

## **Editors' Introduction: Foregrounding The Comedy Audience**

Sam Friedman, University of Edinburgh  
Brett Mills, University of East Anglia  
Tom Phillips, University of East Anglia

In January 2011, the scheduling plans of Britain's biggest TV station, BBC1, were leaked to the press. After the recent success of BBC comedies such as *Outnumbered* (2007-) and *My Family* (2000-11), BBC1 Controller Danny Cohen apparently told his team of producers that BBC Comedy was becoming 'too middle class', and failing in its responsibility to appeal to working class viewers (Gammell, 2011; Revoir, 2011; Leith, 2011). Attempting to clarify Cohen's position, a BBC source told *The Daily Telegraph*:

[Danny] feels the BBC has lost its variety and become too focused on formats about comfortable, well-off middle-class families whose lives are perhaps more reflective of BBC staff than viewers in other parts of the UK. One of his priorities is getting more programming that reflects different social classes and what he describes as 'blue collar' comedies. In the past programmes like *Porridge* [1974-7], *Birds of a Feather* [1989-98] and *Bread* [1986-91] were about real working families and the workings of their lives. Danny is conscious there are not programmes like that on BBC1 at the moment and is making it a priority to change that. The key point is to make everyone feel like they are engaged with BBC1. (Pettie, 2011)

Within 24 hours the leak had caused a media storm. Columnists, sitcom writers and comedians all rushed to denounce the comments. Cohen, most argued, was being fundamentally short-sighted, even patronising. But most importantly, he was neglecting the golden rule of comedy – above all *it has to be funny*. It is not about who is being represented in comedy, Vicky Frost argued in *The Guardian*, or indeed what type of people are watching, 'it's about the jokes' (2011). Similarly, Andrew Pettie in *The Daily Telegraph* wrote: 'It is the quality that is important, not the category. The only meaningful yardstick by which a sitcom should be measured is whether it is funny' (2011). Giving an industry perspective, Alan Simpson and Ray Galton, creators of *Steptoe and Son* (BBC1, 1962-74), told *The Daily Mail*,

‘Cohen is missing the point, good comedy is classless. The best comedies are funny - regardless of whether their characters operate at the depths of society or in middle-class comfort’ (2011). Likewise, Jeremy Lloyd, creator of *Are You Being Served?* commented: ‘Laughter crosses boundaries of class and age – humour is universal’ (2011).

As researchers who have spent considerable time trying to understand comedy, we couldn’t help but feel a little bemused by both Cohen’s comments and the ensuing reaction. Certainly, we shared the frustrations of those that felt the BBC1 Controller’s comments were misguided. While we didn’t necessarily support Simpson and Galton’s suggestion that ‘good comedy is classless’, we felt instinctively uncomfortable with Cohen’s presumption that broadcasters can discern the makeup of a comedy audience simply by looking at the people represented within the programme. To us this seemed a simplistic and somewhat reductive assumption, which was also totally unsupported by empirical audience research.

However, although we were perplexed by Cohen’s comments, we were even more troubled by the media and industry response. Rather than challenging Cohen’s shaky association between comic representation and consumption, most instead argued that the BBC1 controller had underestimated the one universal that underpins comedy – funniness. However, to us, this posed an even more fundamental question – funny to whom? How can we definitively discern what is and what isn’t actually funny? And how come everyone writing about comedy was so sure that their idea of funny was shared by everyone else?

Indeed, if there is one thing we have learnt from our combined work on comedy, it is that there is no such thing as ‘universally funny’. Despite what all those criticising Danny Cohen might say, *a piece of comedy is never simply funny or unfunny*. Indeed, as one of us (Friedman, 2011) has recently found, there is a wide variety in what different types of British people find funny, especially when their taste is examined in relation to demographic variables like social class and age. Furthermore, even when people do like the same kinds of comedy, they’re not necessarily laughing at the same things, or with the same levels of enthusiasm. In fact, Friedman’s research found that people from different class backgrounds had strongly divergent *styles of comic appreciation*, with the middle classes often aestheticising ‘crossover’ comedians in a bid to demonstrate their intellectual skill. Another of us (Mills, 2010) has also shown the polysemic nature of comic texts, highlighting in particular how comic meanings and ‘funniness’ are often inflected through the specificities of an individual’s personal experiences.

