and then filmed another version. Each take, each performance, showed me something new

and became an invaluable research method, for how could I really understand the nature of performing a gag without doing it for myself? Scrutinising each performance, I began to understand something of the subtlety of the silent comic. I realised that it is not only what you do, but also how you do it, that solicits laughter from your audience. The comedy is in the details, in the slight flick of a wrist or brief glance to camera. I also began to realise the importance of the connection between the performer and her material. These were not my gags. I had borrowed them and as much as I was invested in performing them to camera, I was not invested in the generation of them in the first place. I was removed from the context in which they had originally been produced and as a result, there would always be something lacking in my performance of them.

Although the physical act of making the work taught me a great deal about performance and the gag, it was when I showed the work publicly and listened to my own audience that the work became most useful as an analytical tool. The videos were not supposed to be funny. They were a re-presentation to camera of a series of gags by an unskilled performer⁸⁴ who had removed the humour from them. They were the shells of gags. Or so I thought. And yet in the gallery space there were the sounds of sniggering. Occasionally fully blown laughter. Talking to my audience, I

⁸⁴ At least, I was an unskilled performer at the beginning of my engagement with the video works. I could hardly bear to watch myself on screen and found presenting my work at research seminars excruciating. As time passed and I became both a more practised performer and used to seeing myself on screen, watching my work no longer bothered me. Feedback on my most recent collection of video works included a number of comments about the 'sophistication' of my performance. I can attribute any refinement of performance to practice and am confident that there was absolutely no sophistication to my earliest works.

discovered a range of reasons for the laughter. There were those that recognised the silent comedy references and considered my re-performances to be successful parodies. There were some who did not realise the references, and found the works to be comically absurd. There were others who simply found amusement from my performances. It seemed that as soon as I stopped trying to make my audience laugh, they found the work funny.

While the practical work demonstrated to me these elements to consider in relation to my own performance of the gag, it seemed important that my writing look at Keaton's performance of the gag and it was at this point that I began to examine how Keaton constructed his gags and how he used them to provoke something beyond laughter in his audience. It was here that I really began to discover the complexity of the gag. There is far more to consider than its simple definition. A gag is involved with narrative: it has narrative and it is part of narrative. It is linked to the visual through the body, and as much as the voice is linked to the body, the gag is linked to the verbal through the voice. The gag is also linked to negotiation in terms of the relationship between the performer and the audience. This audience relationship became particularly important when I began working with Richard Pryor's work *Live in Concert*. In *Shorts*, the only audience I really had to contend with (until, of course, I exhibited the work) was the camera. With Pryor's stand-up, however, there was an audience that he interacted with, that he performed for and to. Within my practice of re-enactment, which had by now moved on to incorporate stand-up comedy, I had to consider what happened when I substituted a live audience with a video camera, and (in the case of Pryor) a black male for a white

female. The silent films were made without a live audience, in a sense they used the same approach that I did when re-performing their gags: the camera became the audience. The stand-up performances, however, were filmed in front of a live audience. There was an audience relationship that I removed in my production of the work. My own work was a much more private affair than the source material. My camera was my audience⁸⁵ until I showed the work publicly.

A number of interesting things happened in the early stages of working with Pryor's material. For example, during the planning stages for a group show when I proposed a sound piece that involved a three-minute recital of part of Pryor's routine (the part about police brutality against black people) I was told that none of the other artists wanted my work beside theirs because of the language used in my work. Eventually one artist, whose paintings included pornographic imagery, conceded that she did not mind 'that much' if my work went near hers. During the weeklong period the show was on, my work was consistently turned down to a barely audible murmur. It seemed that a Scottish female voice swearing and using the 'N-word' was intolerable to most.

This early work again raised interesting questions about the need for my viewer to know that the work referenced a comic performance, and also raised questions about authenticity of voice and authorship of material. These questions became even more relevant when the work became the more formalised *The Understudy*

⁸⁵ Although it is true to say that when I perform to the camera I am also performing to an imaginary audience, this is a very different experience from performing to an actual audience. The atmosphere does not change in the room; there is no laughter, no heckler, no awkward silence or shocked intake of breath. Only silence.

