

Tales of the Bizarre: Notes on the Nature of Humor and Reality

Eric Shouse*

Abstract: Our experience of reality is always partial and potentially ambiguous, especially where humor is concerned. Far too often, however, we mistake our idiosyncratic experiences of the world for “reality.” This essay wagers that professional comedians can teach us a thing or two about the nature of humor and human existence. Drawing upon in-depth interviews with stand-up comedians about the strangest events they ever experienced on or off stage, I argue that humor always blurs boundaries, and therefore any claim about what “really” happened, what an instance of humor “really” means, is misguided. In this essay, professional comedians’ “tales of the bizarre” provide a starting point for questioning some of the underlying assumptions of humor theory. A careful reading of these narratives suggests the lived experience of humor takes place not in a shared cognitive universe, but in a subjective multiverse.

Key words: Stand-up comedy, humor theory, reality, ontology, epistemology, body

Introduction

Provided he makes and wins an argument about Buddhism with those who live here, any wandering monk can remain in a Zen temple. If he is defeated, he has to move on.

In a temple in the northern part of Japan two brother monks were dwelling together. The elder one was learned, but the younger one was stupid and had but one eye. A wandering monk came and asked for lodging, properly challenging them to a debate about the sublime teaching. The elder brother, tired that day from much studying, told the younger one to take his place. “Go and request the dialogue in silence,” he cautioned. So, the young monk and the stranger went to the shrine and sat down.

Shortly afterward the traveler rose and went in to the elder brother and said: “Your young brother is a wonderful fellow. He defeated me.” “Relate the dialog to me,” said the elder one. “Well,” explained the traveler, “first I held up one finger, representing Buddha, the enlightened one. So, he held up two fingers, signifying Buddha and his teaching. I held up three fingers, representing Buddha, his teaching, and his followers, living the harmonious life. Then he shook his clenched fist in my face, indicating that all three come from one realization. Thus, he won and so I have no

* **Eric Shouse**, School of Communication, East Carolina University, USA. shousee@ecu.edu

right to remain here.” With this, the traveler left.

“Where is that fellow?” asked the younger one, running in to his elder brother. “I understand you won the debate.” “Won nothing. I’m going to beat him up.” “Tell me the subject of the debate,” asked the elder one. “Why, the minute he saw me he held up one finger, insulting me by insinuating that I have only one eye. Since he was a stranger I thought I would be polite to him, so I held up two fingers, congratulating him that he has two eyes. Then the impolite wretch held up three fingers, suggesting that between us we only have three eyes. So, I got mad and started to punch him, but he ran out and that Provided he makes and wins an argument about Buddhism with those who live there, any ended it!” (qtd. in Krippendorff 2009, p. 17-18)

Klaus Krippendorff shared this story of the brother monks in a book that questioned the possibility of universal truth in communication studies. He suggested we live in a “multiverse” where each person “lives, observes, and acts in his own reality” (Krippendorff 2009, p. 20). In this multiverse, our ways of knowing determine what we know. As Krippendorff explained, neither of the two reports about what happened is more objective than the other. Each report is the product of a particular frame that helped to shape the storyteller’s perception of reality (see also Goffman 1974). It is important to note that despite living in a multiverse, most of us experience the world in the same manner as the traveler and the one-eyed monk. We mistake our own idiosyncratic experience of the world for “reality.”

Our misperceptions have material consequences. For example, the traveler in the story, feeling he had been bested, left the temple. The younger brother, feeling he had been insulted, was spoiling for a fight. As Burke (1984a) proposed, frames have a way of forming our attitudes toward situations, and our attitudes determine the way we respond to those situations (see especially pp. 92-105). What Krippendorff didn’t mention about this narrative—a tale utilized to produce a rather scathing critique of empiricism and universal truth—is that it is a joke. This story could easily be interpreted by any of the dominant theoretical approaches in humor studies. It is quite common for books about comedy, comedians, humor, and other related topics, to present three main groups of theories of about humor (e.g., Davis 1993, Gilhus 1997, Lefcourt 2001). The usual suspects are (1) superiority theories, first proposed by Aristotle (1926) and developed by Hobbes (1651), (2) incongruity theories, developed by Kant (1952) and Schopenhauer (1883), and (3) tension release theories, developed by Herbert Spencer (1860) and

expanded upon and popularized by Freud (1905). These three approaches represent the dominant paradigms scholars have traditionally utilized to interpret humor. Gilhus (1997) provides a concise overview of these approaches:

1. the superiority theory defines laughter in the context of power over and aggression against a victim;
2. The incongruity theory sees laughter as caused by two opposite meanings being held together at the same time. The obvious meaning is suddenly dropped in favour of the unexpected meaning;
3. The relief theory stresses that laughter relieves psychological pressure. We laugh at forbidden things, things we usually spend energy on keeping locked up. Laughter is an expression of the relief felt when the pressure is released, thus functioning as a safety valve for the individual and society. (p. 5)

All these positions can be utilized to explain the story of the traveling monk. From the perspective of superiority theory, we laugh at the mistaken interpretation of the stupid brother. We laugh at his stupidity, and our superiority. From the point of view of incongruity theory, the previous story is humorous because the first interpretation of events (that the traveling Buddhist had been bested) is dropped suddenly for the interpretation of the stupid brother (that he had been insulted). From the point of view of relief theory this joke allows us to relieve the feelings of aggression toward the “other,” the physically and mentally different, we usually repress.

What my rather roughshod application of some of the most durable paradigms in humor theory demonstrates is the same thing the story itself evidences: our frames determine what we see. Our realities are a product of our subject positions and the forms of language we utilize to describe our experiences. As Gergen (1994) argued, “It is through an a priori commitment to particular forms of language (genres, conventions, speech codes, and so on) that we place boundaries around what we take to be ‘the real’” (p. 37). Each of the three dominant paradigms in humor studies makes truth claims about what humor “really” does. My argument is that our frames regularly shift during lived experiences of humor. Therefore, any claim about what “really” happened, what an instance of humor “really” means, is misguided. That argument is supported in the following pages through close readings of a number of stories told to me by professional stand-up comedians. These stories, like the story of the traveling monk, illustrate how our experience of reality is always partial and potentially ambiguous, especially where humor is

concerned.

Dead Serious

In everyday life, people actively construct imaginary mental boundaries between humor and seriousness (Mulkey 1988). The following story told to me by Costaki Economopoulos demonstrates the problematic nature of this everyday understanding. Costaki was on stage in Knoxville, Kentucky in the bar of a Holiday Inn when a disabled woman wheeled herself onto the stage. According to Costaki, “She was severely handicapped, and I thought she might be crazy.” Costaki could barely understand what the woman was saying. And when he finally realized what she was trying to convey—that she was dying and she wanted him to perform at her funeral—security came and wheeled her off stage. As he related this last part of the story, Costaki grinned at me, noting that he received, “some huge laughs from the weirdness of the situation.”

“So after the show I’m talking to her and she’s severely physically handicapped, but mentally O.K., not bright, but not gone or crazy at all.” According to Costaki, the woman was a huge fan of stand-up comedy. “And she goes, ‘I know it’s going to be a tough room, so I’m going to pay you very well.’ She goes, ‘I want to leave them laughing.’ She wanted to have a comic at her funeral.”

When I asked Costaki if he performed at the disabled woman’s funeral he turned contemplative: “I never heard from her. I exchanged cards and I said, you know, I’d be honored. It’s the strangest thing I’ve ever heard, but if that’s what you want I’d love to do it for you.” The two talked for a long time, and according to Costaki, “In a weird way, I kind of wanted to get that call. What a weird thing. . . it would be a terrible gig, but it would be a great experience. So, I never heard from her. Maybe she’s still alive and she’s got my card. Maybe she’s still hanging in there.”

Superiority theory would suggest the “huge laughs” Costaki received in this situation were the result of cruel laughter at the disabled woman’s expense. Relief theorists would argue Costaki’s improvised jokes relieved the tension created by the sudden appearance of a disabled woman on stage. Costaki himself attributed the laughter to incongruity— “the weirdness of the situation.” Imagine for a moment we had a transcript of what was actually said. We could perform a thorough conversation analysis and demonstrate with acuity our painful ignorance of this lived

experience of humor.

No single interpretive frame can begin to explain the humor in this situation, nor what it meant to the participants. To do service to the embodied experience of the people in this story we need to conceptualize a comic multiverse. Doing so enables at least some manner of reflection about the different ways individuals apprehend humorous episodes in their lives. The characters in Costaki's narrative begin in very different "realities." Initially, Costaki read the woman's action as an incomprehensible distraction that threatened his stand-up performance. He wondered whether she might be mentally ill. When Costaki finally realized what she had been saying, he came to the conclusion she wasn't crazy. He ultimately saw her as likable person and was even willing to entertain her unusual request.

