

Bits and Bumps: gender, comedy and the body.

Abstract

This paper examines some of the ways in which gender impacts upon contemporary physical comedy. According to the late Christopher Hitchens (2007, 2), women are too concerned with the seriousness of their reproductive responsibility to make good comedy; as slapstick film director Mack Sennett (in Dale, 2000, 92) maintained: “No joke about a mother ever got a laugh”. This article proposes a method of understanding what happens to the body in the comic moment, then draws upon Kristeva’s notion of abjection to help understand how gender inflects the creation of physical comedy.

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Introduction

Although it could be argued that the scholarship of comedy is primarily concerned with how it manifests in literature, the primacy of the body to this form is undeniable. For modern scholars, the figure of Mikhail Bakhtin and his notion of Carnival in this body-centred understanding of comedy (1965) has become a ubiquitous launching point for inquiry, so much so that Mary Russo coined the phrase the “carnival of theory” (1994, 54) to describe the concatenating streams of thought reflecting, refracting, emanating, building upon and consciously diverging from this uber-influential fountainhead (see Davis 1965; Kristeva 1980; Eco 1984, Stallybrass and White 1986 amongst others). However, it is rare for commentators of the comic to move from the realms of theory to a more specific examination of what the body actually does in the comic moment. In this article, I will firstly propose a system of framing and understanding the comic body and then give a brief analysis of some of the ways in which gender inflects the performance of physical comedy.

Comedy and the body

Most scholarly interest in physical comedy is focussed upon practice in the so-called “Golden Age”: slapstick film culture in the early 20th century, and the work of specific performer/writer/directors in this period. In his influential essay, “Comedy’s Greatest Era”, James Agee (1949) details the most effective “gags” of the silent comedy masters: Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, Harry Langdon and Buster Keaton. He identifies how films were created using an established collection of stock routines, “fine clichés from the language of silent comedy” (Agee 1949, 3), but that what distinguished the “masters” was the idiosyncratic inflection they applied to the stock gags.

Following Agee, other scholars (Crafton 1995; Carroll 1991; 2007) of this era produce taxonomies of routines, including Alan Dale (2000), for whom physical comedy

is a fundamental, universal, and eternal response to the fact that life is physical. Of the two components, body and soul, we have empirical proof of the first alone. It’s the body that we can see interacting with physical forces, and objects, and our intense exasperation that this interaction doesn’t run smoother [...] stimulates the urge to tell a story in a slapstick mode. (Dale 2000, 11)

Dale frames slapstick as a ritual form whose purpose is to come to terms with embodiment, operating in contrast to other body-taming rituals, such as Christianity (indeed all major religions take a prohibitive approach to bodily urges), and pagan Olympianism which aims to celebrate what physicality can achieve. Slapstick acknowledges, celebrates and ritualistically (cathartically) foregrounds the limitations of our physicality and in so doing, reconciles us to it (Dale 2000, 14). Clearly, in this conception, slapstick acts are not transgressive – as will be discussed further below – , but are rather enablers for the construction of a certain kind of bodied subjectivity.

On the landscape of contemporary physical comedy, the figures of Jacques Lecoq and his erstwhile pupil Philippe Gaulier cast long shadows of influence. Their practice in physical comedy is popularly condensed under the single term “clown”. For Lecoq, the clown is a physical embodiment of Hobbes’ (1651) “sudden glory”: “The clown is the person who flops, who messes up his turn, and, by so doing, gives his audience a sense of superiority” (Lecoq 1997, 156). Gaulier’s clown is in a perpetual state of bewilderment regarding the vicissitudes of life in the physical world (2000; in Wright 2006).

Registers of physical comedy

The various bodily strategies that are regularly employed by physical comedians can be clustered around five broadly recognisable “registers” of the body, to borrow a term from Foucault (1977, 136). While Michel Foucault identifies a useful body and an intelligible body, I propose that in comic performance we can recognise a grotesque body, a disguised body, a body-as-machine, a body relative to inanimate objects and a body deployed in the social world. Naturally in a single routine or a longer performance work, these registers overlap and are not mutually exclusive, but rather are connected systems or frames of physicality that help to define what happens to the body in the comic moment. The use of male-gendered pronouns throughout this analysis is deliberate, and this gender bias presages the second part of the article.

