

Louis Franzini and Nichole Force write about humour.

- 1 The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein said, "A serious and good philosophical work could be written consisting entirely of jokes." Despite the buffoonish imagery that comes to mind when one considers the joker, the clown or the pie-in-the-face comedian, humour is more than mere silliness. It is an advanced intellectual means of developing new perspectives and coping with extreme circumstances. 5
  
- 2 Humour is a quintessentially social phenomenon. Jokes and other humorous utterances are a form of communication that is usually shared in social interaction. The topics and themes people joke about are also generally central to the social, cultural and moral order of a society or a social group. Humour not only is a sign of closeness among friends, it is an effective way of forging social bonds too, even in situations not very conducive to closeness: it 'breaks the ice' between strangers, unites people in different hierarchical positions, and creates a sense of shared 'conspiracy' in the context of illicit activities like gossiping or joking about superiors. The flip side of this inclusive function of humour is exclusion. Those who do not join in the laughter, because they do not get the joke, or even worse, because the joke targets them, will feel left out, shamed or ridiculed. 10  
15
  
- 3 For individuals, the direct benefits of humour lie in the body's chemical reaction to laughter. Among other things, laughter has been shown to reduce stress and boost the immune system. Rather than taking antidepressants, one can 'self-medicate' by watching a funny movie, going to a comedy show or playing a fun game. For the rejected lover or laid off worker, this self-induced boost provided by humour activates a neurochemical reaction that enhances their ability to tolerate the stress response and think creatively of coping options. Theorist Martin Armstrong, who wrote about the function of laughter in society, may have said it best when he wrote, "For a few moments, under the spell of laughter, the whole man is completely and gloriously alive: body, mind and soul vibrate in unison... the mind flings open its doors and windows." 20  
25
  
- 4 In fact, humour has also been known to possess healing powers. Some medical settings offer a special room for patients and their family where a variety of materials with humorous content is available for their use as desired. Sometimes an aide brings a comedy cart to the patient's room, which typically includes choices of funny movies, tapes, joke books and other amusing materials. It is an extraordinarily powerful and effective way to use humour to alleviate pain and increase the cheerfulness of patients residing in institutions that are often much less comfortable for them than being at home. 30
  
- 5 A keen sense of humour is a quality nearly all of us claim in ourselves and one we seek and highly value in others. We love a sense of humour in our dates and mates, our children and basically everyone with whom we have social contact. When our humour-making is successful, we are drawn closer to people and share a bonding experience with them. We enjoy life more and our troubles seem to lessen instantly. Most important, we like that person even more. Laughter and humour can buffer stress and reduce experiences of pain. The use of humour has been shown to be associated with a positive self-concept, higher self-esteem and intelligence, and even the enhancement of enjoyment of positive life events. 35  
40
  
- 6 Given the benefits of humour, it is no wonder why people are willing to pay to watch comedies. Most people find comedy as merely funny, but comedy is more than just a laugh. Beneath the humour lies a rich layer of social commentaries ranging from the political, to gender, to class and to other social issues. While comedians will make everyone uncomfortable at some point, good comics play an important function in society by holding up a mirror and forcing us to confront realities that we would often prefer to ignore. For minority groups, humour also serves as a tool to neutralise the power of stereotypes that obstruct their path to equal participation in society. Comedy can give social critique and instigate transformation in a way that leaves many audience members wanting more. 45

- 7 Comedy regularly draws criticism for being offensive and for perpetuating negative stereotypes. This, however, is a sign of a healthy comedy culture because it means that comedians are pushing social boundaries. Stories and expressions that are normally unacceptable are met with laughter and agreement when they are told on stage. The fact that the content is encrusted in humour is like a sugar coating to bitter medicine. The laugh takes away the sting. As Mary Hirsch the humourist once commented, "Humour is a rubber sword—it allows you to make a point without drawing blood." Observational comedy, situational comedy, slapstick comedy, comedy that both enlightens and offends—these are forms of creative destruction at their height and in their depths, and they have long allowed us to talk about things that taboos, or at the very least taste, might otherwise preclude. 50 55
- 8 Comedy can also take on a political face. While oftentimes, such political comedy focuses on more trivial matters such as a politician's appearance or personality, political humour also has its serious side that sometimes provides political, social or economic commentary. It can attack the character, policy or even the larger electoral system. Even though the audience may laugh it off, the cogs will have started spinning in their minds. It is this type of political humour that politicians, institutions and authority figures over the centuries have feared the most. 60 65
- 9 The fear of humour points to the fact that humour can be destructive, cruel, belittling, humiliating, relationship destroying, blatantly biased, extreme in its effects, unpleasant to nearly all listeners in addition to the butts of the joke, and simply outrageous in its disregard for its consequences and lack of boundaries. Humour that is racist, sexist, ageist, obscene and otherwise politically incorrect can at times be as funny as it is offensive. However, there is a place for such offensive humour. Some audiences love high-intensity controversy and sarcasm, while others prefer only safe non-controversial topics. It is no wonder why comedians develop the skill of using humour as a lens through which they can examine all kinds of topics and observations about life, subjects that may be otherwise unremarkable, unpleasant or just unfunny. Humour is the Philosopher's Stone that turns everyday lead into comedy gold. It makes the mundane, the awful, the sad or the embarrassing into something we can all laugh at and find funny. 70 75
- 10 As comedy began to do a better job of reflecting the world, it began, as well, to take on the responsibilities associated with that reflection. It began to recognise the fact that the long debate about the things comedy owes to its audiences and itself—the old "hey, I'm just making a joke" line of logic—can be partially resolved in the idea that nothing, ultimately, is "just a joke". Humour has moral purpose. Humour has intellectual heft. Humour can change the world. 80