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RHETOR 123

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Modeling Hedberg's Stand-up: A Step in the Procedural Formalization of Comic Spaces

Mitch Hedberg's approach to comedy, parametrized accordingly in the technical, social, and psychic dimensions, is one of the simplest comedic positions and can be used as a basis to study greater complexity systems stand-ups employ in the equilibrium model of dialogue.

As Ian Brodie's "Stand-up Comedy as a Genre of Intimacy" states obviously, "stand-up comedy is a form of talk" (1). Ian Brodie further formalizes stand-up's form by noting its bidirectional characteristic and identifying it as a form of dialogue. Dialogue is explicitly distinguished from monologue, which I choose to extend here, because it is a key technical attribute that structures comic space. As a dialogue, stand-up provides the audience a way to talk back to the stand-up, by means of laughing, booing, groaning, applauding, exclaiming or any other means of feedback. Notably, these feedback methods exclude full-sentence conversations But Brodie argues there is a technical reason for this:

"However much voice is given to the audience, the comedian always has more tools at her disposal to wrest control back, should that be required [...], where the audience may be an active or passive listener but can not alter the performance. But neither is there the potential for the switching of assumed identities of performer and audience member."

At a fundamental level, stand-up exists as two separate agents: the stand-up and the audience, and structurally the stand-up agent wants control over the audience agent while still supporting a method of bidirectional communication, so the set of communicables is limited for the audience. Formalizing stand-up and audience agents into theoretical objects decouples these ideas from actual instances of stand-up performers and audience members which reflects stand-up comedy from a top-down view: different types of comedians get in front of different types of audiences to tell different jokes, but what stays constant is the existence of a point-of-view of the stand-up and a point-of-view of the audience.

This also follows from Brodie's assertion that individual stand-up styles rest along a broad spectrum, but have a standard way of communicating their point-of-view to the audience. From footnote seven, we can look at stand-up performances as compositions of comedic bits, "where smaller units comprise the larger performance, and according to the immediate need, the performer can move these smaller units around or drop them entirely." This definition gives flexibility to the performer so they can adapt to different audiences but does not sacrifice compositionality of bits. Brodie further explains "each unit, or 'bit,' is inexorably linked with the others in the routine, the performance venue, composition of the audience, the perceived relationship between the teller and the audience, the technological medium [...], and the personality of the comedian herself." So bidirectional communication between the pre-defined types "stand-up" and "audience" acts as a basis formalization of stand-up, and is built to be extended and include more complex comedic formalization, but to get a handle on the basic formalisms we will use Mitch Hedberg's 1999 special "Strategic Grill Locations" as a toy example.

Hedberg's style of comedy does not deviate from this formal basis, "Strategic Grill Locations" is a string of tiny bits composed of tinier one-line jokes that compose into his entire show. He establishes the premise of his show with his first joke: "I have to record this CD. So I have to tell all the jokes I have [L]." Hedberg's special is a clear example in bidirectional communication between stand-up and audience because Hedberg tells one-liner jokes that instantly request (and receive) feedback from the audience. Throughout the special, Hedberg tells one-liner after the other, establishing ephemeral bits to quickly link some together, and receiving responses mostly in the form of laughs. Thus, Hedberg's style in "Strategic Grill Locations" is safely encompassed in the simple definition of stand-up formalized above.