As Costaki related this story to me, I too found the epistemological ground continually shifting. My first inclination was to interpret the story as a case of disruptive heckling. Then, I felt sympathy for the disabled woman and her desire to "leave them laughing." Later still, I began to conceptualize this as tale of one nonconformist meeting another. (Neither Costaki nor the woman in his story were bound by social conventions.) As Mulkey argued, "In the realm of humour, not only are our everyday assumptions about the one, known-in-common world constantly confounded, but the interpretative expectations generated in the course of humorous discourse itself are undermined as that discourse proceeds" (1988, p. 26, emphasis mine). In the end, none of these interpretations is more correct than the other. More importantly, combining them all does not result in one "true" version of the lived experience of humor.

Drawing on a tale with strong resonances to the story of the brother monks, Hurley et al. (2011) proposed:

The fable about the blind men and the elephant is replayed often in science and philosophy. The many theories of humor that have been raised over the years [have] ... each described some important aspect of the elephant. Each has been wrong only in declaring itself an alternative to all the others. Taking the Hindu fable to heart and recognizing that we are all in the position of the blind men when looking at nature, can help us realize that all that is missing is a way of unifying the various descriptions of the elephant—of joining the parts that each theorist has wrapped his hands around—to show that they all are right. (p. 287)

The authors were correct in one respect. Just about any humor theory can create a perspective that is “right.” However, the idea that “unifying the various descriptions” of humor is possible couldn’t be more wrong.

Seriously considering the metaphor of the blind men and the elephant will make that apparent. In John Godfrey Saxe’s (1872) version of the legend, six blind men take up positions around the beast. Each man believes he has correctly sized up the elephant. The first, feeling the elephant’s side, believes the elephant is like a wall. The second, feeling the tusk, suggests the elephant is like a spear. The third, feeling the trunk, believes the elephant most closely resembles a snake. The fourth, laying his hand on the elephant’s knee, thinks the elephant is a tree. The fifth, touching the elephant’s ear, concludes the elephant resembles a fan. And the sixth man, who has seized the elephant’s tail, thinks the elephant is a rope. According to Hurley et al., a smart theorist should be able to combine each man’s perspective to produce a grand theory of the elephant because “all that is missing is a way of unifying the various descriptions of the elephant” (2011, p. 287). Unfortunately for scholars desirous of a universal theory of the elephant or humor, this approach is untenable.

While all eight blind men were correct, eight perspectives are hardly enough to produce a representative tactile theory of an elephant. None of the blind men touched the animal’s eyes nor its reproductive organs. We could solve that problem, of course, by surrounding the animal with hundreds of blind men. (Assuming we lived in a time and place without an institutional review board for the protection of human subjects.) If each man produced an account as accurate as the original eight, a fairly precise description of what a particular elephant felt like might result. However, that description would obviously fall short when it comes to producing a universal theory of the elephant. As Burke (1984b) proposed, “A way of seeing is also a way of not seeing—a focus on object A involves a neglect of object B” (p. 49). In this instance, our method would tell us nothing about the color of the elephant’s skin, or tusks, or even its general health, or how representative the elephant under examination was of elephants in general. Furthermore, a lack of perspectives and the “blindness” inherent in every perspective are the least difficult problems to overcome if we hope to create a unified theory of the elephant or of humor.

Imagine that as the theorist begins to combine each blind man’s concept into his grand theory, the elephant moves. Each man’s perspective shifts. This happens again and again. The blind men

and a moving elephant is a suitable metaphor for the lived experience of humor. Humor scholars would be wise to acknowledge the multidimensional, multiperspectival nature of the beast we seek to grasp. The theorist of lived humor shoots at a moving target while standing on shifting sand. In fact, when it comes to the lived experience of humor, the only thing we can be certain about is epistemological uncertainty. The stories that stand-up comics tell about their adventures highlight the chaos and uncertainty of living a life dedicated to shared experiences of humor. After traveling for weeks and performing every night for different strangers, even the human body can begin to lose its materiality.

Will the Real Body Please Stand-Up?

