

Legitimizing A Discredited Art Form: The Changing Field Of British Comedy

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Abstract:

Bourdieu's field theory offers a useful theoretical platform for sociologists interrogating areas of culture. However, his rigid separation of the sub-fields of mass and restricted cultural production ignores the potential for transformative change in cultural fields. This article uses field theory to chart the history of British comedy, explaining first its historical denigration within the 'academy', and second its dramatic transformation and expansion since the 1980s 'Alternative Comedy' movement. It describes how this movement introduced new and more autonomous genres of critical, intellectual, political and surreal comedy that were slowly appropriated by middle class audiences and helped legitimise comedy in the wider cultural field. It is also argued that in order to fully understand this 'moment' of change in the field one must look beyond Bourdieu to Social Network Analysis (SNA). Only by examining how the network of alternative comedians pooled their artistic resources and worked together, can we understand how they had such a profound influence on the future trajectory of British comedy.

Introduction

Comedy plays an increasingly central role in British cultural life. Constituting 25% of terrestrial TV scheduling and spanning 200 comedy clubs, 30 Festivals and three cable TV channels, it is a multi-million pound industry that plays a key part in the construction of British cultural tastes and identities (Hall, 2007; Medhurst, 2003). Despite this, sociology - and indeed academia in general - have afforded comedy little scholarly attention. Traditionally considered “low-brow art *par excellence*”, comedy has been relegated to the inferior cultural position of “entertainment” and is widely considered antithetical to more important developments in macro-level society (Kuipers, 2006). However, this article seeks to interrogate this dismissal. Using Bourdieu’s field theory, it aims to chart the history of British comedy, focusing in particular on the process of legitimation initiated by the Alternative Comedy Movement since the early 1980s.

In recent years, many sociologists of art and culture have opted to operationalise one of Pierre Bourdieu’s most well-known theoretical tools, “the field” (Rocamora, 2002; Prior, 2007). Bourdieu uses the field as a conceptual metaphor to describe the dynamic social space inhabited by social actors. Each actor has a relational position in this space, governed by their access to power and specific forms of capital. However, although this position is usually the result of historical relations, it is not necessarily static. Indeed, propelled by their habitus, actors compete and strategise over field-specific stakes to win power in the field (Bourdieu, 1993: 55-70). A useful analogy for this is a football field, where different ‘players’ have set and somewhat constraining positions (habitus), but yet can still move, progress and react to the ever-changing dynamic of the game (field).

The field, then, is primarily conceived as a network of objective relations between actors. However, significantly, Bourdieu expands the notion to incorporate groups and institutions within fields, and finally, relations between fields. His aim is not just to examine the micro struggles that take place between individuals, but also the relationship that certain groups in society (within the cultural field, the scientific field etc) have with the wider political field, or as Bourdieu terms it “the field of power” (Prior, 2008). Within this field of power, the place of culture is prominent. In *The*

Rules of Art, Bourdieu notes that the field of cultural production is situated in the dominant half of social space. However, the field of culture itself is split between two poles or sub-fields. At one end, the “restricted sub-field” of cultural production and at the other end the “mass sub-field” of cultural production (Bourdieu, 1993: 53). Success within these two sub-fields are organised around opposing criteria and although they “co-exist”, Bourdieu argues they never overlap (p.128). The restricted sub-field is an autonomous field where high cultural goods, such as poetry, opera and theatre, are produced for a limited but “privileged” (p.115) audience. Here, financial profit is rejected and ‘art for art’s sake’ constitutes the dominant ideology. This derives from the 19th century, where artists began to be released from the constraints of commission and were allowed to operate autonomously, heralding the Romantic notion that art results from individual and autocratic “genius” (Wolff, 1987).

Within this restricted environment, there is also a specialised logic for consumption. Bourdieu (1968) argues that those consuming in the restricted sub-field employ a “pure gaze” for the discernment of art. This derives from Kant’s (1987) influential notion of ‘disinterested aesthetics’, where true artistic beauty can only be found if one separates ‘himself’ from any physical, emotional or functional investment in an art work. Instead, aesthetic objectivity is achieved through the operationalisation of a “disinterested gaze”, in which the virtue of artistic form, not function, is allowed to shine through (Kant, 1987: 234). Bourdieu argues that through the use of this aesthetic logic cultural elites have been able, since the onset of modernity, to conceal the class-based nature of cultural preferences behind the façade of a ‘natural’ artistic competence (Bourdieu, 1993: 228-232).

In contrast, the mass sub-field of cultural production constitutes the “discredited” (p39) arm of the cultural field, where “business is business” and “profane” cultural good such as pop music, comedy and television are produced to reach the largest possible audience for maximum economic profit. Here the dominant logic is that of the “popular aesthetic” and the “taste for necessity”, whereby audiences focus on goods that provide immediate sensual gratification, relate directly to everyday life and “imply the subordination of form to function (Bourdieu, 1984: 32).

As this demonstrates, Bourdieu had a rather negative understanding of mass culture. Although his theory stressed agency through “improvisation” and therefore the contingency of field positions, he himself seemed to espouse a peculiarly static and one-dimensional view of mass culture (Fowler, 1997; Shusterman, 2000). Indeed, during his career he afforded “low” culture very little empirical attention, in later work even deriding it as alienating (Bourdieu, 1996). Theorists like Fowler (1997) and Shusterman (2000) have thus argued that while Bourdieu brilliantly exposes the “veiled interests” of high-art, his hostility to popular art demonstrates he has been partially ‘captured’ by dominant ideology himself.

However, in recent years a number of sociologists have sought to rehabilitate popular culture, arguing that Bourdieu’s inert characterisation is inaccurate outside his native France (Rocamora, 2002; Shusterman, 2000). It is argued that in the cultural fields of Britain and America, for instance, the classification of art forms is in a process of constant evolution. In recent years, many popular cultural forms such as photography, jazz, rock and even rap music have gained increased legitimacy and recognition within the cultural field (Regev, 1994).

One arena in the British context still yet to be explored, however, is comedy. Like other forms of pop culture, British comedy has undergone significant transformations. This article aims to explain the historical context underpinning these transformations, beginning with the early denigration of comedy. Before the field of cultural production had even been established, deficiencies of form and the transgressive role of the body had relegated comedy to the lowest levels of British culture. When comedy split from theatre in 1843 - and the field was more officially established - this denigration only continued. Emerging genres of physical, obscene and ‘trad’ comedy were discredited as unsophisticated and coarse.

