

## The Strange Case of the Stand-Up Special

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**Abstract:** Stand-up special seem to resemble news reporting and documentary film in that they appear prima facie to be mere documentation of an event designed to give viewers the sense of what happened at a place at a time. Closer examination, however, throws doubt upon this transparency claim and it is argued that filmic realism is not the proper lens through which to understand stand-up specials, that they represent a more artistic medium in which the director of the special needs to be seen as an artist along with the comedian.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** stand-up comedy, filmic realism, filmic ontology

At the beginning of Eddie Murphy's "Raw," he makes a joke about his audience being in a movie, though only he'll be paid for it. It's funnier when he says it, but he wasn't wrong. "Raw" was shown in theaters, previewed, advertised and billed as any other movie might be. And yet the people who went to see it in the movie theater saw a stand-up set. In one sense at least, the audience *to* the movie saw what the audience *in* the movie saw. It seems just as reasonable to say that "Raw" *is* a stand-up set as it does to say that it *contains* a stand-up set.

Here, then, is our central question: what exactly is the relationship between the stand-up special and the set it films? There are at least three reasons for asking. First, the stand-up special provides an interesting case – and perhaps problem – for the ontology of film. Second, considering the nature of stand-up specials may help provide stable critical criteria for them, especially regarding those properties that belong to them and not to their sets. Third, becoming clearer on these issues may have implications for the art status of both stand-up comedy and stand-up comedy specials.

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## **I. What Is the Stand-Up Special?**

As a first pass, we might think of the stand-up special just as a recording of a stand-up set, and thus to see the special is just to see what others saw live via different means. This understanding may be informed by the so-called “transparency” of film, a variety of filmic realism.<sup>2</sup> This is the position that films, along with still photographs, are essentially perceptual aids rather than the final objects of perception. We “see through” films to their objects in much the same way that we see stars through telescopes, or fine print through magnifying glasses. Instead of helping us see the very far or the very small (though it could do either of these as well), film most significantly allows us to see events that happened in the past.

There are decent enough reasons to doubt that transparency is adequate to film in general. For instance, there do not seem to be any obvious sufficient conditions for the kind of transparency that realism would require. The most likely candidate, mechanical reproduction plus perceptual similarity, can be carried off without anything like transparency. Also, animation and CGI-heavy films are not in any way perceptual aids to objects that preexist the film.<sup>3</sup>

Still, one might think that the stand-up special is essentially transparent even if not all films are. After all, there are very rarely any special effects or animations attached (we’ll consider such cases in a moment). And the stand-up set is typically performed for a live audience, presumably much as it would be without the cameras.<sup>4</sup> Crucially, the differences between the experiences of the audience in the theater and the audience to the special may not be enough to determine that they are seeing two different things. Admittedly, the latter are privy to close-ups, multiple angles, and sweeping views to which the former don’t have access. And of course the experience of seeing something on a screen is not quite the same as seeing something live. However, seeing the performance from different perspectives and angles cannot be sufficient for seeing different things unless two people on opposite sides of the theater also see different performances.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, (Walton 1994).

<sup>3</sup> For these and other objections to the transparency thesis, see (Currie 1995: 61-76), (Gaut 1997: 147-8), and (Carroll 2006: 121).

<sup>4</sup> There may be some concern about what constitutes a “live audience” as just about any filming will have an audience of some sort or other. But a “live audience” in the relevant sense should not include the filming crew or accidental onlookers. A kind of approximation: a live audience is constituted by people present for a filming, there primarily to be part of such an audience, whose reactions are captured on the film as either audio or video.

We likewise cannot say that the mediation of a screen means that we are not experiencing the stand-up set itself unless we want to say that, for instance, opera audiences directly experience opera glasses but not the performances they see in them. Nor would it do to say that the crucial difference is that the theater audience sees the performance as it happens but the special audience sees it only afterward. We would not want to say that people who catch a live-telecast stand-up special see something that audiences to repeats of it do not.

Despite all of this, there are some case-specific reasons to think that stand-up specials are not mere recordings, and that to see a stand-up special is not just to see its set by other means. For one thing, we treat stand-up specials as though they have independent identities. They have names and stand-up sets typically do not. Stand-up *tours* might be named, but these are often not the names of specials filmed on them. Even when a tour and a special that is filmed on it share a name, there is no risk of conflating them. An audience is able to see a special but not a tour. At most we see a comedian *on* a tour but not the tour itself.<sup>5</sup>

More importantly, mere recordings require technical competence, not artistic prowess. Why, then, would we need a Robert Townsend to direct “Raw,” a Ted Demme to direct Denis Leary’s “No Cure for Cancer” or – a kind of extreme example – a Spike Lee to direct Jerrod Charmichael’s “Love at the Store”? Why are certain specialist directors – and not only camera people – sought-after for specials? We find answers in the critical differences between stand-up specials and the sets they capture. Directors do not merely point a camera at the stage and press record. Through cinematography, editing, sound mixing and the addition of (usually surprisingly dull) intro sketches, the stand-up special is both more and less than its set.

