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## **Stand-up comedy and the comedic cult of the individual:**

### **Or, the humor of James Acaster**

**ABSTRACT:** Stand-up comedy prioritises the individual performer. Yet its success relies upon awakening collective sentiments through laughter. For this article, the aesthetic form of stand-up becomes a site to explore the legacy of Durkheim's 'cult of the individual'. Durkheim recognised the significance of the 'cult of the individual' in modernity but was unable to locate its place within collective sentiments. The article advances the claim that sociology can locate individuality's cult within the aesthetic affordances individuals have at their disposal in institutional settings. It is demonstrated that stand-up comedy becomes a way to achieve individuality in a society of advanced role differentiation, a plurality of lifeworld's and beliefs, and its associated tensions. Humor does not reconcile tensions; through humor these social conditions become 'known' to the modern subject at an intra-personal level. The article substantiates and illustrates these claims through a case-study of British comedian James Acaster. Methodologically the article makes use of literary and aesthetic theories to advance an alternative theory of modernity, one which highlights how stand-up comedy is valued for its ability to register - at a sensuous level - the meaningful organisation of social relations modern social actors live within.

**KEYWORDS:** Durkheim \* Humor \* Cult of the individual \* Stand-up comedy.

## **Introduction**

George Carlin described the aesthetic form of stand-up comedy as: “You’re here for me, I’m here for me. Let’s go on from there.” (quoted in Burns, 2016) Carlin’s description has the structure of a joke. Stand-up encourages transcendence of self but the moment of transcendence is, incongruously, a return to self. Yet Carlin must take you and him somewhere as jokes only work in so far as those for whom the jokes are for recognise them as funny. While the dramatic function of stand-up comedy demonstrates a moment of collective, shared experience, the aesthetic form prioritises an individual existence. What meanings are being communicated about the individuality of the stand-up comedian in comic performances?

That stand-up comedy places the individual performer at the centre is, perhaps, not necessarily wholly peculiar to the art-form. As is well-noted of the consequences of modernity, the individual grows in importance as a ‘centre of meaning’ as a result of social processes of fragmentation in life-worlds and the differentiation of roles (Durkheim, 1964; Simmel, 1971a). In modernity our ‘sources of the self’ increasingly come to be articulated from, and found within, ourselves (Taylor, 1989). Stand-up comedy highlights, therefore, the tensions between individuality and collective cohesion in modernity: as much as the comedian may be ‘there for themselves’, they are equally dependent upon others ‘there for them’. How is this tension between individuality and collective dependence resolved?

Viewed this way, stand-up comedy provides an opportunity to address the legacy of what Durkheim (1972 [1895]:149) labelled as modernity’s cult of the individual. He envisaged a view of the sacredness of the human person as a singular, unitary and sovereign being entitled to rights of respect and the obligations of citizenship. Writing in 1895, Durkheim’s vision was of its time. In essence Durkheim’s writing acts as one intellectual heir to contemporary human rights discourses (Joas, 2013). The formulation for this article is more contemporary. The

article outlines stand-up comedy as a contemporary cultural practice indebted to Durkheim's initial concerns but with a differing conception of the subject. Stand-up comedy's "you're here for me, I'm here for me" aesthetic gains its cultural plausibility, and societal appeal, because it relies upon and gives efficacy to the wider more abstract notion of 'human rights' (a notion whose philosophical justification is far from self-evident (Joas, 2013)). But while the comedic cult of the individual remains indebted to the sacralisation of individuality in modernity, what I outline below is a long way from Durkheim's original formulation. The stand-up comedian approaches a vision of individuality reliant upon notions of layering in the self, a self that engages in dynamic forms of recognition and mis-recognition of their sanctity. A form of individuality which brings to mind the tensions of collective life in modern, pluralistic societies.

As such the wider intention is to make the case for the comedic cult of the individual as a contribution to Alexander's programmatic *The drama of social life* (2017). Alexander calls for an alternative theory of modernity, one where sociologists look toward the aesthetic dimensions of social life and utilise the tools of aesthetic criticism to outline processes of cohesion. For the argument here, stand-up comedy's performative affordances prioritise the narration of self at an intra-personal level (Witkin, 1995:40f): it concerns individuals seeking to construct their sense of self and identity in and through the very process of relating to others. The intra-personal aesthetic of 'You're here for me, I'm here for me' responds to how in modernity our "connectedness to others is diminished and where social relations are more 'fragmentary'" (Witkin, 1997:108). Through their acts, I argue, comedians bring this societal condition to mind.