The grotesque body

Here the term grotesque is used in the Bahktinian (1968) sense, where the elements of the so called lower bodily stratum are foregrounded. This register finds humour in the ineluctable urges of that stratum - the hungry stomach, the lusty genitals and the needing-to-be-voided bowel and bladder. Performance in this mode showcases the “uncivilised” body’s struggle with

discipline of social conditioning (Foucault 1977), hence the use of nudity and bodily functions:

It is an image of impure corporeal bulk with its orifices (mouth, flared nostrils, anus) yawning wide and its lower regions (belly, legs, feet, buttocks and genitals) given priority over its upper regions (head, ‘spirit’, reason). (Stallybrass and White 1986, 9)

The “flared nostrils” of anger symbolise the use of comic violence, a key tool in early vaudeville and slapstick cinema. Comic duo Weber and Fields, working during this period, produced an analysis of physical comedy that emphasised the importance of violence in eliciting laughter (in Glenn 2000; Jenkins 1992). Comic violence must occur to another body – Keaton ruefully acknowledged that “an audience will laugh at things happening to you, and they certainly wouldn’t laugh if it happened to them” (in Feinstein 2007, 135) - and it must be without real consequences ; the bodies must recover almost immediately.

Characters of the commedia dell’arte frequently operate in the grotesque register, as we see Punchinello led by his stomach, or El Capitano by his groin into comic scenarios. It is in the use of the grotesque and disguised bodies that contemporary physical comedians most recognisably embody the tradition of the ancient fool, or clown who “resist[ed] the civilising process, celebrating social transgression, fluid identity and bodily pleasure” (Karnick and Jenkins 1994, 156).

The disguised body

Closely related to the grotesque body, this register situates the body in parodic mode which amuses us, says John Wright (2006, 260), when the physical imitation calls to mind but does not perfectly mimic, the target, making it somehow deformed, a less perfect copy of the original. Through a combination of costume – in carnivalesque mode, this was often mask - and bodily distortion, the body is presented as other – larger or smaller, stronger or weaker, fatter or thinner - than “life”. The politics of this register can be confronting, as historically the grotesque parody was performed by those with actual physical and mental disabilities, the bouffon or buffoons as Philippe Gaulier (2000) and Wright (2006) term them respectively, who were traditionally granted one day in the carnival to parody their quotidian masters before returning to their “rightful” place as despised outcasts of society.

Both the grotesque and the disguised body stage a functional transgression of taboo, where the “ribald humour[...] functions as a therapy for key collective

and individual anxieties including castration anxiety, fear of impotence and so on” (Cheesmond 2007, 11). Cross-dressing exemplifies the parodic and paradoxical performance of this fear, as Butler tersely reminds us: “the sight of a transvestite onstage can compel pleasure and applause while the sight of the same transvestite on the seat next to us on the bus can compel fear, rage, even violence” (1990, 278). Thus, it is important that the comic fiction is clear, that the “mask” is acknowledged – Dame Edna Everage’s contralto voice hints at a “masculine” break and Auntie Jack’s hairy legs peep out from under “her” skirts.

The body as machine

Physical comedy, maintains Henri Bergson (1900, 3), is most potent when the body is least human, that is, when it can be imbued with the rigidity of a machine, forsaking the fluidity of the “natural” body and maintaining its trajectory with mechanic observance when impeded, say, by a slippery banana peel. This is the comedy that transpires when the body, for a brief moment, loses the sentience needed to negotiate life’s obstacles. Like an electric toy car whirling its wheels impotently after banging into the wall, the physical comedian as machine cannot appropriately adjust the pattern of his behaviour when the circumstances change. Wright (2006) describes how he and his students attempted to embody this register in the most literal sense – approaching a banana skin and slipping whilst maintaining complete mechanical rigidity - and the results substantiated Bergson’s claim: the more rigid their bodies under duress, the bigger the laugh. This comic register can also operate at a gestural level, when the comedian takes the most difficult, or least efficient route from point A to point B – turning his whole body, rather than his head, or tracing a huge arc with a soup spoon or wine glass causing “a rupture in the expected link between physical effort and result” (Dale 2000, 4).