So perhaps instead of identifying the special with its set, we should think of the stand-up special as a distinct work. After all, we do not typically identify films with their subjects. If we ought to treat specials like other films, we should start by looking for an appropriate and illuminative analogue among established types of film. But it is not obvious what that analogue will be. It will not, for instance, be the narrative fiction film. Arthur Danto (1979) provides a helpful distinction between two ways of seeing people and objects in film. Films present us (literally and immediately) with images of actors, sets, locations and props. We can view them as

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<sup>5</sup> It is also worth noting that the set filmed for a special is not (typically) just a random performance on a tour. It is an instance of the performance-type that the comic chooses to have filmed. This is often something that is worked out, arranged, edited and honed throughout a tour.

“motifs” when we see acting and props. When we instead see characters interacting with fictional objects in fictional places, we view the actors, props, etc. as “models.” So, for instance, in *Man on the Moon*, the 1999 Andy Kaufman biopic, we can watch the movie and see Jim Carrey, which is to see Carrey as motif. Or, we can see Carrey as Andy Kaufman, which is to view Carrey as model. It is characteristic of fictional narrative films that it is appropriate to see actors as *either* motifs or models. But to watch Kaufman’s 1977 HBO comedy special you must see Kaufman *only* as motif, even though what you see is hardly (or probably hardly, who knows?) anything like the “real” Kaufman. If Kaufman is doing a character or doing a character doing characters, the only appropriate viewing is to see Kaufman doing all of this.

Is the stand-up special then more like a documentary, given that we can also only see Kaufman in “I’m from Hollywood” or “The Death of Andy Kaufman”?<sup>6</sup> Probably not, since the documentary is a film *about* its topic. The stand-up special is not a film *about* the set, it is a film *of* its set. Similarly, “I’m from Hollywood” is *about* Kaufman, but his HBO special is not. It is *of* him.

There are other kinds of film that are *of* their subjects in this sort of way: broadcasts of sporting events, award shows, and the like. But these broadcasts, no matter how extravagant, complicated or technically proficient, are ultimately mere recordings in just the way that stand-up specials are not. Notice, for instance, that the broadcasts of the Super Bowl or the Oscars do not have independent names. You either see the actual events in person or you see them on film. But the live stand-up set audience does not see the special in person. What they see in person is the set that was filmed for the special.

Probably the best analogue is the music concert film. These films are *of* the performances they capture. The musicians are only properly viewed as motifs. The films often have names when their performances do not, or if they share a name with a performance or tour, we speak of them as being “of the same name,” not merely recording something that has a name. Unlike concerts, concert films are subject to editing and sometimes have appended intros. And if we are

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<sup>6</sup> Having just mentioned Danto on film, I should make clear that I’m using “documentary” in the standard sense of a genre designation, not Danto’s own somewhat more technical “documentary” that he distinguishes from a “screenplay” by virtue of its objects only being viewed appropriately as motifs.

surprised by Spike Lee doing “Love at the Store,” we might be as surprised by Martin Scorsese doing “The Last Waltz.”

Unfortunately, as appropriate as the concert film is as an analogue for the comedy special, it isn’t terribly illuminative. The former is no more often the subject of theory, and its ontology as an artwork is no better understood. So we cannot look to an affinity with concert films to establish the special as a work independent of its set.

We could at this point set aside the search for an analogue for the stand-up special and say that it is a *sui generis* form, but no less distinct for that. This sort of insistence, though, gets us no closer to an answer to our central question. If the special (or perhaps the performance film generally) is unique among genres or forms, it is because it is uniquely tied to the thing it films. And it is just that relationship which we are trying to discern and explain.

Now if the special is neither a mere recording of a performance nor a film independent of it, we ought to consider whether it might be a kind of hybrid of both performance and film. But it is not quite that either, or at least not typically. Again, a special is typically a film *of* a stand-up comedy set, not stand-up comedy *along with* another established form of film.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the best way to see that stand-up specials are not generally hybrid works is to compare the typical special to those that genuinely are hybrid works. Chelsea Peretti’s “One of the Greats” combines a filmed stand-up set with surrealistic cutaway shots of dogs in the audience, Peretti herself as a critical clown in the wings, and other things that were not included in just the performance of the set. Zach Galifianakis’s “Live at the Purple Onion” and Sarah Silverman’s “Jesus is Magic” intersperse sets with short sketches. *These* are hybrid works that use established forms together. The typical special is not.