Let's use some parts of his special to prove how Hedberg's style is "close to the metal" of the above formalization. In other words, what I have defined above is a formal structure, notably a dialogue between performer and audience, where the performer communicates in bits and the audience communicates in feedback. This format can be extended but Hedberg does not do so. As a result, Hedberg communicates with observations about the structural levels of communication itself: paying attention to responses from the audience and playing with the idea of response at all constantly contextualizes his performance. He's even paying attention to how bassist Chuck Savage is changing music texture throughout his performance: "Oh! Chuck's bringing it down. Alright! That's fine, I like it, but don't think I didn't notice tho." Also a playful mind like Hedberg's and his interest in gambling games like blackjack may have also primed his mind to explore bidirectional communication because of the player-dealer dynamics present in that space. A hand in blackjack is very much like a stand-up joke: you have a context (initial dealt cards/premise) that you make a decision from (hit, stand/punchline) and see if it's good

(win hand/audience laugh). Here is a good example of Hedberg responding to audience communication:

> My lucky number if 4 billion, that doesn't come real handy when you're gambling [L]
>
> Come on, 4 billion [L],
>
> Fuck, seven [L],
>
> Not even close [L],
>
> I need some more dice [L],
>
> 4 million divided by six, at least [L],
>
> (giggles at himself) Snake eyes, now, [L]
>
> I said snake eyes [L], gambling term [L]
>
> Or it's an animal term too [L]
>
> Popsicles are for the summertime,
>
> I like to play Blackjack, I'm not addicted to gambling I'm addicted to sitting in a

semicircle [L]

For this gambling bit, each joke gets a strong laugh from the audience, which is standard structure. What's notable is that Hedberg tries to change the subject after trailing off on "or it's an animal term too" and trying "popsicles are for the summertime" but got no laughs so he immediately returned to a (rather famous) gambling joke (of his) because gambling jokes were making the audience laugh.

Susanne Colleary formalizes this purpose and its consequences in her book *Performance and Identity in Irish Stand-Up Comedy: The Comic 'i.'* She writes, "Lest we forget, stand-up

comedy is essentially about the pursuit of laughter. That frame radically contextualises *all* telling on a stand-up stage. So that *acts* of communication projected through the multifunctional lens of comic persona(e), which embraces the comic 'i' are deeply embedded within another set of tensions" (57). Hedberg is paying close attention to the set of tensions generated from his and his audiences' actions as a key component to his style of comedy, whereas most comedians take this structure for granted, and integrate it quietly into their routine to make other types of jokes. To clear up the stand-up's reasoning, Colleary further elaborates, "the question becomes situated for the moment, not in how the stand-up comic treats the world playfully, but *where* the stand-up comic treats the world playfully, for comic space has a very close relationship to the playful world" (57). All stand-ups are aware of the types of observations they are making, and in Hedberg's case, he treats the world playfully in the very structure of the world itself. Take the joke that inspired the title of his 1999 special, but didn't actually make it into the recording:

See I'm a dreamer, man, and when I was a cook I'd always work with people who weren't dreamers. Like, I was cooking at this restaurant and I put a hot dog on the grill and my kitchen manager came over, and he said, "Mitch, put the hot dog up here, in the right hand corner of the grill, so in case you get a whole bunch of orders at once you have all this space available." See that's how I knew he wasn't a dreamer, 'cause the day I give up my dreams is the day I have strategic grill locations. A dreamer has a philosophy: The entire grill is hot.

So Mitch Hedberg approaches comedy as a dreamer, a dreamer who dreams in big, simple, abstract concepts *intentionally* so he can maintain his inner worldview. The audience, however, may not share this same worldview, but through jokes like "I haven't slept for ten days,

because that would be too long," Hedberg connects his worldview to the audience's worldview by successfully communicating jokes. Colleary's "The Comic 'i'" chapter makes this argument more robust by specifying "the comic must make decisions about the work in order to successfully maintain the balance between the desire to break the rules of comic permission and the risks involved should the material go a step too far" (62).

Finally, I submit the balance the stand-up must maintain in their performance is precisely what causes the comic space to emerge from dialogical structure to the individual style of the performer. It is how the stand-up plays with the equilibrium of the comic space that allows more complex systems of performances. Hedberg applied stand-up performance in a reduced form, he does so to connect his individual worldview the audience, which gives a proof-of-concept implementation a bidirectional relationship to align differing worldviews with one another in a comic space.

Works Cited

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