However, this article seeks to focus on a particular ‘moment’ in the field of British comedy that occurred between November 1979 and April 1981. During this short period, 23 young stand-up comedians initiated a significant re-evaluation of British comedy now popularly known as the ‘Alternative Comedy Movement’. This movement greatly altered and expanded the field of British comedy, introducing new forms of critical, intellectual, surreal and political comedy that have now

become established genres in their own right. These genres altered the layout of the field, their aesthetic orientations skewed towards the principles of Bourdieu's sub-field of restricted production.

The Pre-Field of British Comedy

Deficiencies of Form

Academic deliberations concerning the place of comedy date back to Ancient Greece and Aristotle's *Poetics* (335BC), where comedy was first discussed as a form of drama. Notably, comedy was defined in relation to its opposition with tragedy, a distinction that has proved remarkably persistent in British literary culture (Stott, 2005). Whereas Aristotle saw tragedy as an "imitation of all action that is admirable, complete and possesses magnitude" (Aristotle, 1996:10), he viewed comedy as a representation of the ridiculous and unworthy elements of human behaviour. Comic characters were presented in Greek Drama as "disgraceful" figures that failed to uphold moral values, and were characterised by vulgarity and inferiority (Critchley, 2002: 88). Indeed, for Aristotle, the opposition between comedy and tragedy symbolised the wider conflict between the two aesthetic capabilities of the human character; tragedy representing the transcendental goals of "high-art" and comedy the "low" counterpoint of vulgar entertainment .

Comedy's early artistic deficiencies were not just attributed to vulgarity, but also to the limited nature of its form. Roman New Comedy, for instance, which incorporated a body of 26 plays by Plautus and Terence, were built upon stereotypical characters that were indistinguishable from one play to another (Konstan, 1995). Such one-dimensional characterisation was also matched by formulaic plots. Plays rejected realistic human portrayals in favour of repetitive themes, such as the forbidden love of a Roman man for a prostitute or a slave girl (Konstan, 1995). The basic structure of Roman New Comedy went on to have an enduring effect on British comedy and greatly influenced the development of British 'citizen' comedy in the 1580s and 1590s. Here the plays of William Haughton and particularly Ben Jonson dealt in similarly repetitive themes, but reflected the onset

of modernity and the capitalist economy. For instance, in Jonson's *Volpone* (1605) and *The Alchemist* (1610), it is the pursuit of money that replaces the slave girl in becoming the narrative focus.

Comedy and The Body

Although comedy's early denigration had much to do with its restricted form, its lowly place in the cultural hierarchy was also the result of an inextricable relationship with the body. Again, a key theme in Greek thought was the divided nature of the human form, capable of both stunning beauty and foul excretions. Physical beauty was therefore considered a reflection of 'absolute beauty', symbolising good, virtue and truth (Plato, 1951: 94-96). Developing alongside this idealisation of beauty was an emphasis, particularly among social elites, on mastering the body and making it conform to appropriate codes of "civility". In the *Civilising Process*, Elias (1939) demonstrated that the governing of bodily manners and suppression of "bestial functions" has been key in the development of modern Bourgeois civilisation:

'The greater or lesser discomfort we feel towards people who discuss their bodily functions more openly, who conceal and restrain these functions less than we do, is one of the dominant feelings expressed in the judgment of 'barbaric' or 'uncivilised' (Elias, 1978: 58-59).

Much Medieval and Early Modern British comedy was situated directly against these notions of civility. Overtly physical, sexual, grotesque and obscene, comedy functioned by returning the individual to the uncivilised body.

This direct inversion of social etiquette was most obvious in the holiday festivities of the Elizabethan era (1558–1603). Barber (1963) argues that the loosening of social controls and deliberate merrymaking experienced during holidays like May Day and Shrove Tuesday both informed and was reflected in the comedy of the period. The best example of this is arguably the "Saturnalian Comedy" of Shakespeare. In plays such as *Twelfth Night* (1601), the plot centres around the "release" from social norms experienced by characters during the festive period, where "the energy normally occupied in maintaining inhibitions is freed for celebration" (Barber, 1963: 7).

However, arguably the most explicit reference to the body in comedy studies derives from Bakhtin (1984) in his analysis of the early modern comic novelist Francois Rabelais (c.1494-1553). Bakhtin characterises the early modern period in terms of two opposing cultures, the sombre, Church-driven 'Official' culture, and the popular, boisterous culture of the common people. Bakhtin argued that this popular culture could be characterised as a spontaneous expression of 'natural' feeling, where people were unmediated by expectations of bodily formality. In particular, the main vehicle for this popular voice was 'Carnival', a special period of sensual indulgence before the Lenten fast, which involved a temporary suspension of all social rules and etiquette. For Bakhtin, the carnival operated according to a "comic logic", where graphic and humorous descriptions of bodily functions and sexual activity represented a deliberate mocking of the dominant order (1984; 68-74). He celebrates these comic expressions as a form of "grotesque realism", which reached beyond societal limits and interacted with the world in a distinctly sensual way:

'Wherever men laugh and curse, their speech is filled with bodily images. The body copulates, defecates, overeats and men's speech is flooded with with genitals, bellies, urine, disease, noses and dismembered parts' (Bakhtin, 1984: 319).

While Bakhtin sought to romanticise the grotesque, the fact remains that the enduring connection between comedy and the barbaric body - conceptualised today in the genre of obscene comedy - only added to the art form's early denigration within British culture.

Perhaps the most enduring personification of comedy's connection to the body is through the figure of the clown or fool. In Britain, this can be traced back to the Church Festivals of the middle ages such as the *festum stultorum* (the 'feast of fools') and the *factorem papam* (the 'fool's pope'), but is perhaps most clearly prominent in the work of Shakespeare (Barber, 1963). Figures such as Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* and Falstaff from *Henry IV* (1597) are exaggeratedly physical, distorted and disproportionate figures, which arguably derive their comedy either from the way they move (Malvolio) or from their general physical degeneracy (Falstaff). This distinct form of physical comedy was continued throughout the 17th,

18th and 19th centuries by a long line of popular British clowns, most notably the Regency comedian Joseph Grimaldi (1778-1837) and Charles Wetch, better known as Grock (1880-1959).

Finally, it is also worth considering comedy's relationship with the forbidden physical pleasure of laughter. According to Stott (2005), hostility to laughter within cultural circles derived from early Christianity, where all sensual pleasure was considered suspicious and antithetical to the pursuit of pious abstinence. The more a person's body was closed to the world, the more it was considered open to god (2005: 129-131).