One of the things we typically take as truth bearing, as outside of discourse and social construction, is the body. Even Berger and Luckmann, two of the best-known proponents of social construction, believed “there are always elements of subjective reality that have not originated in socialization, such as the awareness of one’s own body prior to and apart from any socially learned apprehension of it” (1966, p. 134). The debate about the “reality” of the corporeal has been taken up in several spheres. Amongst feminists, Bordo (1993) has questioned the postmodern practice of describing the body as a fluid text, as a product of discourse. She asks, “What sort of body is it that is free to change its shape and location at will, that can become anyone and travel anywhere? If the body is a metaphor for our locatedness in space and time and thus for the finitude of human perception and knowledge, then the postmodern body is no body at all” (p. 229). Bordo is concerned that a purely textual understanding of the body “suggested by the images of cyborg, Trickster, the metaphors of dance and so forth obscures the local, limited, inescapably partial, and always personally invested nature of human ‘story making’” (p. 228, emphasis original). Every story is the product of at least one “real” body, but as the following narrative told to me by Danny Bevins indicates, real bodies are sometimes intertwined with imagined ones.

“You know the joke I do about the blind guy and the gun?” Danny does a routine about how the state of North Dakota issued a concealed weapon permit to a severely visually impaired man. The man in question passed a criminal background check, a firearms safety test, and he passed a shooting test on the second try. Danny’s punchline is, “Of course he did. They turned him around!”

Danny doesn't like to watch other comedians perform before he gets on stage. According to him, "I can't listen to them. I can't pay attention because I'm going on stage. You have to watch them the first night to kind of get a feel for what they're doing so you can stay away from whatever material they're going to do. That's fine, but other than that I don't like to watch."

On the night in question Danny was performing his act and everything was going well. "The people were laughing, and I get to that joke and there's just nothing . . . I mean every punchline there's just nothing." The routine ends with Danny saying, "If a blind guy came into this room with a gun people would be, 'Hey, there's a blind guy.' And I would be, 'Shhhhh!' And still, nothing." Danny didn't understand what was happening. The audience had been laughing throughout his set and now there was this awkward icy silence. "And I look at them and I go, 'Why? What? Really?' And there's a blind guy in the room. And he said, 'I think it's funny.' Just like that the crowd laughed and everything was alright."

If Danny watched the first part of the show he would have known what everyone else knew. There was a blind man in the audience. Danny's joke didn't work in this circumstance because when it comes to the disabled our culture finds "open mockery or even less malign forms of shunning . . . unjustifiable" (Miller 1997, p. 203). On the other hand, the joke usually works because we "hold the stigmatized to partial account for those stigmas that we know, at the level of official knowledge, are not within their power to change. If we cannot quite blame the blind for their blindness we get around it by blaming them for not remaining invisible . . ." (Miller 1997, p. 203).

The press coverage that surrounded a blind man receiving a gun permit had the effect of making that blind man visible, and thus potentially subject to the conservative forces of social ridicule. However, having an actual blind man in the audience created a situation where it was impossible for the audience to laugh. To laugh in this instance, the audience realized, might be interpreted by the actual blind man as an open mockery of his disability. When the blind man replied, "I think it's funny," he let the rest of the audience off the hook by dissociating himself with the blind man in Danny's joke. However, contrary to what is implied by the term "actual blind man," it wasn't this man's corporeal body that prevented the audience from laughing.

In one sense, the blind man in the audience was as much a social fiction as the blind man in the joke. Both were significant to the audience not because of their corporeality, but as markers of difference. As Miller (1997) claimed:

[I]t has come to pass that one of the surer markers of our recognition of stigma is our guilt for having recognized it. The stigmatized . . . make us feel that we are not properly according them civil inattention, for we are never certain what we are supposed to do in their presence. We suspect we are supposed to act naturally, but in the face of the stigmatized what does that mean? look away? provide assistance? pretend there is nothing unusual? The stigmatized are felt to disrupt the smooth-running social order that normals righteously demand. (p. 199-200)

The audience didn't laugh because of what it would have meant to laugh. It would have meant giving up their self-congratulatory belief that they were above the cruel mockery of the disabled. If the audience had seen this man as an individual they would have been free to laugh, as they did when he dissociated himself from the man in the story. However, they didn't see him as an individual. The audience "read" him symbolically, as a marker of a social category (blind man, disabled person).

This story demonstrates why thinking about the body as a text and/or marker of social difference is problematic. To think of the blind man in this story as a nothing more than a "text" would reduce his humanity. It would allow the audience's objectification of him to stand as the reality of the situation. Although on one level we can see the bodies in narratives as discursive formations, as Stenberg (2002) claimed, "When identity is thought to be a mere discursive formation, the material consequences of living in particular bodies get erased—as do the differences between them" (p. 48). On the other hand, as the debate within disability studies about the "reality" of the body illustrates, every discussion about the corporeal body is fraught with political consequences. Thomas (2002) explains how a social model of disability, which sees disability not as a result of biological difference, but of people's reactions to these differences, can be empowering for people who are perceived as having disabilities:

Once introduced to the social model perspective, they [the disabled] find themselves able to throw off the idea that their impairments are the cause of the difficulties and disadvantages that they experience in social life: they can see the source of the problem as lying outside their bodies. The dominant individualized personal tragedy view of

disability can be replaced by one that identifies the social barriers ‘out there’ that work to exclude and oppress. This is tremendously liberating for individual disabled people, as this author can personally testify. (p. 68)

The social model of disability has not only been personally liberating; it has also created a space for collective action that has had real political consequences. Disabled people successfully fought for and made changes in the world out there. And yet, others in disability studies have begun to ask whether being disabled isn’t more than just a social construct, pointing to their own bodies, and asking the politically tricky question: What about the disability in here?

The critique of the social model has come most strongly from feminists who have argued that “some of the restrictions of activity experienced by disabled people are directly attributable to the body and would not disappear with the removal of all disabling social barriers” (Thomas 2002, p. 69). Critics of this approach contend that in the end these theorists may wind up strengthening a medical model of disability that the social model of disability has fought so hard to critique and undermine. In the end, Thomas states that, “Somehow, bodies need to be theorized as, at the same time, bio-socially produced and culturally constructed entities. Both biological reductionism and cultural reductionism need to be avoided” (2002, p. 76). As I interpret these stories, I find the question of the “real” body impossible, but necessary. Impossible, because I wasn’t there; I’m writing about other people’s memories of embodied experience. Necessary, because without acknowledging that the bodies encased in these memories were “real,” it becomes too easy to dismiss their claims on the social realities that are the subject of these memories. The following narrative, told to me by Jean Paul, is a good example of why I feel the need to make a nod toward the corporeal, to acknowledge that there is something more going in these stories than social construction, to argue that there are “real bodies” in these texts.

Sometimes after a show people will corner a comedian and start pouring out their life stories. According to Jean Paul, “Sometimes it isn’t even about your act, they just say, ‘I’ve got to tell you this.’ And you feel like you’re almost a psychiatrist.” A woman approached Jean Paul one evening after a show. “And it wasn’t even a good show. And she tried to crack a few jokes. And then she started talking about all this weird shit, like how messed up her life was, and how her husband beat her. And what do you say to that?” Jean Paul didn’t know whether the woman

wanted him to comfort her, “or maybe crack some jokes for her.” According to him, “She went into detail. She told me that they got together when they were young, and that she had a kid for him, and that he didn’t work. It was just weird because it’s hard to cut somebody like that off. But at the same time, you don’t know what to say. You don’t want to joke about it.”

In this story, to write the body as a text would be to deny the embodied reality of the situation. Jean Paul’s discomfort, his admission that sometimes when people talk to you after a show you don’t know what to say, was a product of a particular embodied experience. “To crack a few jokes,” as he said, would have been to deny the corporeality of the situation. In this text the battered body is only an allusion, but to treat it as such would be to deny the way it constructed the reality of the experience. Interestingly, the “real” engagement of the two bodies in this scene was probably promoted by another fiction, Jean Paul’s status as a stand-up comic. Usually we don’t self-disclose as much information as this woman did to a stranger (although it is not entirely uncommon in situations where we know that we will never see the person again, on airplanes and at bus terminals for example). So, Jean Paul’s experience might have been partially a result of his status as traveler. However, I think that his role as performer had at least as much to do with the way this story played out.

The performance of stand-up comedy has the potential to convey a great deal of intimacy and can transform otherwise anonymous individuals into a celebrity-like figures. The ability of people to form incredibly intense “parasocial relationships” with celebrities is well established (Gamson 1994, Doss 1999, Giles 2000). Horton and Wohl (1956), the scholars responsible for coining the term parasocial relationships, proposed that the television and radio performers with whom audiences became involved in parasocial relationships were different from stage actors. The stage actor plays a role. At the end of the performance he or she “crosses back over the threshold into the matter-of-fact world” (Horton & Wohl 1956, p. 213). The radio and television personalities Horton and Wohl believed were catalysts for parasocial relationships, like the contemporary stand-up comic, lacked a clear distinction between performed role and genuine self. Their presence and ubiquity troubled this distinction. Is the game show host playing a role, or is he or she simply being him or herself? The question is unanswerable. The same is true of the contemporary stand-up comic who plays an idealized version of him or herself:

The spectacular fact about such personae is that they can claim and achieve an intimacy

with what are literally crowds of strangers, and this intimacy, even if it is an imitation and a shadow of what is ordinarily meant by that word, is extremely influential with, and satisfying for, the great numbers who willingly receive it and share in it. They “know” such a persona in somewhat the same way they know their chosen friends: through direct observation and interpretation of his appearance, his gestures and voice, his conversation and conduct in a variety of situations. Indeed, those who make up his audience are invited, by designed informality, to make precisely these evaluations – to consider that they are involved in a face-to-face exchange rather than in passive observation. (Horton & Wohl 1956, p. 213)

Comics vary in the degree to which they foster this sort of immediacy. Jean Paul has an incredibly informal style. He presents his material conversationally and he seeks a high level of participation from the audience, asking them questions, trying to draw them into his performance. In short, he tries to let an audience know him “in somewhat the same way they know their chosen friends” (Horton & Wohl 1956, p. 213). Even in a performance where things didn’t work on one level (Jean Paul confided in me that he didn’t have a great set that night) the performance may have worked on another level. For at least one member of the audience, Jean Paul may have created an atmosphere of intimacy. It is possible that the woman in his story saw the production of her own personal narrative as called for by the situation, as merely reciprocal. The potentially intimate nature of stand-up comedy, its mode of first person, informal address can create real connections between people. Trying to describe the feeling of being in the moment, when these connections are being made effortlessly, when self-consciousness dissolves and the boundary between self and other becomes blurred is incredibly difficult. As Dan French (1998) claimed, “The phenomenology of stage comedy is so intense, so potent, that it is almost literally impossible to capture its texture in description” (p. 82). But French took a crack at it:

There are moments on stage when the night cracks open and the laughter spills out and fills the room so completely that it seems there will never be an end to it. Sometimes as I stand blinded from the glare of the lights it bursts from out in the darkness and crashes into my chest like the roaring of an ocean wave. The sound washes over me and I drift within its undertow, made to feel as if there’s no way to escape its hold, that somehow I

have become a part of the laughter itself. (1998, p. 82)

When people share moments like these it is no wonder they try to make sense of the experience by drawing upon social scripts for interacting with celebrities. On the other hand, the history of celebrity is full of disquieting moments. Fans who believe that the performance of self is self, and who attempt to form parasocial relationships that can be awkward at best, and dangerous at their worst, are common problems for celebrities. In addition, this mode of address can sometimes be unwittingly too personal, as comedian Brian Schmitt makes clear.

Brian was performing in Des Moines, Iowa at a comedy club called the Spaghetti Works. According to him, it was a good club and he was having fun riffing with the audience. There was a couple sitting right up front, “and I tend to ask couples, you know, ‘Do you have any kids?’ So, I asked them if they had any kids, and they looked at me kind of funny.” Brian realized the man sitting down front had an especially strange expression on his face. “So, I asked, ‘Is something wrong with him?’ And this woman bursts into tears right in the middle of my act.” Brian’s jaw dropped to the floor. “Basically, there was nothing funny I could say. I was just like, ‘I, ah, I didn’t really mean that.’ And she kept crying and they finally had to leave. And the rest of the show just sucked.” After the show a woman approached Brian and told him the couple’s daughter had recently passed away.

In this scene, the fragility of the comic multiverse is apparent. Brian found out in dramatic fashion that each person “lives, observes, and acts in his own reality” (Krippendorff 2009, p. 20). From Brian’s point of view, “Do you have any kids?” was a simple gambit to engage the audience and make his routine seem more spontaneous. From the point of view of someone who had lost a child, on the other hand, being asked about children in a public setting where she was expected to respond was obviously traumatic. It is quite likely the couple came to the comedy club looking for a respite from their emotional pain. Neither Brian’s perspective nor the couple’s point of view fully embodies the reality of the interaction. The apparently neutral ground of the woman who informed Brian about the couple’s loss is also partial. In other words, there is no firm epistemological ground on which we make claims about this lived experience of (humor?).

Of course, the stage isn’t the only place where a stand-up comic can find him or herself living in a different reality than others. As the following story told to me by Uncle Dow Thomas

illustrates, the parking lot can be just as bizarre a world of multiple frames and shifting realities.

When the Real Body Can't Stand-Up: Death and Affect

Uncle Dow Thomas is a musical comedy act who dresses like an undertaker in a classic Western. Dow was still wearing his top hat and long coat as he hoisted his guitar and banjo into the back of his hearse. As he was loading up his equipment, a man he'd met earlier that night, a tenor who directed the local opera, fell out of the window of an upper floor of the Sheraton hotel.