The body in relation to inanimate objects

Dale (2000, 10) highlights the “bewilderment and exasperation” the hero experiences when dealing with the seeming perversity of inanimate objects. Perverse, because the objects introduce a complication that must be dealt with so that the narrative can continue. Seeming, because we as audience are smugly aware that, despite the anthropomorphic vicious agenda that the (hilariously) enraged hero ascribes to the banana skin, or heavy piano, or sticky glue, that the thing is just that - a thing - and that we, the sentient beings are actually in control. In this way, humans can assert their animate physical superiority by playing with moments when the tables are (sometimes literally) turned. Noel Carroll (2007, 6) links this register with

the former - “body as machine” - via Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) concept of bodied intentionality, using Buster Keaton’s 1926 film *The General* as an exemplar where the comedian

underscores bodily intelligence as a human norm by subtracting it from those situations where his character fares badly in his attempts to influence the physical world and by superadding it on those occasions where the character has the material world do his bidding. (Carroll 2007, 6)

When the material world does is at the comedian’s bidding, objects can inspire as well as infuriate, as demonstrated by Jerry Lewis’ interactions with a baton or an office chair *The Bellboy* (1960), *The Errand Boy* (1961)); they have a magnetic quality that inexorably draws the body to them in order to showcase chaotic virtuosity and/or virtuosic chaos. Objects can also be used in what Carroll (1991) describes as “mimed metaphors” and/ or “object analogs”, where the object is either used so that it is metaphorically equated with another object or simply repurposed for comic effect.

The body in the social world

Karnick and Jenkins make the distinction between “clown” and “comedian” physical comedy, where the clown exists, in a sense, outside of society in their own world, whilst the comedian makes “mistakes and mishaps arising from efforts to conform to social roles” (1995, 156). This register is best exemplified by the glorious oeuvre of Rowan Atkinson, in particular the hapless Mr Bean. Wright (2001) structures an exercise to teach the use of this register entitled “The Clown in the Real World”. In the prototype exercise, the clown has an important job interview but has no idea what to do. His friend (also a clown) assures him that he knows, and will hide himself in the interview room, out of sight of the employer, but so that his hapless friend can see him and copy his movements, since successful interviews are all about “the right body language”. Here the focal point for the laughter is the juxtaposition of the absurd (since without a context) physical turns of the clown with the socially coded and “normal” behaviour of the potential employer. It is significant that the scene is funnier when the “straight” performer tries to normalise the clown’s behaviour whilst attempting to disguise their own dismay at the situation– we see shock in their eyes, but they do not laugh, treating the clown’s antics as a form of (embarrassing) disability.

Challenges of gender

Many theories of comedy fail to fully investigate the implications of gender when seeking to provoke Hobbes' "sudden glory" of laughter. Kathleen Rowe's critique of Northrop Frye in this regard is applicable to many commentators who "seek a common ground of shared desire, rather than to investigate the divisions which make such common ground difficult, if not impossible to achieve" (1995, 48). As with so many fields of human endeavour and their concomitant fields of scholarship, the presumption of a non-gendered discourse is a fallacy; as Regina Barreca (1998, 10) baldly asserts, "the history of comedy has in fact been the history of male comedy." Comedy's historic binaries can both be seen to exclude the female: she is not serious enough to joke at the life-and-death issues and not enough of a social threat to need the "pressure-valve" of anarchic release. To understand how gender inflects the creation of, specifically, physical comedy, I propose three frames of reference, or challenges: the neutral fallacy, the heavy body and the ideological clash.