Such ethical opposition to laughter remained strong in clerical circles throughout the early modern period and by the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries extended to exclude laughter more firmly from 'official culture' (Roodenburg, 1997). Comedy and laughter were considered enemies of social distinction and Stott (2005) notes that an edict of the 18th century implored that 'men of quality' did not laugh on grounds of breeding (2005: 124). Laughter here was seen not as an enemy of god but an enemy of intellectual enlightenment. As Addison (1979) claims:

'Laughter slackens and unbraces the Mind, weakens the Faculties and causes a kind of Remissness, and Dissolution in all the powers of the soul' (Addison and Steele, 1979, vol 2: 237-238).

The British Field of Comedy: 1843-1979

Although comedy's lowly position in British culture may have had a strong historical precedent, it was arguably not until The Theatres Act of 1843 that comedy began to resemble a distinct field of British cultural production. Before this comedy had mainly constituted a genre of theatre, but now it was able to assume a separate identity within the performing arts. Institutions, networks and genres of comedy all began to surface and a distinct "universe of belief" began to emerge (Becker, 1982; Bourdieu, 1996).

In particular, The Theatres Act gave local councils the power to license theatres for the first time and this paved the way for the first true institution of comedy;

Victorian music hall. Boisterous and strongly working class, music hall was deliberately skewed towards Bourdieu's sub-field of 'mass' cultural production. Here, in huge purpose built auditoriums, a breathless roster of artists performed various forms of entertainment to hundreds of often inebriated audience members (Bratton, 1986). However, it was undoubtedly musical comedy that dominated music hall and "gave it its distinctive voice" (Bailey, 1984). Musical comedy gradually grew into a network of hundreds of professionals, who toured the country and made a lucrative living from their comedy (Rutherford, 1986). It was also through this musical tradition that the first meaningful genres of British comedy were established.

The Development of Physical and Obscene Comedy

As music hall grew in popularity during the mid to late 19th century, two types of comic performance began to emerge. The first and most notorious tradition was the "vulgar" comic singer, who combined sexual suggestiveness with lavatorial innuendo in a manner reminiscent of the medieval carnival and "grotesque realism". Such obscene comedy was hugely popular among music hall audiences, but was denigrated within high-art cultural circles as an "agent of moral and cultural degeneration" (Bailey, 1984: 14). Notable early purveyors of this tradition include Dan Leno and Marie Lloyd, who both regularly threatened the livelihood of music hall operators, their risqué lyrics invoking the wrath of moral and social reform lobbies who called for "fun without filth" (1984:16). However, arguably the most influential 'obscene' comic of music-hall era was "cheeky chappie" Max Miller. Miller was brash, mischievousness and well-known for his risqué 'blue' humour. Indeed, his suggestive double entendres even earned him a ban from the BBC from 1932-1937:

'I was walking along this narrow mountain pass - so narrow that nobody else could pass you, when I saw a beautiful blonde walking towards me. A beautiful blonde with not a stitch on, yes, not a stitch on, lady. Cor blimey, I didn't know whether to toss myself off or block her passage (Miller, 2002).'

The second comic tradition to develop from music-hall was physical comedy. Although strongly influenced by the traditional figure of the clown or fool, physical

comedians of the music hall era, such as George Formby, Gracie Fields and Nellie Wallace, used their physicality in a new, more direct way (Double, 2002). These comedians interacted directly with their audience, creating a rapport similar to contemporary stand-up comedians. Wallace, for example, cultivated a grotesque image as a gawky unglamorous spinster, but further exploited this physicality with humorous movement and exaggerated speech (Double, 2002). Other comedians like Tommy Trinder were known for physical trademarks like a “funny face”, or in the case of 4ft 6in Little Tich, an unusual stature (Rutherford, 1986). One of the other comic trademarks of the music hall era was impersonation. Whether “Lions Comiques” where working class men pretended to be upper class “toffs”, or gender cross-dressing, such impersonation relied upon physical incongruity. The most famous drag queen of the music hall era was Arthur Lucan’s “Old Mother Riley”, a cantankerous Irish washerwoman known for “her facial and bodily contortions, malapropism-filled tirades, and seasoned “knockabout” slapstick” (Dacre, 2006).

As music hall died out in the 1920s and 1930s, it was succeeded by Variety, a more banal and upmarket format for diverse entertainment. Variety launched the careers of many successful British comedians, but like Music Hall was largely considered low brow. Variety also coincided with the growth of the British Cinema industry, and the popularity of many variety comedians extended to a much wider audience through film (Dacre, 2006). Again, the genres of physical and obscene comedy dominated the Variety era with most performers falling into one or both categories. In the obscene tradition, notoriously offensive comedians such as Frank Randle and later Benny Hill enjoyed success, although it was largely physical comedy that transferred best onto film. Performers like Charlie Chaplin and Laurel and Hardy were synonymous with stunts, acrobatics and exaggerated violence - a kind of “socially acceptable masochism” (Stott, 2005) - where comedy was created through clownishly exploiting human movement and pain. Later in the 1950s and 1960s, Norman Wisdom also enjoyed widespread success with a basic physical formula. His character, “The Gump”, was well-known for wearing a suit at least two sizes too small with a crumpled collar and mangled tie. Yet arguably the biggest comic success of the period were the 29 *Carry On* films (1958-1978), which combined both physical and obscene comedy in the form of contrived slapstick and a constant stream of double-entendres.

Wit/Satire

Despite the prevalence of physical and obscene forms of comedy, it should be noted that not all comedy in the 19th and 20th centuries was considered low brow. For instance, comedy continued to constitute an important element of theatre during this time. The important distinction, however, was that the comic prose of playwrights like Shakespeare and Moliere were recoded as “wit” rather than comedy (Palmer, 1994: 56). Indeed, wit, defined by Addison (1979) as “the inventive drawing together of distant ideas for the amusement and intellectual thrill of the listener” (1979: 189), has since played a significant role in the British field of comedy. The emphasis on linguistic inventiveness and intellect propelled the genre into the high-art ‘restricted sub-field’ where it was largely considered the only truly legitimate form of comedy. In 19th century Britain, Oscar Wilde embodied the sophisticated and intellectual image of wit. In plays such as *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde’s characters use wit as a tool for elevating themselves above the sober requirements of the establishment, seeing its use as a “sign of intelligence that equals freedom of conformity” (Stott, 2005). Such a tradition of highbrow and sophisticated humour was continued in the 20th century through the plays and poetry of Noel Coward, TV comedies such as *Hancock’s Half Hour*, Peter Cook’s satirical comedy venue *The Establishment Club*, the performance comedy of several generations of the *Cambridge Footlights* and latterly the work of *Monty Python*.