The article builds these claims as follows. First, Durkheim's cult of the individual is conceptually outlined and its problem stated: Durkheim may have identified individuality as a sacred core of modern social life but he also remained unable to locate its sources explicitly in

sociability. It is the contention here that the aesthetic affordances granted to individuals within institutional settings themselves realise distinctive forms of individuality. The next two sections on the comedic cult of individuality outlines the manner with which stand-up comedy's aesthetic affordances grant one such vision of modern individuality. I locate this in a comedian's 'comic persona'. A 'comic persona' dramatizes the tensions between individuality and collectivity as it establishes a vision of self in-between a comic character and a 'true self'. Comic personae are read as an aesthetic analogue to the social form of modern sociability stand-up comedy symbolises: living with, and among, 'strangers' (Simmel, 1971b). Comic persona and stranger sociability produces a form of individuality which relies upon processes of oscillating recognition and mis-recognition so as to bring to mind the tensions between collective categories of identity and the uniqueness of modern personhood. The comedic cult of individuality relies upon the sensuous experience of laughter to confuse audiences, and comedians themselves, on individuality's sources and veracity.<sup>1</sup>

Thirdly, with this conceptual framework in place, the article empirically substantiates these claims through a strategic research case focused on contemporary British comedian James Acaster. It is demonstrated that Acaster's position within the UK comedy industry is that of an apogee. Acaster epitomizes the generic ideal to the 'You're here for me, I'm here for me' aesthetic, while also epitomizing those persons most likely to ascend to fame through stand-up comedy. Although stand-up comedy is an art-form which prioritises outsider status (see Brodie, 2014; Krefting, 2014; Weaver, 2011; Limon, 2000), the comedy industry overwhelmingly sees privileged subjects rising to fame and success (Pérez, 2017). By exploring how a hegemonic subject (a white, middle-class, millennial male) works within the outsider position of the stand-up comedian, we see how Acaster's act intimates the central

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<sup>1</sup> To avoid confusion, the terms recognition and misrecognition are not employed as Bourdieu uses them in his concept of misrecognition (or *méconnaissance*).

societal significance of the comedic cult of the individual: aiming for a sense of ‘intra-personal’ coherence in the face of fragmentary social relations in pluralistic, modern societies. Examining Acaster’s realisation of the ‘I’m here for me, you’re here for me’ aesthetic in his *Netflix* special ‘Reset’ (Acaster, 2018), the article makes the case for the general cultural sociological significance of stand-up comedy illuminating modernity’s conditions of experience.

### **On the cult of the individual & aesthetic forms**

The status of the individual in modernity plagued Durkheim’s (1964; 1972; 2001) sociology. At stake in his theory of organic solidarity was how advances in the division of social labour necessitated ‘individuation’. However while the growing importance of individuality, and an ideology of ‘individualism’, was a consequence of modernity’s advanced division of social labour, Durkheim (1972:149) maintained the morality of individualism was “not simply a hygienic discipline or wise principle of economy” on our part. Simply, belief in the sacrosanct nature of the individual is not believed in begrudgingly. The value placed upon the individual may be a consequence of modernity’s fragmentation of life-worlds but does not rest upon utilitarian principles: individuality “appears to those who aspire to it as having a religious character.” (Durkheim, 1972:149) It was in this cult of individuality that Durkheim (1972:149) outlined “a religion in which man [*sic*] is, at the same time, both believer and god.” But it was also in this conception of the sacred object being *both* ‘believer *and* god’ that Durkheim encountered the problem of value and cohesion for this cult (Bowring, 2016).