Such observations about comedy and its vast interpretative diversity acted as the main impetus for undertaking this Special Edition. As researchers who had carried out some investigation into audience responses towards comedy we were acutely aware of the lack of detailed study of this area, and we wanted to invite other scholars to further explore the ways comedy is appropriated, co-opted and reinterpreted by its audiences. Moreover, in

doing so, we didn't want to just make presumptions about what audiences find funny, or assume their reactions based on comic representation. Unfortunately, such approaches are not just confined to the media, they also dominate academic literature on comedy. Indeed, in disciplines as wide as English literature, Cultural Studies, Media Studies, Film and Television Studies and Sociology, there is a long tradition of assuming audience reactions to comedy. In some cases these have echoed Cohen in presuming modalities of consumption from analysis of comic representation (Wagg, 1998: 2; Thomas, 1998: 59; Stott, 2005: 119; Harvey, 1987: 665-78), and in other instances audience interpretation and makeup has been presupposed solely in terms of a comedian's authorial intention (Gray, 2009: 154; Medhurst, 2007: 194-99; Wilmut and Rosengard, 1989: 30-45; Sutton, 2000: 23-32).

It is, perhaps, significant that comedy remains a topic about which it seems to be accepted that it is possible to delineate audience response from the analysis of texts alone. Comedy has often been criticised for its hegemonic tendencies, for it is assumed that it is a form of communication which requires a unified audience response in order for the pleasures it offers to be successful. For example, Andy Medhurst and Lucy Tuck link contemporary television comedy with its theatrical predecessors via their function as a 'collective experience' (1982: 44), with the pleasures of comedy predicated on a communal response reaffirmed by the physical activity of laughter. Similarly, John Limon's analysis of stand-up comedy sees the form as one which can shed light on social norms because 'The audience – by means of its laughter ... - comes together as a community' (2000: 23). Indeed, Limon argues that because stand-up is so dependent on its audience for its meaning that it might be appropriate to suggest that it should be audiences who are criticised for laughing at socially reprehensible humour rather than the comedian who gives them such jokes to laugh at (13). Tellingly, though, while Limon's astute analysis might be seen as an impetus for thinking about the complexities of audience response to comedy, the fact that he's interested in analysing comedy in its social context means that he has to assume a congruence of response in order to be able to say anything meaningful in social terms. Once again, then, the specificities of audience responses are written out of such an analysis.

The absence of such specificities is an issue that has been encountered previously in more general audience studies work. In the introduction to *Participations* 8.1, for example, Martin Barker notes his concern – going back to the 1970s – at the ease of which dominant cultural studies approaches made presumptions about people's (or indeed, 'audience's') reaction to texts based on notions of textual and ideological analysis (2011). In noting the linguistic distinction of audience categorisation, Barker implicitly invokes the movement in media studies from the discussion of 'audience' to that of 'audiences', which has assisted in the emergence of more detailed and specific audience analyses. Shaun Moores believes this distinction is preferable because the plural denotes several groups divided by their reception of different media, or by social/cultural positioning, despite the caveat that he believes the 'conditions and boundaries of audiencehood are inherently unstable' (1993: 2).

Cohen's categorisation of the BBC audience, then, can be understood as an attempt to gain some stability in categorising those comedy viewers. This institutional process has been identified by Ien Ang as classifying audiences as respective taxonomic collectives – discursive constructs encountered through representations that do not accurately reflect a given 'reality' (1991: 35). In taking part in this process, Ang would argue, Cohen depersonalises the audiences in question, in order for a construction of audiencehood to be made that is purged from 'the unpredictable, the capricious, and the erratic that characterizes the social world of actual audiences' (37). Such a distinction appears problematic, particularly in its application to the subjective comic text.