However, it is important to note two things about this tradition. The first is that within the cultural field wit has arguably been considered less a form of comedy and more a genre of literature, theatre or poetry. Therefore, although in Figure 1 we specifically include it within the British field of comedy, many producers of wit may challenge this. The second point is that, as a genre, wit is synonymous with the British upper class and has thus constituted only a fraction of production in the field of comedy.

Trad Stand-up Comedy

By the 1960s and 1970s Variety was dying out and being usurped by the new medium of Television. Television provided a fantastic vehicle for distributing comedy to a popular audience and many variety performers such as the physical comedy duo Canon and Ball made successful transitions.

In contrast, the obscene comedy of the variety era was replaced by a more autonomous stand-up comedy 'circuit' governed by the Club and Institute Union (CIU). This comedy circuit revolved around working men's clubs and became synonymous with a new genre of comedy known as Traditional or 'Trad' Stand-up. In particular, Trad comedy was known for its distinctly formulaic approach, where comedians rarely had proprietary rights over the comic material they performed and instead bought jokes "in bulk" from the "enormous repertoire" stored by the CIU (Critchley, 2002: 56-60)¹. Jokes tended to be fast-paced and mainly concentrated on simple joke frames such as "one-liners, short-jokes and wise cracks" (Stebbins, 2000: 56). Such a mechanical approach inevitably led to "Trad" stand-up being characterised as "low" and unsophisticated.

However, it was more than just the structure of Trad stand-up which elicited cultural condemnation. The material often had an "aggressive subtext, expressing in particular racist, sexist and homophobic sentiments" (Stott, 2005: 114). The roots of this kind of comedy can arguably be found in the "superiority theory" of humour first articulated by Hobbes (1991) and later by Billig (2005). Here humour and comedy are understood as tools for securing 'insider' identities by systematically humiliating 'outsider' groups. Comedians such as Bernard Manning, Frank Carson and Jim Davidson were synonymous with this genre and during the 1970s were largely successful in introducing 'trad' humour to mainstream TV. A string of supposedly light TV "family sitcoms" such as *Mind Your Language*, *Up The Elephant and Around The Castle* and *Love Thy Neighbour* all possessed bigoted undertones (Cashmore, 2009). One of the most explicit examples, however, was the popular Granada Television series *The Comedians*, which ran

¹ Such an approach is reminiscent of the "Tin Pan Alley" music producers popular in America during the early 20th century

for more than 50 episodes throughout the 1970s. One of Bernard Manning's more infamous jokes from the show epitomises the 'trad' style:

'There was a plane crashed in Madrid about six month ago... two hundred Japanese on that plane, broke my fucking heart... Six empty seats there was' (Manning, 1993).

It is important to note that such bigoted comedy wasn't necessarily introduced by the trad comics. Indeed, racist and sexist undertones can be located throughout the comedy of the music-hall era, especially in stock stereotypes such as 'the Irish' or 'the mother-in-law'. However, the discrimination in music-hall comedy was arguably more implicit than the open intolerance advocated by the trad comics. Medhurst argues

While this kind of comedy can provide a swift, charged and effective route to belonging, what Medhurst calls a "short-cut to community", the way in which this is achieved is often at the expense of those occupying contrasting and challenging identities (Medhurst, 2007: 18). In this sense, Critchley (2002) argues the comedian can be likened to the anthropologist or shaman of our everyday lives, using humour to create a "palpable sense of cultural distinctiveness and often superiority" (2002: 58).