## **II. Stand-Up and Stand-Up Special Criticism**

If we decided anything in the prior discussion, it is only that the comedy special is, as a form, a little uncertain – maybe even a little odd. One practical consequence of that uncertainty involves critical criteria. Specifically, it may not be clear which properties that are subject to criticism belong to the special and not to the sets they capture. Some obvious candidates include

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<sup>7</sup> I’m relying here on a notion of hybrid artforms that Jerrold Levinson discusses in “Hybrid Art Forms” (Levinson 1984).

cinematography, editing, and sound design. And, yet if the special is identical to its set, then these are properties of the filming of the special rather than the special itself.

It would be nice if standard or expected criticisms of specials were themselves illuminating on these points, but they are not. Imagine that you ask a friend about a special you know she saw the night before. It seems just as reasonable for her to say, “It was great, but the camerawork was terrible” as it would be for her to say “The comedy show was great, but the camerawork was terrible.”

If the camerawork is part of the special itself, then good camerawork makes a special better and bad camerawork makes a special worse. Then if the camerawork is only part of the filming of the special and not the special itself, good camerawork can at most make the experience of a special better and bad camerawork can at most make that experience worse. In that case, seeing a special with better or worse camerawork is akin to seeing a set from better or worse seats. Notice that both of these positions assume a symmetry between good and bad-making properties of specials. We may instead be inclined to count the camerawork as part of the special itself only if it is deleterious to our experience. So perhaps the director and crew have vis-a-vis a special something like what we tend to think referees have in a basketball game: the power to make worse but not better. But neither of these inclinations are very reasonable. If the directors of specials can deserve blame, then they should be able to deserve praise as well. And the nature of their contributions should be the same in either case. Even in the case of referees, the tendency to blame often and hardly ever praise does not become fair just by virtue of being common.

Another sort of asymmetry may run in the other direction, from stand-up set to a special’s filmmaker. Whatever else a good special might be – thought-provoking, engaging, well-performed, well-shot, etc. – it must above all be *funny*. It seems that a director cannot rightfully take credit for the fact that a special is funny. We may even be suspicious of a special that makes a set seem funnier than it really is. But poor editing or camerawork could very well make a set that would have been funny seem much less so. Similarly, we would be disinclined to praise a filmmaker for the moral virtues of a comedy special, but he or she may well share some blame for its vices. If we found a particular special especially offensive in some way, the primary object of our blame would be the comic. But the director should not escape blame for abetting the presentation of the offending material.

The ties between the nature of specials and our criticism of them may be a bit stronger than those we have considered thus far. The former may provide a kind of critical standard. We might be put in mind here of the once-popular idea that a realist ontology of film demands a realist teleology for film and a privileged valuation of realistic films. Similarly, if we think that the special is essentially the filmed set, then we might think that the best special will be purer and less adorned with film technique. And if we think that the special is essentially a kind of film ontologically independent of its set, we might insist that the better special will be the one that better utilizes the film medium. These critical standards are not implications of the ontological views in question per se, but may well be natural suggestions given particular ontological commitments.

### III. The Art Status of Stand-Up and Stand-Up Specials

The art status of stand-up comedy is itself questionable, so on no account can we move too quickly from that to the art-status of stand-up specials. Still, it seems likely that at least some stand-up comedy sets and their specials ought to count as art and their comics as artists (Richard Pryor, Steve Martin, Mike Birbiglia and Tig Notaro are likely candidates). The more general claim that stand-up comedy is an artform and so each instance of stand-up comedy is an artwork may be harder to maintain. A full theory of stand-up-as-art would require an antecedent theory of art that I do not want to assume here.

Even so, we can settle on a few much more modest (and conditional) claims by attending again to the relationship between stand-up specials and sets. Let us first assume that a given stand-up set can be a work of art, perhaps as a variety of performance art that is not in question. If the special just *is* that set, then of course the former is itself an artwork. But if the special is a film independent of the set, then its art status may still be in question. We have only established that it *films* an artwork, not that it is one.

Assume instead that stand-up specials can be art, perhaps as a variety of film that is not in question. On the view that identifies the special with its set, the set is an artwork whenever the special is. But if the special is essentially a film and not identical to its set, then the art-status of the former does not necessarily confer anything on the latter.

#### **IV. Our Subject, Revisited**

Someone may object at this point that the stand-up special is only a “strange case” (and the implications of this observation only interesting) because I’ve chosen a strange focus of inquiry. Perhaps there is not anything all that puzzling about the stand-up special properly construed. This sort of concern could take many forms, and I will consider three here.