Despite a weakening in the *conscience collective*, Durkheim (1964:166) would stress how “the only collective sentiments that have become more intense are those which have for their object...the individual.” Durkheim viewed the ‘sacredness’ of the individual as a reflection of collective moral sentiments: “duties of the individual towards himself [*sic*] are, in

reality, duties towards society.” (Durkheim, 1964:399) Yet despite this Durkheim remained ambivalent on the status of moral individualism. Durkheim (1972:148) envisaged a view of moral individualism radically opposed to an “egoistic cult of the self” yet remained deeply sceptical about the integrative power of this cult. Individuality remained uneasily grounded in collective sentiment: “it is not to society that it attaches us; it is to ourselves. Hence it does not constitute a true social link.” (Durkheim, cited in Bowring, 2016:26)

While Durkheim was never able to fully reconcile his position on moral individualism, this does not signal his irrelevance. Durkheim (1972:150) detected the presence of the cult of the individual in modernity and wished “to progress towards making a reality of the famous precept: to each according to his [*sic*] works!” The way to follow up Durkheim’s vision is to explore the aesthetic affordances granted to persons in their ‘works’. This suggestion has precedents in recent scholarship. In Durkheimian fashion many studies have noted tensions, and contradictions, between collective interests and the celebration of individuality in differing spheres of social life: capital punishment (LaChance, 2007); military obituaries (King, 2010); Olympic athletes (King, 2012) classical musicians (McCormick, 2015); social media users (Smith, 2017); engaged couples planning their wedding day (Carter & Duncan, 2017); the status of being a consumer (Varul, 2015). These studies register the same problematic sacredness granted to the individual and its potential for anomic individualism. But where they move beyond Durkheim’s problematic is that they all variously demonstrate how the aesthetic affordances of these social practices express such ambivalences. Aesthetic affordances register individual sacralisation with differing cultural imaginaries and symbolic repertoires. For instance, classical musicians attempt to realise a musical self which mirrors the aesthetic goal of music as a transcendent experience but are bound and hindered by the collective codes of civility within musical competitions (McCormick, 2015). Death row prisoner’s ‘last meals, last words’ aesthetically localise the tensions between penal discourses which place prisoners

beyond humanity and as moral agents culpable for their crimes (LaChance, 2007). These studies are certainly disparate and do not necessarily speak to one another. However, when read together we can detect recurrent motifs to the tensions within individuality's cult. As such, these studies can form the basis for a larger claim to be made: the cult of the individual is granted different aesthetic means through which to appreciate its 'true link' *in* sociability, rather than 'ourselves' as Durkheim lamented. This article makes the case for stand-up comedy as one institutional setting with a distinct aesthetic form.

### **The Research**

Witkin's *Art & Social Structure* (1995) has been a major source of inspiration to explore this argument. In line with others in the sociology of artworks (Acord & DeNora, 2008; de la Fuente, 2008; Gell, 1998), Witkin notes how different artworks can do different things given the qualities of the aesthetic medium used. Distinctive to Witkin's approach is how the sensuous qualities of artworks offer a means of 'knowing the social'. The ordering of aesthetic qualities in art-work mirrors the ordering of social relations, and it is through the sensuous qualities (affordances) of such aesthetic forms that social relations become 'known' (Witkin, 1995:58f). Putting this into practice requires appreciation of the aesthetics of stand-up comedy alongside its institutional contexts and situated performances (Witkin, 1997:102; 1995:9). To this end, the research of this article involved (1) investigation of the institutional context of Acaster's comic performances, (2) consideration of the aesthetic form of his performance and (3) his relation to audiences.

#### *(1) Institutional context: Acaster as a strategic research case*

To understand how Acaster conceives of his performances the article makes use of interview data drawn from *The Comedian's Comedian Podcast* (Goldsmith, 2013; 2018a/b). A podcast hosted by professional UK stand-up Stuart Goldsmith, *The Comedian's Comedian*



*Podcast* is a rich source of ethnographic insight into the life-world of (a branch of) professional stand-up comedians.

