To Laugh or To Cry

Within comedic speech, there lies an inconspicuous line between harm and humor of which comedians must tread carefully along; will the joke offend the target audience, or will it teeter over the edge towards harmlessness just enough to evoke a genuine laugh? After witnessing scores of comedians succeed, and just as many fail, at mastering the art of perfectly balanced comedy, I've realized that it is indeed possible for a joke to leave me feeling affronted, yet still in awe of the particular comedian's craft. A burst of laughter followed by a pang of shame for laughing is still a laugh, and in fact, might be an indication of the best types of socio-political comedy. However, I find myself disagreeing slightly with Chappelle, as he goes on to say in his Mark Twain Prize speech that he'd "go upstairs and have a beer" with comics who harbor problematic prejudices, the very ones they use to fish for laughs. I don't think I'd go so far, and I say this because there is a clear distinction between jokes that are slightly funnier than they are offensive and jokes lined with the obvious ignorance of the teller. I believe it's innate to only find humor in speech you believe to be true in some way; even the guilt I feel after indulging in certain jokes comes with the realization that I support that comedian's views to some degree, provided I can tell what their true stance is.

In order to appreciate the complexity of balanced joke-telling, it's critical to examine the work of those who excel at it; almost immediately, the late George Carlin comes to mind. Nowadays, Carlin is considered one of the pioneers of counterculture humor due to his ability to proclaim his (often controversial) truth and maintain his diverse audience's respect and attention throughout. In watching his performances, it even seems as if the audience are involuntarily swaying towards his principles, accepting his opinions purely due to the ingenuity with which he

produces and performs his material. In his 1990 special “Doin it Again”, Carlin demonstrates his verbal craft in a series of quips aimed towards the stigmatization of rape jokes. “They’ll say you can’t joke about rape, rape’s not funny. I say, ‘f--- you, I think it’s hilarious!’ I believe you can joke about anything; it all depends on how you construct the joke.” Before going in-depth, Carlin ascertains he and his audience are on the same page; that stigmatizations are simply social constructs and that humor can be injected into the darkest of subjects, if just done in the right way. And during the following minutes, the audience rowdy with approval, Carlin achieves just this. He muses, “I wonder, does a rapist have a hard-on when he leaves the house in the morning?” By speaking about rapists in an “othering” manner, he puts substantial moral distance between himself and the subject of his jokes. But Carlin’s greatest strength is how he manages to accomplish this feat without coming off as condescending; he presents his comedy as fact, as if he’s merely giving his audience a lecture on common sense.

Initially, the set-up of Carlin’s jokes didn’t strike me as impressive; it’s difficult for a comedian, a male one at that, to sound credible whilst claiming that rape jokes are hilarious. However, Carlin never touches on the aspects of rape that make it such an intimidating topic to encroach; instead, he twists the idea around until it’s entirely unrecognizable. Are rapists more common near the equator, or at the North Pole? Carlin is careful to never make light of the subject, but rather prove to the audience that there is in fact something humorous about rape; the rapists themselves, and their barbaric desperation to have sex. In the same set, Carlin takes a moment to deprecate men before joking about feminism: “Men are basically insecure about the size of their dicks and so they go to war over it. You don’t have to be a political scientist or a history major to see the bigger dick farm policy theory at work.” Here, Carlin utilizes a popular cop-out tactic wherein comedians criticize all sides of a target group equally to seem more

impartial. But however worn the method is, it works perfectly for a comic style like Carlin's. Rather than projecting his own opinions onto the subject of his jokes, Carlin paints himself as the exasperated spectator, simply offering the audience his observations on some of, in his opinion, more illogical aspects of society. In doing so, Carlin managed the impressive feat of keeping his head just above the water, perhaps the prime location for a comedian specializing in counterculture humor.

Like Carlin, Daniel Tosh is another comedian accustomed to treading the dangerous waters of borderline offensive comedy. However, the two comics' styles completely contrast each other. Unlike Carlin, who talks his way through his humor in an effort to sway the audience, Tosh specializes in a form of comedy coined as "superiority" or "insult humor", which are associated with the degradation or humiliation of specific individuals and communities for personal enjoyment, and typically accompanied by a superiority complex. Tosh takes this form of humor and stretches it, exaggerating his 'superiority complex' in order to get his honest stance on controversial topics across. In his 2016 special "People Pleaser", Tosh takes time to uplift the black community for their all-around social/physical aptitude before saying, "...so the fact that we pulled off slavery…I'm just saying, it's pretty neat." Of course, Tosh prefaced the bold joke with a series of disclaimers-- "this is a tough joke to do as a white comedian"-- and clarified afterward that he doesn't perform it everywhere, depending on the political demographic of the audience. However, the unorthodox quality of the joke stems from his unwavering commitment to the superiority persona, seemingly taking enjoyment out of the fact that white people "accomplished" the enslavement of their black contemporaries. An advocate of "fair play" comedy, where every possible identity is offered equal opportunities to be criticized, Tosh spends much time choosing different groups to pick on and carefully building a reputation with his

audience. And it works; the joke lands and the audience laughs because they know Tosh isn't being serious.

As I mentioned before, it's nearly impossible to indulge in a joke if some part of you is not in agreement or admiration of the substance. Each person retains their own set of fundamental principles and philosophies, no matter how refined, and laughter is just another way of divulging our beliefs to others-- perhaps even unwillingly, depending on the nature of the joke. In response to Tosh's risky gag, the audience can't help but laugh; the brilliant set-up, his unprecedented boldness, and the come-down afterward where Tosh takes time to acknowledge potential "wrong" recipients of the joke ("there's a fine line between appreciating the sarcasm and ooh, this feels like a rally") give the audience enough context to feel comfortable in their enjoyment, even if it was initially instinctive. In a dangerous race to see which jokes will catch his audience off guard the most, Tosh takes advantage of his exaggerated version of superiority humor to address and violate a multitude of taboo subjects that less-practiced comedians wouldn't dare approach. As Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren's Benign-Violence model suggests, comedy reaches its peak at the junction between insult and a laugh. The closer a joke is to being a violation of basic societal standards, the more technical and cautious a comedian needs to be. Through his faux superiority humor, high-stakes choice of subject material, and solid contextual skills, Tosh consistently demonstrates an enhanced understanding of the greater potential of counterculture comedy, and what it takes to get there.

Despite the differences apparent in the two comedians' styles, both George Carlin and Daniel Tosh gained popularity through their unorthodox technique and inclination towards taboo topics. In choosing not to shy away from the intimidation these subjects invoke, including rape and slavery, both comics have proven time and time again that the best forms of comedy

transpire in the minuscule intersection between benign and offensive material. That isn't to say all comedians should attempt the same form of risky comedy; if Tosh and Carlin have proven anything more, it's that performing these jokes successfully necessitates incredible tact; in word choice, mannerisms, and an adaptive wariness of the audience. The "fluff" of the focus material is equally important; as Tosh demonstrates, the only way his audience will feel safe enough to find humor in his darker material is if he provides them with not only the necessary context but a hefty dose of his own inflated ego. In contrast, George Carlin spent much of his time onstage deep in thought, offering up the ridiculous thoughts he has on a plate of logic as if to say, "Here are the facts-- accept them." His performances are relentless as well as ruminative; he provides endless context to his thoughts for the audience, and when the joke eventually drops, his audience is prepped to receive it. While Carlin will forever be the face of counterculture comedy, commandeering the stage with his unique presence, Tosh blends contemporary humor with surefire tactics, spearheading the movement to a more intellectual, novel era of risky humor.

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