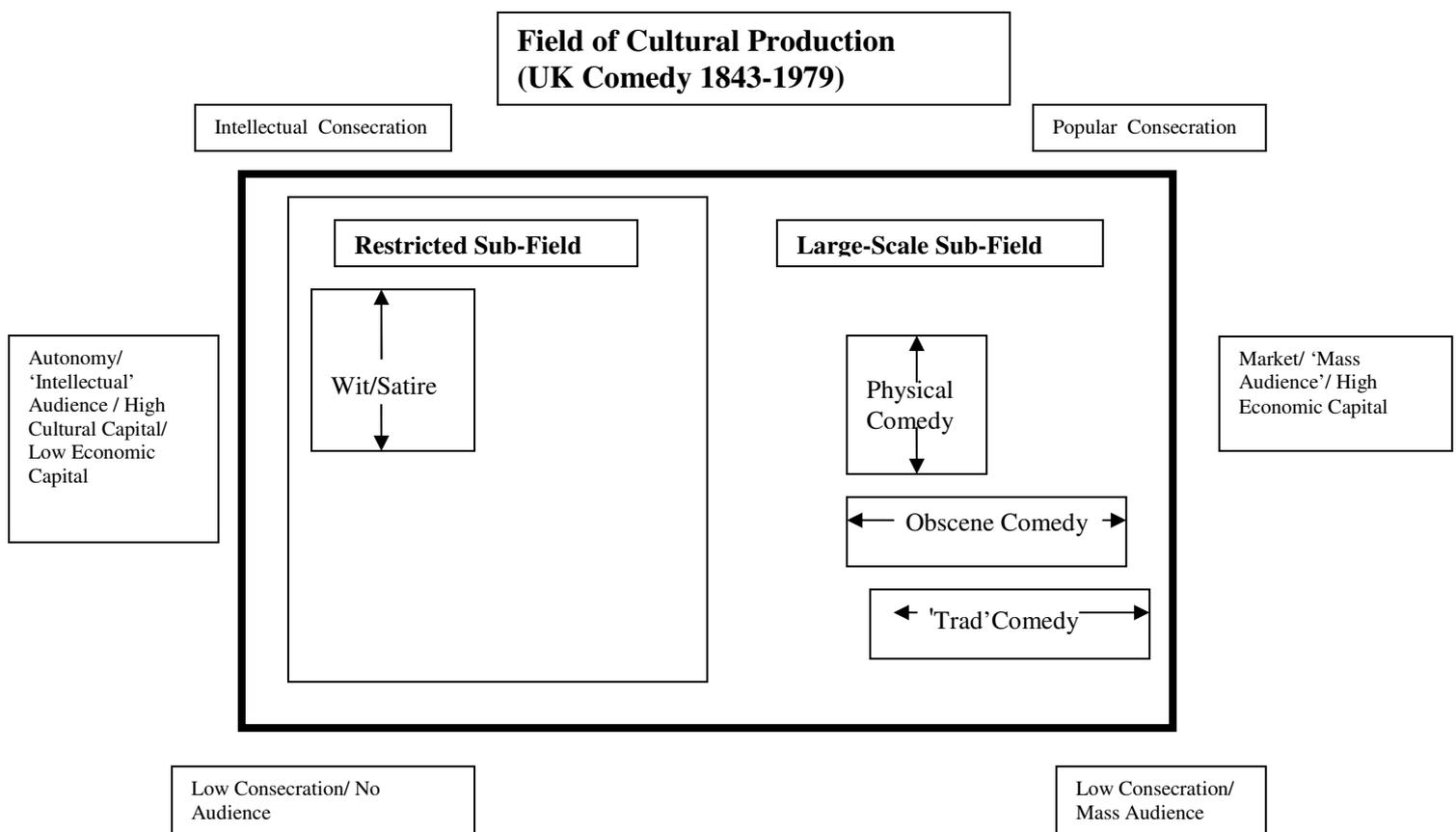


Figure 1: The comic Field 1843-1979 (Adapted from Bourdieu, 1996)

As Figure 1 illustrates, the genres of comedy (except wit) that developed from the Music Hall era onwards can be situated in Bourdieu's sub-field of mass production. Primarily, this is because these forms systematically defied the principles of autonomous art, which with the onset of modernity was fast becoming institutionalised as the dominant logic of the cultural field. There are a number of reasons for this. First, such comedians considered themselves first and foremost entertainers rather than artists. Representing the diametric opposite to "art for art's sake", they unashamedly reached out to mass audiences, sought out economic capital, and rejected Bourgeois notions that art must be "improving". In turn, such market-led action led to their relegation to the inferior position of "entertainment" or "show business" (Regev, 1994).

Such comedians were also widely criticised for the predictable, repetitive and inane nature of their craft. Cultural elites considered their comedy too "easy", too contrived and too obviously recognisable as humour (Kuipers, 2006). A 1909 Home-Office memo summarised the Lord Chamberlain's assessment of music-hall comedy:

'It injures the theatre both financially and artistically, and produces a degraded taste for hurried, frivolous and brainless entertainment' (Public Record Office in Rutherford, 1986).

In the case of physical and obscene comedy, there was also the persistently problematic role of the body. The high-art principle of 'pure' contemplation demands that audiences separate any emotional 'interest' they may have in an art work. Yet in these forms of comedy such detachment was practically impossible. Here comedy deliberately invoked the vulgar body, either through the themes of performance or the laughter of appreciation.

Furthermore, trad, physical and obscene comedy all defied the fundamental principle that true aesthetic contemplation must be uncontaminated by the subjectivities of others (Kant, 1987). Indeed, comedy from the music hall era onwards was noted for a distinct "community of feeling" between audience and performer which was "renegotiated anew" every night via laughter and pleasure (Bailey, 1984: 16). Pure contemplation was further contaminated by the fact that alcohol was a staple of most aesthetic appreciation of comedy.

Finally, these forms of comedy were discredited because they demanded no aesthetic engagement beyond the everyday life and attitudes of the audience. Each focused on the 'interest' people brought to aesthetic experience rather than requiring the kind of critical or 'disinterested' approach demanded by high-art.

Disrupting The Field: The Field of British Comedy 1979-present

The Birth of Alternative Comedy

Between 1979-1982, a dramatic re-evaluation of comedy began to take place in the UK. Frustrated by the casual bigotry of the 'trad' comics and the hackneyed 'light entertainment of TV sitcoms, a new generation of comedians emerged in London around the newly opened Comedy Store. Eager to improve the form and substance of British comedy, the 'alternative comedians' began to redefine the contours of the field. Adopting the ideology of autonomous art, their stand-up pushed beyond the 'low' styles of physical, obscene and 'trad' comedy. Their aim

was to expand the art form and introduce more sophisticated genres deliberately skewed towards the restricted sub field of cultural production (see Fig 2).

However, as mentioned previously, Bourdieu was sceptical of such processes of transformation within pop culture. Indeed, his theoretical model of rigidly separate sub-fields does not allow for the kind of blurring implied by the alternative comedy movement (Rocamora, 2002). Therefore, in order to understand the movement's emergence, it may be useful to look beyond field theory towards Social Network Analysis (SNA). By analysing the key 'nodes' (individuals) and 'ties' (relationships) that make up a socially significant network, SNA arguably offers a more sophisticated approach for understanding how significant 'moments' of change occur in cultural fields (Crossley, 2008).

Drawing upon various authoritative histories to understand the social network of alternative comedy (Wilmot, 1989; Double, 2000; White, 2002; Dugein, 2008; Medhurst, 2007; Thompson, 2004; Stott, 2005;) it is possible to identify 23 key protagonists that shaped this crucial 'moment' in the field. These actors include well-known names such as Alexei Sayle, Rik Mayall, Ade Edmondson, Robbie Coltrane, Dawn French, Jennifer Saunders and Ben Elton (see Appendix for full list). Significantly, these comedians not only performed in similar venues between 1979-1982, they also constituted a dense social network. For instance, it is possible to demonstrate that each actor had at least one significant tie with every other actor, either through friendship, romance or common involvement in a comedy troupe, cabaret, duo or 'Improv' group (see Appendix)². This is significant because, as Crossley (2008) notes:

'Cultural production and contestation requires a pooling of resources and energy which can only occur where actors are connected. Communication and exchange between a critical mass of protagonists is necessary if their actions are to be combined and coordinated constructively, and if ideas, innovations and collective identities are to be disseminated' (p.101).

2. One notable example is Alexei Sayle, arguably the most highly connected actor, who between 1979-1981 was the compere at the Comedy Store, in a comedy duo with Tony Allen, and also a member of *Alternative Cabaret*, *Boom Boom*, *Out Go The Lights*, *The Comic Strip* and *The Young Ones* (Wilmot, 1989; Double, 2000).

Furthermore, by conceiving of Alternative Comedy as a dense and concrete network, one can start to see how it obtained the power to transform the field. Acting together rather than in Bourdieusian struggle, the network of actors functioned as a powerful instrument for the dissemination of new ideas. Furthermore, they also laid the structural foundations - in terms of institutionalising new genres and modes of performance - for subsequent comedians to continue the cultural legitimisation of comedy.