The problem, here, though, is less one of particular institutions or pieces of research deliberately and actively rejecting the notion that audience response to comedy is complex, and more that it remains the case that humour is a woefully under-researched area (particularly considering its prevalence within all societies) and the frameworks that might help define the field are still being thrashed out. If there is a heritage of comedy analysis then it is one which has, on the whole, assumed audience responses can be read from the analysis of the text, and so it is unsurprising that this assumption remains evident today. The rather amorphous field referred to as Humour Studies or Comedy Studies often argues that theories of humour can be divided into three main kinds; a Superiority Theory, an Incongruity Theory, and a Relief Theory. Superiority Theory suggests humour is a result of what Thomas Hobbes calls 'a sudden glory' (2005/1651: 45) whereby jokes assert the laugher's superiority to whomever or whatever is being laughed at; the Incongruity Theory argues we find funny things that are not where they should be and thereby defy our expectations, which Immanuel Kant refers to as 'the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing' (1931/1790: 223); the Relief Theory takes a psychological approach to humour, and sees jokes as allowing us to express repressed ideas and desires, which is why, according to Freud (1991/1905), so much humour is predicated on topics 'civilised' societies commonly repress, such as sex, death and violence.

The first two of these theories consistently make assumptions about audiences, for the Superiority Theory assumes the social hierarchies comedy draws upon are straightforward and understood in the same way by everyone, whereas the Incongruity Theory assumes everyone will respond to incongruities in the same way. While the Relief Theory is an analysis of individual psychologies it remains precisely at the level of the individual, and does not really explore how the individual's response might function within larger groups or change from context to context. While all of these theories have been repeatedly critiqued and explored by many thinkers, they remain the starting point for much analysis of comedy, and it is therefore unsurprising that the specifics of audience response remain sidelined within the study of humour.

That said, it is worth noting that some useful research does exist on comedy audiences. Most of this has focused on how audiences interpret representations of race, class, sexuality and nationhood in comedy. Notably, in the US, Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis (1992) and Aniko Bodroghkozy (1995) have both investigated the way black and white audiences respond to black sitcom characters in programmes such as *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984-92) and *Julia* (NBC, 1968-71), arguing that such readings often demonstrate an unquestioned or assumed racism. Similarly, Marie Gillespie (2003) has looked at the way British-Asian communities carry out 'alternative readings' of many British sitcoms, and Doty (1993) found that gay communities often decode prominent US sitcoms in similarly 'unintended' ways.

Other research has highlighted the limited power of authorial intention in understanding comic consumption. Sue Turnbull (2008), for example, has noted the way Australian comedy is interpreted in different national and international contexts. Although Australian comic characters such as Dame Edna and Kath and Kim may be intended to satirise the provincialism of Australian suburbia, Turnbull argues that some audiences do not read them as ironic and instead interpret them as celebrating Australian suburban life. Similarly, studying the intentionality of notable anti-racist comedians, Simon Weaver has cautioned that such 'resistance meaning is never automatically successful' (2010: 44). Using examples from British comedians Lenny Henry and Reginald D Hunter, Weaver argues that anti-racist humour is complex and multilayered but also, crucially, ambiguous, meaning the rhetorical potential can sometimes act to support rather than challenge racial stereotypes. In Britain, such interpretative diversity was also famously observed in relation to Alf Garnett, the central character in *Till Death Us Do Part* (BBC1, 1965-75). Although writer Johnny Speight intended to Alf Garnett as a parody of the baseless bigotry that existed among some sections of the British population in the 1960s, some audiences interpreted the character as celebrating racism (Husband, 1988)

From a different perspective, Giseline Kuipers (2006) has worked extensively on the notion of comedy *taste*. Her work focuses on how comic preferences act as a strong marker of social class, age and educational level in the Netherlands. In particular, her findings examine how the well-educated draw strong symbolic boundaries between what they consider to be their more 'highbrow' appreciation of comedy and the 'lowbrow' appreciation of those with less education. Such findings have also recently been corroborated in a Belgian context through the similar findings of Nathalie Claessens and Alexander Dhoest (2010).