According to Dow, "He landed right behind my hearse in the alley. I got everybody calmed down and back into the building and I went back and looked at him. He was still kind of breathing, but he died right there."

As Dow was looking over the man the police arrived. "There were all these lights and everything. And I just all of a sudden realized that I was in a top hat and tails standing over a corpse with the back door of my hearse open." Dow thought to himself, "Awe, man, this doesn't look good." All he could see was the police car's headlights and cop hat coming him. The police officer shouted, "Dow Thomas!" According to Dow, "I almost pooped my pants." Then the police officer stepped over the body and said, "Are you playing here tonight?" Dow chuckled and added, "I was like, 'Yeah, let's pull up a bloody corpse and talk about the gig.' It was unbelievable. I read about it in the paper the next day. It was one of those mornings you wake up and go, 'Did that really happen?'"

Uncle Dow had performed in Dayton for more than twenty years, so it was not unusual he was recognized as a local celebrity. However, it is unusual that the celebrity frame took precedence over the dead body on the pavement. Obviously, Uncle Dow didn't actually say, "let's pull up a bloody corpse and talk about the gig." This was his way of indicating how bizarre the police officer's behavior had seemed to him. The police officer in this story appears to be living in a totally different reality than Uncle Dow. And in some ways, I'm certain that he was, but just how different that reality was is difficult to know. Surely the police officer saw the dead body on the pavement. So, what motivated him to react in the way he did?

One possibility is that the celebrity frame provided a means of eschewing the more obvious frame of the crime scene. As a police officer, it was this person's duty to maintain order. Acknowledging the dead man would have called attention to the horror of the scene. According to Miller (1997), "What makes horror so horrifying is that unlike fear, which presents a viable

strategy (run!), horror denies flight as an option” (p. 26). To call attention to the corpse might have produced fear, and thus triggered a fight or flight response; the result could have been disorder, something that the officer’s role demanded he attempt to prevent. Therefore, it is possible the police officer’s communication in this situation was primarily strategic. It could also be that his reaction was one of simple surprise. It’s not often that a police officer shows up at a suicide and sees someone she or he “knows.” It’s the fact that the police officer “knew” Uncle Dow that made this scene bizarre.

It is always a bit unnerving attempting to relate to people who feel as though they know you when you don’t know them. Doing so whilst standing over a corpse was so strange that the next morning Dow Thomas questioned whether it had even happened. I think the element of surprise could account for the police officer’s initial, “Dow Thomas!” but maybe not so much the question that followed: “Are you playing here tonight?” That question was either a way of explaining the initial reaction (“I’ve seen you perform before, that’s why I used your name.”), or the expression of someone reacting in an affective rather than strategic way. As Marshal (1997) commented, “the concept of affect is central for understanding the meaning and power of the celebrity in contemporary culture” (p. 73). We tend to relate to celebrities in ways that defy rational explanations. I would suggest that affect is especially important for understanding the relationship between individuals and stand-up comics, because comedy is a type of performance that purposefully attempts to provoke an emotional/physiological response.

Actually, my description of the way in which the police officer related to Uncle Dow as either affective or strategic is problematic; it may have been both. In this situation, the officer only had two options. Option one was to ignore the previous parasocial relationship he had formed with the performer; he could have treated Uncle Dow just like any other “civilian” at a crime scene. His other choice, and the one he made, was to relate to Uncle Dow as a fan. And as Grossberg (1992) commented, “The fan’s relation to cultural texts operates in the domain of affect or mood” (p. 56). Therefore, even if his choice was strategic, it created a way of relating that was caught up in a previous affective investment. The power of affect to transcend reason is one explanation for the behavior of the police officer in Uncle Dow’s story. To the person who has an affective investment, relating on any other level is difficult, if not impossible.

At first glance, this narrative might not appear to qualify as a lived experience of humor. The show was over, after all. However, as Uncle Dow’s story makes clear, even at the time he could

see the irony of his situation (standing over a dead body, dressed as an undertaker, with the back of his hearse open). On the other hand, the newspaper report of this incident didn't even mention the scene on the street. It simply stated, "Alan Crofoot, Metropolitan Opera tenor, jumped to his death from the fifth floor of the Dayton Sheraton Downtown Hotel in Dayton, Ohio, early yesterday morning, according to the Montgomery County Coroner's office. Mr. Crofoot was 49 years old and lived in Toronto" ("Alan Crofoot" 1979, p. B6). I doubt the fans accompanying Uncle Dow to his hearse saw humor in the death by suicide either. Nor is a nonhumorous interpretation of the scene wrong. It is perfectly correct *not* to see this incident as humorous. Part of the value of conceptualizing lived humor as a multiverse is that we can avoid securing epistemological certainty (the claim that some incident or other is humor) even when doing so forces us to deny another equally justifiable position (that this incident was not humorous). It can be both simultaneously, and a person's conception of it can shift over time.