Post-Punk Political and Intellectual Comedy

One of the most significant cultural shifts effected by the alternative comedians was to move political satire to the centre of British comedy. Although this had its antecedents in the 1960s Satire boom (Carpenter, 2000) and the 'Oxbridge' revue tradition (Duguid, 2008), such intellectual 'wits' were arguably not identified as 'comedians' as such. In contrast, Duguid (2008) argues the alternative comedians "were inescapably the products of the early Thatcher government" (2008: 3). Infused with the spirit of Punk, comedians like Jeremy Hardy, Alexei Sayle, Malcolm Hardee, Tony Allen and Ben Elton possessed a radical political awareness rooted in Socialism. Unlike the educated 'wit' of the Pythons, the main concern of these comics was "political life as experienced by their audiences – many of them, young, radical and working class" (Wilmot, 1989: xiv). This often meant a collective political project aimed at raising awareness of rising unemployment, economic recession and social division. For these comedians, the revolutionary idea was that comedy could be not just a banal perpetuator of "false consciousness", but instead a radical mode of communication to galvanise political action and energy (Rosengard, 1989: 9).

As well as political comedy, there was also a deliberately cerebral aspect to much of this new comedy. Audiences were expected not just to listen and laugh, as in the 'trad' era, but to possess the tools to engage with complex ideas and themes. Alexei Sayle epitomised this 'alternative' intellectual style, his ranting and relentless speed of attack demanding a constant intellectual participation ranging from Sartre references to Brechtian theatre (Wilmot, 1989). Such intellectual comedy also demanded a more overtly "disinterested" appreciation. Together,

comedians like Sayle and Keith Allen dared to transgress the normal emotional response expected from comedy and intended not to please but to challenge. This meant material that directly invoked unpleasant emotions such as shock, disgust and sadness (Kuipers, 2006).

Taking A Critical Approach

Although often overtly left-wing, alternative comedians were better defined in terms of what they stood against. In particular, this involved the vilification of the casual bigotry symbolised by the 'trad' comic generation. Alternative comics were acutely aware of the implicit politics of joking and how prejudice in comedy can consolidate ignorance by reinforcing it with laughter (Stott, 2005: 68). Tony Allen, for instance, delighted in using deft parody to reveal the prejudice that was hidden behind much 'trad' comedy.

'Ok, stand-up comedy, I know what you want...there was this drunk homosexual Pakistani squatter trade-unionist takes my mother-in-law to an Irish restaurant...says to the West-Indian waiter, 'Waiter, waiter, there's a racial prejudice in my soup...' (Allen in Wilmut, 1989: 34).

Allen and others were responsible, in particular, for championing a form of distinctly 'critical' observational stand-up that asked audiences to see humour in the weaknesses of their own lives, not others. This was arguably an inversion of the insider-centred approach of the 'trad' comics and often turned the laughter back on the bigotry itself. It mirrored a sentiment first expressed by Eddie Waters, a comedy mentor in Trevor Griffiths play *Comedians* (1979). Griffiths believed strongly in the transformative power of comedy to release people from prejudice. In the play, this is poetically articulated through the character of Waters. He tells his group of would-be comedians:

'Most comics feed prejudice and fear and blinkered vision but the best ones, the best ones...illuminate them, make them clearer to see, easier to deal with' (Griffiths, 1979: 23).

The critical approach to stand-up also represented another way in which alternative comedy borrowed principles from high-art. It asked audiences to participate and engage in comedy, to detach themselves from 'interest' in their own

identities and instead see the logic, truth and humour of self-deprecation. As Cook (2001) notes of alternative comedy, “The best of it hits hard and it hurts, but it’s philanthropic not misanthropic” (2001: 58). However, it wasn’t just the lives of the audience that alternative comedians probed, it was also their own. Critical observational stand-up often demands the comic put him or herself in a deliberately vulnerable position, revealing, through laughter, the perceptions and prejudices of their own life (Stott, 2005: 85). As Ben Elton noted:

‘Irishmen are not stupid and it’s not funny to say they are. Women’s tits are not funny and it’s not funny to say they are. So where did we look, we looked around us, inside ourselves and in what we were doing – that’s where the comedy was’ (Elton in Wilmut, 1989: 55).

Form Over Function

Alternative comedy was also responsible for a significant re-evaluation of the techniques involved in stand-up comedy. In particular, ‘alt’ comedians objected to the restrictive and inauthentic nature of the ‘gag joke-form’, which had become “reactionary and dull” (Stott, 2005: 119). Instead, there was a new emphasis on innovation in the craft of comedy that echoed the ‘form over function’ ideals of high-art. Observational humour usually took the form of long monologues of personal narrative, and the punch-line was either hard to predict or never came (Wilmut, 1989). Many alternative comedians also borrowed from high-art traditions to inform their style. Performers like John Hegley took from poetry when delivering material in his characteristically lyrical manner, whereas the critical approach of Tony Allen knowingly invoked the spirit of Brecht’s ‘Epic Theatre’ (Stott, 2005; Duguid, 2008).

However, arguably the most significant high-art influence on alternative comedy was the tradition of surrealism and absurdism derived from visual art and Theatre of the Absurd. Actors turned comedians such as Keith Allen drew upon their knowledge of the theatre to craft observational monologues that often drifted self-consciously into surreal whimsy (Wilmut, 1989). Similarly, comedians like Rik Mayall and Aide Edmondson deliberately borrowed from the surreal narrative of plays like Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* to construct their early double acts (Duguid, 2008). The notoriously anarchic Malcolm Hardee was also renowned for performing absurdist stunts. For example, during the 1983 Edinburgh Fringe, he

hired a tractor and, entirely naked, drove it over the stage of another performer who was disrupting his act by making too much noise (Stott, 2005).