Yet despite these valuable works the fact remains that the vast majority of existing comedy literature has tended – either explicitly or implicitly – to make speculative and unsupported assumptions about comedy audiences. And while such conjecture may well be reasoned and thoughtful, the problem is that it can only ever provide a hypothetical understanding of how audiences interact with comedy. Thus this Special Edition aims to explicitly redress this balance in the literature. We take issue not with individual authors, but instead with the

general textually-inclined mode of address that seems to dominate comedy scholarship. While there may be common denominators in the reception of comedy, we echo a multitude of high-profile literature in highlighting the diverse ways audiences interpret cultural texts (Morley, 1980; Ang, 1985) and thus argue that comedy scholars should be wary of literature that makes claims about funniness or universal humour.

With this point in mind, we bring together here a range of papers with the common aim of *foregrounding the comedy audience*. While each has a different empirical focus, they all share a common interest in explicitly examining what *kind* of comedy different people like and how they *read* and *make sense* of it.

## References

- Ang, Ien, *Watching Dallas*, London, Routledge, 1985.
- Barker, Martin (2011) 'Editorial' [WWW document] URL  
<http://www.participations.org/Volume%208/Issue%201/introduction.htm> [visited 1 June 2011]
- Bodroghkozy, Aniko "'Is this What you Mean by Color TV?": Race, Gender, and Contested Meanings in NBC's *Julia*', in Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez (eds), *Gender, Race and Class in the Media: A Text Reader*, Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1995, pp. 413-23.
- Claessens, Nathalie and Alexander Dhoest (2010) 'Comedy Taste: Highbrow/Lowbrow Comedy and Cultural Capital' [WWW document] URL  
<http://www.participations.org/Volume%207/Issue%201/claessens.htm> [visited 1 June 2011]
- Doty, Alexander, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- Freud, Sigmund, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, London: Penguin, 1991/1906.
- Friedman, Sam, 'The Cultural Currency of a "Good" Sense of Humour: British Comedy and New Forms of Distinction' *British Journal of Sociology*, 62, 2011, pp. 347-70.
- Frost, Vicky (2011) 'TV Comedy: Is it Really a Class Issue?' [WWW document] URL  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2011/jan/24/tv-comedy-class-miranda-hart> [visited 1 June 2011]
- Gammell, Caroline (2011) 'BBC to Introduce More Working Class Comedy' [WWW document] URL  
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/8277022/BBC-to-introduce-more-working-class-comedy.html> [visited 1 June 2011]
- Gillespie, Marie, 'From Comic Asians to Asian Comics: *Goodness Gracious Me*, TV Comedy and Ethnicity' in Michael Scriven and Emily Roberts (eds) *Group Identities on French and British Television*, Oxford: Bergham, 2003, pp. 93-108.
- Gray, Frances 'Privacy, Embarrassment and Social Power: British Sitcom' in Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering (eds) *Beyond A Joke: The Limits of Humour*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pp. 146-61.
- Harvey, James, (1987) *Romantic Comedy in Hollywood from Lubitsch to Sturges*, New York: Knopfler, 1987.
- Hobbes, Thomas, *Leviathan, parts I and II*, Peterborough, Plymouth and Sydney: Broadview Press, 2005/1651.