Podcast interviews are orientated to how comedians approach the writing and performance of stand-up comedy. Acaster has appeared on two episodes of the podcast, with his second appearance being a two-part special. Acaster is granted this level of attention because, from within the context of the life-world, he has garnered much acclaim and recognition. Acaster is a comedian often mentioned by other guests for his comedic ability and skill. Of course this may well be understood as highly niche or even irrelevant outside of this domain. However this view would underestimate the methodological fruitfulness of *The Comedian's Comedian Podcast*. The podcast offers important institutional knowledge to appreciate what Acaster's acclaim amounts to. The podcast is dedicated to interviewing stand-up comedians who have brought at least three hour-long specials to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe (Goldsmith, personal interview). Acaster has been nominated 5 times for Best Show at the Edinburgh Festival (2012, 13, 14, 15, & 16) and in March 2018, a recording of his Fringe shows *Represent*, *Recognise* and *Reset* (Acaster, 2018) premiered on *Netflix* as *Repertoire*. Ultimately *The Comedian's Comedian* champions a form of stand-up which is highly aesthetically coherent. All the comedian's interviewed are orientated toward the goal of writing and performing comedy which adheres to the hour-long Edinburgh show, over and above other performances.

This is underlined by the fact that *The Comedian's Comedian Podcast* guests ( $n = 198$ ) are most cohesively (26.5%) represented by management established during the rise of Alternative Comedy (c.1979-89) which arose around the Edinburgh Festival: Avalon (18 acts (9%)); Off The Kerb (17 acts (8.5%)); PBJ (11 acts (5.5%)); Phil McIntyre Ents. (7 acts (3.5%)). Acaster is represented by the latter. While 26.5% is not a majority, the overall sample demonstrates that this percentage is in fact the most sociologically important: 14% have no

representation at all, and no other agency (of a total of 65) shows representation of more than 10 individuals who appear on the podcast; (8% of comedians remain unknown (i.e. did not declare no representation or indicate representation)). The 4 Alt. comedy agencies demonstrate the most cohesive presence and indicate their institutional importance within the podcast's archives.

As noted generally by Anheier et. al. (1995) and explicitly in reference to comedy by Freidman (2014) and Reilly (2017), artists tend to work in the form of cliques and clubs. *The Comedian's Comedian Podcast* gives an archived voice to this club as much as evidencing the limits of this club. The Alternative Comedy period saw the emergence of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe as the central ritual space wherein the hour-long performance aesthetic was developed (c.1990 onward). This aesthetic was institutionalised around a series of venues known as the Big Four (The Pleasance (in which Acaster performs); Gilded Balloon; Assembly Rooms & Underbelly) and supported by said professional agencies. In this regard Acaster's cogency as a strategic case arises from his being an apogee of what stand-up comedians in general are striving to achieve. That said, this is not to suggest that all comedians approach stand-up comedy in the same manner. Rather it allows us to isolate from Acaster's approach how his aesthetic realises and intimates a wider cultural tradition and form of contemporary performance.

And finally, Acaster is significant in terms of not only the institutional present but in terms of his status in relation to the history of stand-up comedy. Historians of popular performance and folk art-forms trace the genealogy of stand-up through marginalised groups (Double, 2014; Brodie, 2014). This conception of stand-up comedy as an outsider art form feeds and bolsters its orientation to addressing the tensions and conflicts manifest in modernity's pluralisation of life-worlds and the fragmentation of beliefs and identities. And many studies have explored these tensions through a focus upon subaltern or marginalised

subjects who perform stand-up comedy (Limon, 2000; Gilbert, 2004; Lavin, 2004; Weaver, 2011; Krefling, 2014; Lockyer, 2015a; Rossing, 2015; Meir & Schmitt, 2016; Pérez, 2016; DeCamp, 2017). However, despite the marginal subject being the genealogical ancestor to stand-up comedy, it has been demonstrated that an overwhelming predominance of privileged subjects perform and ascend to fame through stand-up (Pérez, 2017). Stand-up comedy is a subaltern art form largely performed, at present, by hegemonic subjects. Acaster is, then, no exception: as an apogee of contemporary stand-up performance in institutional terms, he is also representative of the subject who is most likely to ascend to fame. With this in mind, the argument pursued here demonstrates that this outsider genealogy feeds the tensions through which the comedic cult of the individual is forged: Anglo-American stand-up comedy has become a means by which an outsider status, or position outside a hegemonic norm, is adopted *de facto* in order to register the tensions between collective categories of identity and the centrality of self and individuality prioritised. Acaster is ostensibly a hegemonic subject - as a white, middle-class, millennial male - but adopts through his act a position outside these categories as his persona of a nerd, mediocrity and ranter comes to collapse the global subject status his hegemonic categories position him within. This argument will be pursued through an analysis of Acaster's *Netflix* special *Reset* (Acaster, 2018).