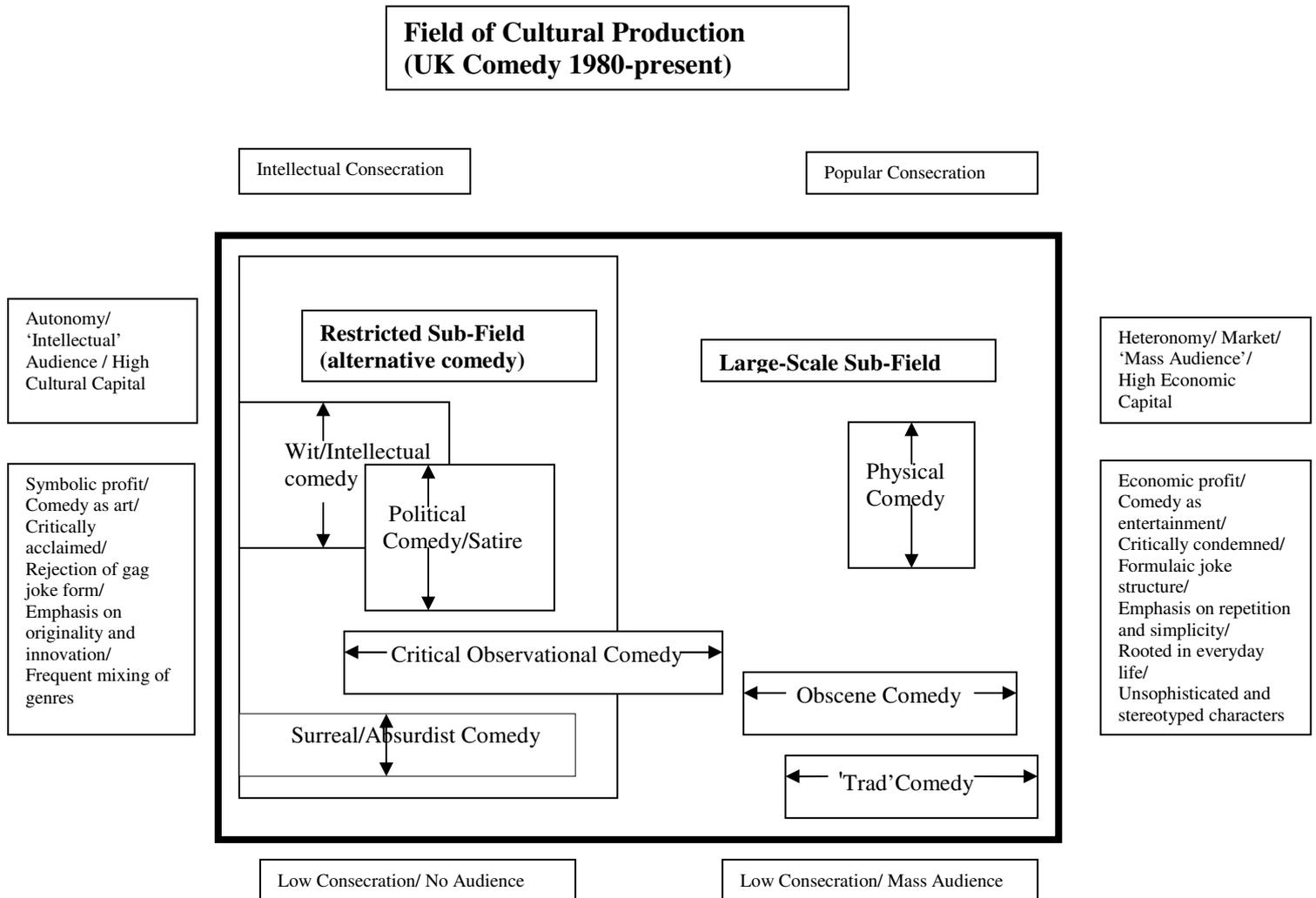


Figure 2: The Comic Field 1980-Present (Adapted from Bourdieu, 1996)

As figure 2 illustrates, the genres of comedy developed via the Alternative Comedy movement can be located in the restricted sub-field. This comedy borrowed heavily from highbrow traditions in other artistic areas to create a specific “comic aesthetic” revolving around originality, formal sophistication and intellectual refinement. It demanded that audiences employ a more critical lens in their consumption of comedy, and with the expansion of British Higher Education in the 1960s and

1970s, a young and newly educated audience emerged with the tools to appreciate this challenging new comedy.

It is important to reiterate that 'serious' comedy did play a role in the field before the advent of alternative comedy, but this was largely through the tradition of 'wit', which traditionally separated itself from discredited comedy. In contrast, alternative comedy represented a much more widespread and significant shift in the production of comedy. In effect, it reflected a growing acceptance of the dominant rules of the cultural field, an affirmation that the new 'alternative' producers of comedy recognised that the ideology of autonomous art "still determines the struggles and defines the prizes in the field of cultural production" (Regev, 1994; 87).

However, although the alternative comedians were certainly synonymous with more sophisticated genres of comedy, it must be noted that alternative acts then and now are rarely defined by one style. Defying Bourdieu's assertion that 'mass' and 'restricted' styles never overlap, many alternative comedians mixed both high-art and low-art genres in the same performance. For instance, comedians such as Rik Mayall and Adrian Edmonson were well-known for incorporating both satire and physical comedy into their double-act, *20th Century Coyote*, whereas many might describe the colourful language used by Alexei Sayle as obscene, despite the often complex nature of his subject-matter.

Conclusion: A Partial Legitimation

By utilising Bourdieu's concept of the Field, this article has sought to identify key historical shifts that have occurred in the production of British comedy. It has proposed that both before and after the field of comedy was established in the 1840s, comedy's rejection of the ideology of autonomous art led to its discredited position in the sub-field of mass cultural production.

However, unlike Bourdieu's analysis, which is sceptical about 'paradigm change' in relations between the sub fields of restricted and mass production, this article charts the recent elevation and emancipation of comedy in the cultural field.

Echoing similar developments in photography, rock, jazz and film, British comedy has expanded beyond Bourdieu's rigid boundaries, spawning new intellectual and critical genres skewed towards the sub-field of restricted production (Regev, 1994). In some ways, this transformation can be understood using a Bourdieusian framework. After all, the main reason for this ascension of comedy is arguably the adoption of the ideology of autonomous art. British comedy has gained legitimacy because it has accepted the "rules of the game", one could argue, and ceded to the structuring force of the 'disinterested' aesthetic that dominates the wider cultural field.

However, while the ideological underpinning of this transformation may be roughly Bourdieusian, the actual process through which it took place is harder to theorise using Bourdieu's conceptual tools. Indeed, it is possible to argue that the deterministic slant of Bourdieu's notions of field and particularly habitus leave little room for explaining processes of change and transformation in culture. For instance, in order to understand the sudden emergence of the Alternative Comedy Movement between 1979 and 1982, Bourdieu offers only the under-theorised notion of "improvisation", in which he stresses that the habitus is an "open system of dispositions" and therefore, subject to experiences, actors may occasionally change the trajectory of their behaviour and position in the field (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 132-134). Yet this is hardly sufficient to explain a significant moment of 'collective improvisation' such as the alternative comedy movement. Instead, it is perhaps necessary to temporarily suspend the competitive metaphor of the field and turn to the more dynamic instrument of Social Network Analysis. SNA focuses on the power of collective agency and explains the transformation initiated by the alternative movement in terms of a diffuse network of actors who worked together rather than against each other. This network of actors pooled their resources through a number of key alliances (via comedy clubs, comedy groups, TV programmes etc) and together were able to transform the entire paradigm of British comic production. In particular, they were able to galvanise new audiences high in cultural capital, who subsequently began the process of legitimising and consecrating comedy.