- Husband, Chris, 'Racist Humour and Racist Ideology in British Television, or I Laughed till you Cried' in Chris Powell and G.E.C. Paton (eds) *Humour In Society: Resistance and Control*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988, pp. 149-78.
- Jhally, Sut and Justin Lewis, *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences and The Myth of the American Dream*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1992.
- Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Judgement*, London: Macmillan, 1931/1790.
- Kuipers, Giseline, *Good Humor, Bad Taste: A Sociology of the Joke*, New York, Mouton De Gruyter, 2006.
- Leith, Sam (2011) 'Whatever Happened to the Working-Class Sitcom?' [WWW document] URL <http://www.guardian.co.uk/tv-and-radio/2011/jan/24/working-class-sitcoms> [visited 1 June 2011]
- Limon, John, *Stand-Up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*, London: Duke University Press, 2000.
- Lloyd, Jeremy (2011) 'Blue Collar Comedy? How Patronising, Foolish and Old-Fashioned' [WWW document] <http://mailonline.newspaperdirect.com/epaper/viewer.aspx?issue=1054201101230000000001001&page=27&article=1a504a3a-e6c9-400e-b73d-fde7c07f55a8&key=iGVCnYMPfTz8afGsSBQC8g==&feed=rss> [visited 1 June 2011]
- Medhurst, Andy, *A National Joke: Popular Comedy and English Cultural Identities*, London, Routledge, 2007.
- Medhurst, Andy and Lucy Tuck, 'The Gender Game', in Jim Cook (ed), *BFI Dossier 17: Television Sitcom*, London: British Film Institute, 1982, pp. 43-55.
- Mills, Brett, "'I'm Anti-Little Britain, and I'm Worried I Might Start Laughing": Audience Responses to Little Britain' in Sharon Lockyer (ed) *Reading Little Britain: Comedy Matters on Contemporary Television*, I.B Taurus: London, 2010.
- Moore, Shaun, *Interpreting Audiences*, London: Sage, 1993.
- Morley, David, *The Nationwide Audience: Structure and Decoding*, London: BFI, 1980
- Pettie, Andrew (2011) 'It takes Talent to Put the 'Com' into Sitcoms' [WWW document] URL <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/8280391/it-takes-talent-to-put-the-com-into-sitcoms.html> [visited 1 June 2011]
- Revoir, Paul (2011) 'Let's Curb the Middle Class Sitcoms says BBC's new Boss' [WWW document] URL <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-1349946/BBC-boss-Danny-Cohen-Lets-curb-middle-class-sitcoms.html> [visited 1 June 2011]
- Simpson, Alan. and Ray Galton (2011) 'Steptoe, Rigsby, Margo: Forget Class, it's the Laughs that Count in Comedy' [WWW document] URL <http://mailonline.newspaperdirect.com/epaper/viewer.aspx?issue=1048201101260000000001001&page=22&article=10bccaaaf-a852-4547-ba10-528ebcc992a8&key=TdFbSEGtIjpp76XVhfobg==&feed=rss> [visited 1 June 2011]
- Stott, Andrew, *Comedy*, London: Routledge, 2005.
- Sutton, David, *A Chorus of Raspberries: British Film Comedy 1929-1939*, Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000.
- Thomas, Deborah, 'Murphy's Romance: Romantic Love and The Everyday' in Peter William Evans and Celestino Deleyto (eds) *Terms of Endearment : Hollywood Romantic Comedy of the 1980s and 1990s*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998, pp. 57-74.

- Turnbull, Sue, 'Mapping the Vast Australian Suburban Tundra: Australian Comedy from Dame Edna to *Kath and Kim*' *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 11, 2008, pp. 15-32.
- Wagg, Stephen, 'At Ease Corporal: Social Class and The Situation Comedy in British Television, From the 1950s to the 1990s', in Stephen Wagg (ed), *Because I Tell a Joke or Two: Comedy, Politics and Social Difference*, London and New York: Routledge, 1998, pp. 1-31.
- Weaver, Simon, 'The 'Other' Laughs Back: Humour and Resistance in Anti-Racist Comedy', *Sociology* 44, 2010, pp. 31-48.
- Wilmut, Roger and Peter Rosengard, *Didn't You Kill My Mother In-Law?: The Story of Alternative Comedy in Britain*. London: Methuen, 1989.