## (2) *Aesthetic Form (1): Acaster's Repertoire*

With the hour-long show becoming central to stand-up comedy's institutional structure, this necessitates an analysis of such specials as its central aesthetic object. Acaster's *Netflix* series *Repertoire* all involve the same conceit: Acaster substitutes himself on stage for someone else. The substituted character and the invented world becomes an allegory for his own identity struggles. It is beyond this article to provide an exhaustive analysis to all of *Repertoire* and as such I focus only on *Reset* (Acaster, 2018). The aim is to interpret, and connect, Acaster's aesthetic strategy of attempting to escape himself with the social form of modern stand-up.

Through a performance medium where he is most isolated and visible as an individual, what does escapology achieve? In *Reset*, Acaster is placed in witness protection and it is demonstrated that this conceit becomes a means for Acaster to attempt to escape himself and the collective identity categories he is placed within: a white, middle-class millennial.

As stand-up in general responds to the problem of intra-personal coherence (Witkin, 1997), where the relationship between our perceived sense of self and how others see us is fragmentary, Acaster's escapology is a strategy to resolve the problem of being 'James Acaster'. Acaster's identity as a middle-class mediocrity places him in a position whereby he is a victim of his own inability to be anything other than a normative mean. As a hegemonic subject his attempts to achieve difference can only be asserted in illusions of self-evacuation (i.e. escapism). For the hegemonic subject wins the privilege of their non-difference. However in creating doubles, Acaster only better achieves to extend his hegemony and, ultimately, his comic world ends in collapse. This is certainly not a generalisation to *all* comedic acts: Limon's (2000:104ff) interpretation of Ellen DeGeneres' escapism, for instance, is not the same as Acaster's. Fundamentally the semiotic codes of stand-up suggest escapism as a *generic feature* of stand-up comedy, but its content differs from act to act.

### (3) *Aesthetic Form (2): Laughter and its audiences*

While the form of stand-up comedy explored here demonstrates a clear institutional structure and coherent aesthetic, our analysis must take into consideration the aesthetic affordances of stand-up's central object: laughter. By considering this facet of stand-up comedy we come to appreciate how stand-up comedians manage their relationships to audience(s).

Double defines the stand-up comedian as: "*a single performer standing in front of an audience, talking to them with the specific intention of making them laugh.*" (2014:4 original emphasis) What is missing is indication of the audience's specificity in this aesthetic form. Of

course it would be ridiculous to suggest that stand-up comedians have no, or even little, indication of *who* their audiences are. Every stand-up performance is a situated, embodied encounter and, in some sense, a collaborative effort to produce the ritual effect of laughter. Double's definition responds to the aesthetic ordering of stand-up comedy: "Audiences turn their jokes into jokes", says Limon (2000:13): "as if the comedian had not quite thought or expressed a joke until the audience thinks or expresses it." By contrast, audiences at classical musical competitions have differing levels of aesthetic judgement. As such musicians tailor their performances to those whose judgement matters most: the judges (McCormick, 2015:25). Comedians are, on the other hand, dependent upon the whole. Ethnographies of stand-up comedy trace this theme as they demonstrate that comedians often struggle to sustain a belief in their comic abilities (Stebbins, 1990; Riley, 2017; Keisalo, 2018). This existential position is reflected in the institutional dynamics of comedians career 'progressions'. Riley (2017) demonstrates that comedians do not achieve a linear progression up a professional hierarchy (e.g. from unpaid open spot to headline act) smoothly or even absolutely. Instead the 'layers' of career progression are variously moved up and down for various periods of time; stand-up is performatively situated in such a way that 'audiences' become viewed as intermediate because laughter itself is indeterminate. For instance, France's most famous stand-up comedian, Gad Elmaleh (2016), describes his current relationship to French audiences as wanting: with fame, laughter came too easily, and with it a lack of satisfaction in his artform.