Conclusion

This paper has described a genre of comic road stories. In these stories, stand-up comics recount the strangest events they have experienced both on and off stage while "on the road." My goal in sharing these stories with an academic audience has been twofold. First, I believe stand-up comics perform a unique reality-revealing social function in contemporary culture. Thus, I would argue that providing a glimpse into the backstage "real lives" of these individuals is an intrinsically worthwhile endeavor. Second, the stories stand-up comics tell one another reveal the power of humor and humorists to highlight the multiple realities we live in and yet often overlook. Perhaps the most important lesson to draw from these "tales of the bizarre" is just how often the taken-for-granted view of a singular, stable, knowable Universe is put in jeopardy in everyday life. While stand-up comics may be unique in their comfort with narrative ambiguity and shifting forms of discourse, their "tales of the bizarre" are less complex than the reality from which they spring—the multiverse in which we all live.

References

- "Alan Crofoot, Tenor at Met, 49; Dead in a Dayton Hotel Plunge". 1979, March 6. *New YorkTimes*, p. B6.
- Aristotle. 1926. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by H. Rackham. Loeb Classical Library 73.

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Berger, Peter L. and Thomas Luckmann. 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality*. New York: Doubleday.

Bordo, Susan. 1993. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Burke, Kenneth. 1984a [1937]. *Attitudes Toward History (3rd ed.)*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

———. 1984b [1954]. *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose (3rd ed.)*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Davis, Murray S. 1993. *What's So Funny? The Comic Conception of Culture and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Doss, Erika Lee. 1999. *Elvis Culture: Fans, Faith, and Image*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.

French, Dan. 1998. *Through the Eyes of the Comic Mask: An Ethnographic Exploration of the Identity of a Stand-up Comedian*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of South Florida, Tampa.

Freud, Sigmund. 1960. [1905]. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Translated by James Strachey. New York: W. Norton & Company.

Gamson, Joshua. 1994. *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Gergen, Kenneth J. 1994. *Realities and Relationships: Soundings in Social Construction*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Giles, David. 2000. *Illusions of Immortality: A Psychology of Fame and Celebrity*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Gilhus, Ingvild Saelid. 1997. *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins: Laughter in the History of Religion*. New York: Routledge.

Goffman, Erving. 1974. *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Boston: Northeastern University Press

Grossberg, Lawrence. 1992. "Is There a Fan in the House? The Affective Sensibility of Fandom". In Lisa A. Lewis (ed.), *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*. London: Routledge, pp. 50-65.

- Hobbes, Thomas. 1651. *Leviathan: Or, the Matter, Form and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiastical and Civil*. London: Crooke.
- Horton, Donald and R. Richard Wohl. 1956. "Mass Communication and Para-social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance." *Psychiatry*, 19(3), pp. 215-229.
- Hurley, Matthew M., Dennett, Daniel C., and Adams, Reginald B. 2011. *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1952. [1793]. *Critique of Judgment*. Translated by James Creed Meredith. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press.
- Krippendorff, Klaus. 2009. *On Communicating: Otherness, Meaning and Information*. Edited by Fernando Bermejo. New York: Routledge.
- Lefcourt, Herbert M. 2001. *Humor: The Psychology of Living Buoyantly*. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers.
- Marshall, P. David. 1997. *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Miller, William Ian. 1997. *The Anatomy of Disgust*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Mulkay, Michael. 1988. *On Humor: Its Nature and Place in Modern Society*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Saxe, John Godfrey. 1872. *The Poems of John Godfrey Saxe*. Boston: James R. Osgood and Company.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. 1883. [1819]. *The World as Will and Idea*. Translated by R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Spencer, Herbert. 1860. "On the Physiology of Laughter". *Macmillian's Magazine*, 1, pp. 395-402.
- Stenberg, Shari J. 2002. "Embodied classrooms, embodied knowledges: Re-thinking the mind/body split." *Composition Studies*, 30(2), pp. 43-60.
- Thomas, Carol. 2002. "The 'disabled' body". In Mary Evans and Ellie Lee (eds.), *Real Bodies: A Sociological Introduction*. New York: Palgrave, pp. 64-78.