First, you might think that the present focus is too narrow, that stand-up specials constitute only a small subset of the much larger domain of the type of film in question. If so, then at least some of the specialness of the special disappears. To some extent this is correct. I suggested as much above when I compared the stand-up special with the musical concert film. We should not, however, conflate these sorts of performance films with other (so to speak) nearby types of film. It would not be useful, for instance, to think of stand-up specials the same way we do television shows that happen to be filmed in front of a studio audience. Talk shows, situation comedies, and sketch comedy shows often have live audiences, but they are audience to the taping of a show rather than to a performance for the audience per se. This is a difference easily felt but somewhat difficult to explain.

In each case, however, there are telling customary features that would be out of place in a typical stand-up special. Talk show hosts, for instance, are understood to be speaking to their television audiences. “We’ll be right back,” they say before commercial breaks, but the live audience knows that neither they nor the host are going anywhere. When a stand-up comedian speaks to the audience of the special and not the set, he or she must say something like “to the people watching this later...” The sit-com audience (an increasing rarity, we may be thankful) is more obviously not seeing a performance for their sake. Sit-com directors often make little to no attempt to create an atmosphere where the live audience sees anything like the film produced. They will re-shoot entire scenes, constantly obstruct views with cameras and other equipment, and actively direct the cast and crew in front of the audience. Finally, it would be entirely inappropriate – except perhaps as a joke – to have a “laughter” or “applause” sign to elicit the desired audience responses at the filming of a stand-up special, but these sorts of directions are common at the tapings of both talk shows and sit-coms (again, that is, when the latter has an audience).

The comparison to sketch comedy shows – *Saturday Night Live*, *In Living Color*, *MADtv* and the like – is a little more complicated. These may take numerous forms, ranging from the filming of sketches aimed primarily at a live audience to a live audience being privy to the filming



of a sketch aimed primarily at cameras. The former would make a sketch show more like a stand-up special, the latter less so. A single sketch show may in fact have features that lead it one way and then the other. Therefore, a sketch show may to some greater or lesser degree generate the same sort of questions we have been asking about stand-up specials.

So, our inquiry applies to some films that are not stand-up specials. The typical stand-up special remains, however, the most common, illustrative, and well-known case. And yet here we come on another potential problem, especially with this word “typical” that I have used a few times. Perhaps stand-up specials are too varied to constitute a single type. Earlier I called some stand-up specials “hybrid” works, which include but are not entirely composed of typical special material. Perhaps we should instead treat these films as just another sort of stand-up special. And if so, then our present focus is too broad rather than too narrow.

This sort of concern may be more pressing in the future than it is today. The stand-up special is of course nothing like a natural kind. The form may evolve in ways such that the specials that we see today on Netflix, HBO, Comedy Central and in theaters become no better instances of the type than Lumière experiments are instances of movies today. But for now, the “typical” stand-up special as we have been considering it is by far the most common form of stand-up comedy film. As such, it provides us with a relevant object of inquiry.

Finally, there may be a related concern about the distinctness of the subject rather than its extension. I have argued that there is a relevant ontological difference between a stand-up special and a mere filmed stand-up set rather than a stylistic difference between two films of the same type. But perhaps in doing so I have placed somewhat arbitrary limits on what constitutes a *genuine* stand-up special. Some specials are shot with more cameras than others. Some have more variety in video editing, attention to audio mixing, etc. Why, then, should not we think of a film of a stand-up set shot from the back of a club using a phone in a single unedited static shot as a genuine stand-up special? To be sure, it would be on an extreme end of a spectrum of filmic quality. But it is telling that there *is* such a spectrum and no clear necessary conditions of film style or quality for a genuine special.

However, while there may not be any film style or quality requirements for a genuine stand-up special, there are necessary conditions. The comedian’s approval, for instance, seems to be a clear one. I could not surreptitiously film a set and release it as a special. It could only ever be a bootleg. But approval is not sufficient. A comedian might post on her website a video of one of

her sets that a friend happened to film with a phone at the back of the club. But only as a joke could she call the film a “special.” And yet the same comedian *could* have a special that was planned to look just like that and actually film it with a phone. The difference between the two would be a certain *attention* to filmic style and quality rather than an actual difference in style or quality. The genuine special would look the way it does because of certain directorial and cinematographic choices. I am not in a position to say how much attention or which choices are telling, but it is enough for now to notice that certain kinds of historical and intentional differences will allow us to discern an ontological difference between the stand-up special and the mere recording of a set.

## V. Conclusion

If I have been successful here, I have convinced you only that that there is an interesting and deceptively difficult question regarding the relationship between stand-up specials and their sets. The question is interesting because of its implications for ontology, criticism and the art status of certain forms. It is difficult because some answers that may at first seem plausible do not quite work. Perhaps, then, we had do better to find some non-obvious but more promising answer. Let us end here, then, on a first rather than a last step toward it.

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