Challenge # 1: the neutral fallacy

This challenge can be illustrated by one of the most basic units of physical comedy: the banana-peel slip. Laughter is generated when the rhythm of the hero's journey is ruptured by the slippery banana skin, but it is louder when the hero has more to lose by the slip – a pompous businessman elicits more humour than a young boy. As Dale (2000, 3) explains; "the essence of a slapstick gag is a physical assault on, or collapse of, the hero's dignity; as a corollary, the loss of dignity by itself can result in our identifying with the victim." However, this hypothesis presumes that "dignity" can be located and fixed outside of gender, which feminist theory contests (de Beauvoir 1953; Cixous 1976 amongst many others). When the hero is gendered as female, her dignity is not only of a lesser order but it is fundamentally differently constructed; she is "that which is other – than the established norm" (Braidotti 1997, 64).

Whether women can perform physical comedy at all, let alone as effectively as men, has been a debatable point - as Kristen Wagner (2011, 37) points out in relation to early slapstick cinema, comedy's inherent aggression was at odds with the prevailing ideal of passive, nurturing femininity. Alan Dale's analysis of this period (as cited earlier) is revealingly titled "Comedy is a Man in Trouble" (2000). The important figures in his audit are all male: Buster Keaton, the Keystone Cops, Harold Lloyd, writer/ director Preston Sturges, and of course, Charlie Chaplin. The comic potential of the feminine was directly prescribed by her reproductive capabilities; mothers were

completely off limits as were young heroines - putative mothers of the hero's children - but old maids could be subjected to "anything this side of torture and [still] get a laugh" (Sennett in Dale 2000, 92).

What is strange is that for female characters, physical comedy itself is seen as a form of impurity, as if pratfalls, even though at the level of character and story they are clearly unintentional, imply that the heroine is altogether too physically available. In addition, it is apparent that men don't like to laugh at women, certainly not the women they are attracted to. (Dale 2000, 101)

It is easy to dismiss such analysis as referring to a less "enlightened" age, however the intransigence of this perspective is exemplified in a now (in)famous article featured in *Vanity Fair* magazine, where the late Christopher Hitchens provocatively analysed "Why women aren't funny" (2007). His answer is predicated on the putative seriousness of women's reproductive responsibilities: "for women the question of funniness is essentially a secondary one. They are innately aware of a higher calling that is no laughing matter" (2007, 2). When you are caring for a baby, you simply do not have time to be funny. For Hitchens, the body of "woman" could only be read as the essentially un-funny, life and death-dealing "womb". This inscription and reading of the female body directs our discussion to the second "challenge" – the heavy body.

Challenge #2: the heavy body

As the "registers" of comedy demonstrate, many of the strategies employed for physical humour temporarily subvert the systems of power/control that operate on the body, to extrapolate from Foucault's (1977) analysis. However these systems of power are gendered, as Simone de Beauvoir aphoristically (but no less powerfully) tells us: "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (1949, 295). Applying Julia Kristeva's (1982) concept of abjection provides an effective framework for understanding what I term the "heavy" – ie. densely and negatively coded – female body. For Kristeva, abjection signifies the subject's struggle to come to terms with physical embodiment and manifests in revulsion of bodily excretia, of corpses, of blood. The abject permeates borders that divide binary opposites, and is therefore capable of inciting horror, as in this description of the living being's encounter with the lifeless corpse:

in that thing that no longer matches and therefore no longer signifies anything, I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders ... It is not the lack of cleanliness or health that causes

abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. (Kristeva 1982, 4)

Analysis of James Joyce's rhetorical landscapes further crystallises how the

feminine body, the maternal body, in its most un-signifiable, unsymbolizable aspect, shores up, in the individual, the fantasy of the loss in which he is engulfed or becomes inebriated, for want of the ability to name an object of desire. (1982, 20)

The connection here between the corpse and the maternal/feminine body is their inability to be signified, to be "matched", they become an "other" without a name, which subjective experience confronts when it does not stop at the appearance of its identity" (Kristeva 1982, 59). What, in this paradigm, are the implications for the female comic performer? Firstly, if the female body is ascribed/ positioned as "abject", that is, between borders, liminal, unfixed, then how can it be signified in any genre? In this sense the female body jostles with, rather than submits to Aristolean mimesis. Of course, this dilemma was for centuries resolved, in part, by theatrical transvestism that saw the feminine constructed as a mask (both literal and figurative) worn over a "real" male body (Ferris 1998, 166).