Although time restrictions prevent me from analysing the British field post-1982 in detail, a number of accounts indicate that the expansion and legitimisation of comedy has continued in the last 25 years (Stott, 2005; Duguid, 2008). One notable example of this is at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, the largest arts festival in the world. Traditionally showcasing only the 'high' performing arts of opera, ballet and theatre, Festival attendance has been synonymous with the upper and middle classes (Shrum, 1996). However, although audiences remain predominantly drawn from the cultural elite, there has been a significant rise in the consumption of comedy among such audiences. Indeed, according to authors such as Double (2005), The Fringe has become the focal point of the entire British comedy industry, an "embodiment" (Rocamora, 2002) of the wider field and a place where comedians can showcase their most provocative and original work (Hall, 2007: 56). While in 1980 there were only 14 comedy shows at the Festivals, this number had risen to 668 by 2008, more than any other art form (White, 2008).

This high-art appropriation provides strong evidence of the growing cultural legitimacy of comedy. There are also other indications. At the Fringe, comedy has now adopted an institutional apparatus of legitimisation and consecration traditionally seen only in high arts. For instance, 200 comedy critics, including representatives from all the Broadsheet newspapers, scrutinise comedy at The Fringe, upholding comedy's "universe of belief" and promoting a specific comic aesthetic (White, 2008). There is also a whole host of awards, most notably the former Perrier Award, that aim to recognise, propel and consecrate British comedians in the cultural field.

However, although comedy has certainly advanced in the cultural field, it is important to note that such legitimacy is still only partial. As this article demonstrates, British comedy has been largely ignored by all disciplines within academia. Furthermore, comedy's artistic status has also been undermined by its lack of acknowledgement within the British Arts Council, where public funding of comedians is unheard of.

Indeed, looking at the specific aesthetics of comedy, it may be the case that comedy will never gain full recognition in the cultural field. Although contemporary comedians often use innovative and original means to play with the 'form' of comedy, they rarely place "form over function" in the sense demanded by autonomous art. Indeed, even at its most political, surreal or intellectual level, alternative stand-up was (and still is) inextricably linked to the 'low' practice of sensual appreciation. Comedy fundamentally seeks to produce laughter, or at least a smile, which is evidence of a subjective and pleasurable response. From a Bourdieusian sense, then, this lack of autonomy and "reliance on immediately accessible aesthetic effects" may forever confine comedy (like photography) to a "Middle-Brow" position in the overall field of culture (Bourdieu, 1993: 125-130).

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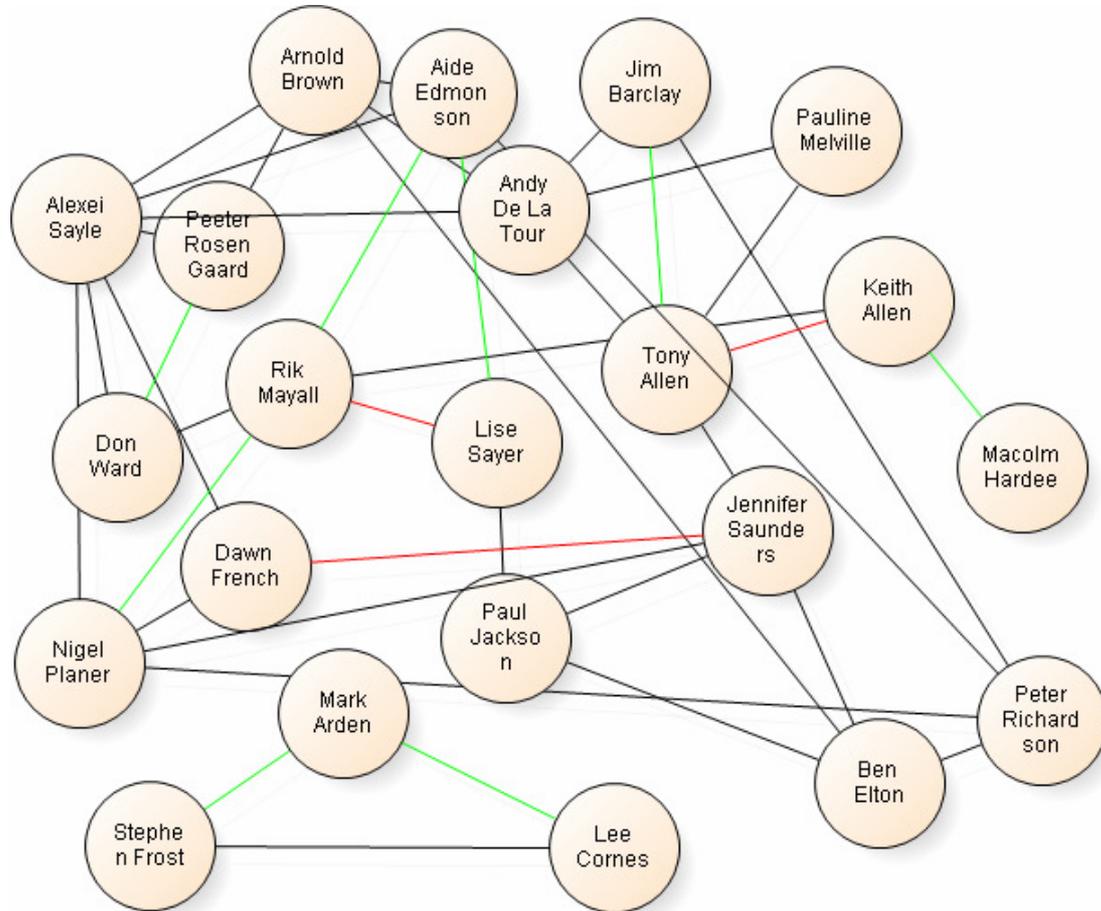
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Appendix

The Social Network of Alternative Comedy 1979-1982



Key

———— = Two actors were involved in a common comedy group (such as a duo, trio, cabaret, troupe or 'improv' group)

———— = Two actors were known to be close friends

———— = Two actors were known to be romantically linked or lived together

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