Part I (Speaking) and the viewer was able to confirm visually that the performer was not black, and therefore not licensed to use the type of language she was using. Indeed, *The Understudy* showed me gender and race-related aspects to Pryor's subject matter that I might not have considered if I had not taken this approach. I began to look at these aspects in the writing, examining how Pryor uses both language and gesture to deal with the issues that his work raises. This process took me back to the practical work, to the moving image, where I began to unpick the physical movements Pryor makes. Filming myself making the same gestures as Pryor, without the accompanying words, showed me something of the relationship between the two. I began to cut the footage, repeating significant gestures, experimenting with their connection to the spoken words, experimenting with their ability to visually punctuate Pryor's words. This led to the creation of *The Understudy Part I (Moving)* and the realisation that in order to show my viewer something of the relationship between the visual and the verbal, I would need to bring the two performance elements together.⁸⁶

As with my experience of working with Pryor's material, my mimetic treatment of Brand's physical movements within the practice showed me aspects of her performance that I would not have considered through writing alone. Brand's movements are clearly very different from Pryor's, movements that are linked to her body size. The filming of my performance of Brand's gestures allowed me to see how Brand uses her body to supplement her words; much of her work is communicated through her facial

⁸⁶ The dual projection of *The Understudy Part I*.

expressions and their relationship to her tone of voice. On editing and cutting the footage it became apparent that the relationship between Brand's words and her use of her body is far more complicated than I had originally appreciated and I was able to bring this awareness to my writing.

Brand occupies a subjective position within her work. She is objectified in a number of ways: comic performer, female performer, large woman, yet she deals with her material from her own subjective position. The substitution of her performance for mine in *The Understudy Part II* raised a number of questions about my own subjectivity and authorship. With my treatment of Pryor's work, there are indications to guide the viewer to the fact that the words I am speaking are not mine. With Brand's work, there are no such suggestions. If the viewer were not aware that I am referencing Brand's work, there is nothing to intimate it. Like Brand, I am female and white and although I am not a mother, my viewer has no way to know this; I could be speaking my own words. Once again issues of authorship and the need for my viewer to know that my work references another were raised.

My approach to the works of Keaton, Pryor and Brand allowed each one to show me something different of the relationship between the visual and the verbal. Through the close readings of the three works and the variety of ways they informed my practice I was able to push my work in order to help me answer my research questions. The techniques I employed in the production of the practical work and the questions and issues that those techniques raise are suggestive of further research. On several occasions I considered doing a live performance of some of the material from

Pryor and Brand that I have been working with. Each time I decided that this method was not appropriate to this research and I resumed the video techniques.⁸⁷ At this point, a live performance seems like the next natural step if I am to take this project further. This will allow me greater understanding of the relationship between a live performer and her audience, of the negotiation that takes place between the two, of the communication that occurs that it is only possible to discern through doing.

The degree to which the visual and the verbal are inherently linked within a comedic moment is a revealing aspect of the research. The visual and verbal function differently, but they function in relation to each other; they enrich each other. In the silent comedy of Buster Keaton, which one might be forgiven for assuming is a purely visual medium; there is a connection between the visual and the verbal. The visual is dominant, given the fact most of the communication takes place through physical action, but the verbal exists as inter-titles and in the different voices 'speaking' within the work. But this is further complicated by the fact that even then, the audience reads the words, which returns them to the domain of the visual. In the stand-up comedy of Richard Pryor, he speaks his words and he makes animated gestures, but neither makes much sense without their relationship to each other. That is, neither solicits much laughter without their relationship to each other. With Jo Brand's work, the connection between the visual and verbal is subtler. Brand's verbal style is fairly deadpan, particularly in comparison to Richard Pryor. And unlike Pryor, Brand does not

⁸⁷ I could not say for sure why I decided against this within the practice, but I could suggest stage fright as one possible reason.

rely on her body for many of her punch lines. Rather, Brand's gestures serve to supplement her words, compliment them. They demonstrate an authority and a forcefulness that indicates that although we are laughing, we had better take what she is saying seriously.

Gags provide us with an alternative way of looking at the world and change our way of thinking. One tends to think of comedy in terms of the physiological response: the amused laugh, the repulsed groan, the shocked intake of breath. Comedy gathers around points of tension within a social structure, around points where there is already an element of disruption. And so gags allow the expression of ideas that would otherwise remain unexpressed. Rarely do we give much thought to the effect of these gags: to the change in our thinking, to the transformation of our perception. I hope that through the course of this research I have managed to demonstrate that this change does not happen at the moment of laughter, it happens slightly later. It happens after the laughter.

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Billy Connolly

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Keaton in *Go West*, 1925

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Keaton in *The Navigator*, 1924

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Oliver Hardy's look to camera

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Woody Allen in *Annie Hall*

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Groucho Marx's look to camera

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Groucho Marx in *Horse Feathers*

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Spike Milligan in *Q Series*

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- Page 156 *Jo Brand in Barely Live*
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