Secondly, amongst the specifics of physical comedy is the notion of recognition; for us to appreciate the twist that makes us "reinterpret all previous facts" (Ramachandran in Wright 2006, 6), we must be safe in our knowledge of those facts, in our impregnable subject/ object relationship which abjection disrupts. Dale (2000, 3) puts it simply: "Comedies have to stay close to life in some respects to get at what makes us anxious and convert it to laughter". It is this foundational imperative, staying "close to life", which becomes problematic when the female body is represented in the comic mode.

Human defilement - excrement and menstrual blood - is the abject in material form, around which taboo ("what makes us anxious") and its symbolic counter-part, ritual are constructed, and for Kristeva, both "stem from the maternal and/or the feminine, of which the maternal is the real support" (1982, 71). She evidences this point by noting that the initial proscription of excremental freedom, that is, the actual/ corporeal (not symbolic) ordering of clean/ unclean bodily sites and functions, is a maternal one (1982, 71-2). However, whilst these taboos might well emanate from the same source, their powers of generating horror vary widely. John Limon (2000) and Rachel Lee (2004) utilise the notion of the abject to understand the apparent

transgression inherent in stand-up comedy. In this form of comic performance the abject is redeployed from despised limen-dweller to star performer, and this is true, to an extent, of physical comedy, particularly when it is operating in the "grotesque" register. Bare bottoms, flatulence, diarrhoea and constipation have all been grist to the comic mill in varying degrees, but the slapstick hero/clown never gets accidentally splattered in menstrual blood. It seems there are some horrors too powerful to be converted to laughter.

Does it follow, then, that Hitchens (2007) is correct in his analysis? Are the womb and all its apparent appurtenances of blood and pain essentially unfunny? When performance artist Carolee Schneemann slowly pulled a scroll from her vagina the project was political, transformative, religious or titillating, depending on your frame of reference (Ashby 2000, 42; Fortier 1990, 46; Schneider 1997, 36) but no one suggested it might be funny. In contrast, Schneemann's male contemporaries were able to foreground their own phalluses with a sense of joy (Schneider 1997, 40). This problematic positioning leads us to the final "challenge" of gender: the ideological clash.

Challenge # 3: the ideological clash

This challenge can be understood through what Judith Wilt (1980, 173) has described as the "collision between comedy and feminism". The contours of this collision are illustrated by the marked division along gender lines around the question of whether comedy is inherently conservative or subversive. In the conservative (male-authored) model of comedy, the superstructure that enforces the subjugation of the many by the few is understood to be impregnable, whilst the seeming anarchy of carnival provokes transgressions from the status quo that are manageable and contained (Karnick and Jenkins 1995, 267). Frye (1957) most notably emphasised comedy's function in providing a temporary retreat to another dimension with an inevitable return to a community made whole again. In psychoanalytical terms, Sigmund Freud (1928) conceives humour as liberating, but momentarily so, functioning as an "outlet for aggressive tendencies" (3) that preserves normal psycho-social behaviours. For these critics, comedy depends for its existence on the continuing context of "normalcy", without which, there can be no deviancy.

Feminist analysis of comedy paints a different picture, particularly as it is, not surprisingly, focussed on comedy created by women. In this conception, laughter becomes a weapon. As Gail Finney posits,

It has been frequently argued by theorists of women's comedy that men, as those traditionally in power, use humor to vent dissatisfaction but ultimately to preserve things as they are, whereas women use humor to shake things up. (Finney 1994, 9)

Female-authored comedy is underscored with the rage of the oppressed; its aim is to critique the system from an acknowledged outsider position, as Barreca (1988, 6), when introducing and summarising essays on women's humour concludes.

It would appear from these studies that women who create comedy do so in order to intrude, disturb and disrupt; that comedy constructed by women is linked to aggression and to the need to break free of socially and culturally imposed restraints. Anger and comedy are present as interlocking forces in many women's texts.

Mary Russo, in her comprehensive analysis of the female grotesque, sees this carnivalesque and thus comic figure as a liberating force: "the very structure for rethinking the grand abstraction of "liberation" for women" (Russo 1994, 13).

When scholarship moves from literature to female comic performance, purposeful transgression is still the focal theme, especially as regards content (Hubbell 2002; Lavin 1997; Rowe 1994; Starcevich 2001) - studies that are primarily concerned with stand-up comic performance. Perhaps most relevant for this discussion of physical comedy is Wagner's (2011, 35) investigation of women in early slapstick cinema, where she argues that female comedians of this era were using their fictitious comic roles to change expectations of "real life" social roles for women:

In many ways, comedy is an ideal genre for women to push boundaries and challenge traditional gender roles, as the genre has long been used as a means of masking transgression and of rendering acceptable a wide range of behaviours.

Russo (1994, 73) reviews Bahtkin's analysis of the grotesque female comic body and asks, provocatively, "Why are these old hags laughing?" Here, she is calling for a new understanding of the liberating power of carnivalesque laughter, "dialogical laughter[...] with a new social subjectivity". In a similar fashion Lee (2004, 124-5) refers to the "heroic pedagogy" of Margaret Cho's stand-up comedy performance as it foregrounds the unruly, uncontainable "leaky" borders that separate (or not, as the case may be) races, bodies and

genders. This heroism is apparently staged on behalf of the oppressed others – Cho is the vanguard for a new, less-sexist (and racist) world.

When Russo points to the hags' laughter as an exemplar of powerful comedy, she has, I contend, missed the point. Comedy is not about laughing, but about making someone else laugh. Social laughter, wit and group-based humour are not the same as purposeful, formalised comedy. One of Gaulier's (2000) most memorable injunctions to the clown-in-training was that s/he not "steal the laugh from the audience" by laughing on stage. Feminist claims for comedy's agency in doing something, in creating social change, actually inhibits female comic performance because weighs it down with a function which is anything but funny. As Wilt (1980) identifies, when one wants to "do something" about real issues, then "the first thing we must do is reject comedy" (1980, 174). Lois Weaver, of acclaimed comic duo Split Britches, sums up this ideological clash from the viewpoint of years of practice and research as a female comic performer:

Seen as women, we need to take ourselves seriously. Because nobody else does. So then when you do comedy, you need to not take yourself seriously. And that's the problem ... the oppressed need to be taken seriously, and in order to be successful [in comedy] you have to NOT take yourself seriously. (Personal Interview, August 2, 2012)

If comedy is hard for men to perform (when it is not working, the comedian "dies" onstage), then it is doubly so for women. This article has attempted to provide some explanation as to why: discourse which leads me to a version of what Hughes (2002) refers to as the agency-structure debate. This dialectic stages the tension between the scholarly analysis of why oppression, or challenges to women's comic expression occur, and the agency to change this. As Hughes argues, "as much as we can take up particular discursive positions, we can also resist them" (Hughes 2002, 99). It is in the spirit of this pronouncement, then, that future research projects should be undertaken. Female physical comedians do undoubtedly exist, albeit in smaller numbers compared to men (Lavin 2004, Greer 2009 et al). Do they use the same strategies as male performers? Can the registers of physical comedy be applied to the work of female comedians? Can we find new ways of performing comedy that can allow women to perform as effectively as their male counterparts? This is now the challenge for researchers and practitioners of comedy.

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