Stand-up comedy has developed an aesthetic which relies upon audience laughter. This laughter however, on some level, remains indeterminate in terms of *who it is for*. As such I read the joke-form of audiences confirming jokes as the situated, micro-expression of the comedic cult of the individual and its tensions: by having to live with laughter's mercurial quality a tendency develops amongst comedians to reconcile themselves to this performative situation and work *within it*. Similar to Elmaleh's position, Acaster describes a routine from

his special *Represent* which he states was “always hard” whether it was with Edinburgh audiences, described as “comedy savvy”, or “mainstream audiences.” Reflection on this routine prompted Acaster to state:

I had a big realisation that I enjoy comedy when I’m improving, and I don’t enjoy it when I just try and go, ‘I deserve this’ or ‘this is finished, this is great, why aren’t you laughing?’ I enjoy it a lot more when I ask myself, ‘Why aren’t they laughing?’ and get under the hood and fix it. (Goldsmith, 2018a)

Acaster’s reflection is an *intra*-actional one focused on the nature of the joke-form itself: the aesthetic form of stand-up comedy as a celebration of individuality (‘I’m here for me’) relies upon comedians adopting a strategy which acknowledges the collective (‘You’re here for me’) from within themselves.

### **The comedic cult of the individual (1): Comic personae from presentation to representation of self**

I wish to view stand-up comedy’s “You’re here for me, I’m here for me” as the aesthetic analogue to the structural form of social relations Durkheim envisaged for the cult of the individual, a religion where the individual is both believer and God. By so doing I offer a case for the aesthetic affordances of this form acting as a site to locate this cult’s true link in collective social processes.

In the comedic cult of the individual, the true link in sociability is found stand-up comedy’s central representational device: a comic persona. A comic persona is neither fully a dramatic device, nor completely a reflection of the comedian’s individual personality. As others have demonstrated, comic personae exist on a *continuum* between a fictional self (a comic ‘character’) and a comedian’s authentic, “true” self (Keisalo, 2018; Quirk, 2015;

Colleary, 2014; Double, 2014). The discrepancy between fictional and authentic self in a comic persona is, at the level of aesthetic form, a reflection of the structural form of social relations found in modernity: as the individual grows in importance and value, their integration into the life of the collective is more fragmentary. A comic persona becomes a comedian's means to at once forge a sense of their own individual identity *and* locate this identity in collective processes. To achieve this, comic personae exist also on the continuum *from the presentation of self to the representation of self*.

To be a stand-up comedian in modernity means to be engaged in a differentiated role with a specialised obligation: making people laugh (Double, 2014; Limon, 2000). This involves the *presentation of self* as comedians bring their collective identities to the stage (their class, gender, ethnicity, race, sexuality, and so on) and through these fragmentary and abstract collective impressions encourage laughter at who they are. Viewed this way, stand-up is *inter-*actional as it involves “the self that awaits the individual in the situation, ready made to put on...” (Witkin, 1995:40): comedians bring their biographical and historical identity (as, say, a class, race, or gendered subject) to the stage. However, this collective identity brought to the stage is not finished or fully coherent *without* audience laughter. As such, to forge a *comic persona*, a self in-between a comic character and authentic self, is to also be engaged in the *representation of self*. This is an *intra-*actional process. In *intra-*actional processes “the subject seeks to construct his or her social being directly in and through the process of relating to others.” (Witkin, 1995:40) *Intra-*actional processes rely less upon the identities persons bring to interactions, more to a shared sensuous ground of relating to each other (Witkin, 1995:41). In stand-up comedy, the shared sensuous ground of laughter realises one's sense of self and identity in a manner which mirrors the fragmentary form of social relations.

Consider how Acaster views his comic persona: “I just want them to at least believe the world I've created, and enter in that world and go ‘this is reality now, this is the world that is

apparently acceptable' and go along with that and laugh at it..." (Acaster in Goldsmith, 2013) For identity and individuality to be achieved Acaster wishes for suspended disbelief. Through suspended disbelief, a comic persona becomes "the 'sensuous machinery' through which the subject realises a mode of being." (Witkin, 1995:81) Acaster is not *reflecting* his world as a subject (a white, middle class English millennial); he is realising his world and individuality through laughter. The comedic cult of individuality finds the means to (a) aesthetically reflect the fragmentary form of social relations in modernity by necessitating the forging of a comic persona and (b) bringing the problematic integration of the individual into the collective to mind through the sensuous qualities of laughter. Laughter is an ephemeral, economical device which short-circuits distance and difference between self and others. Laughter sensuously registers and short-cuts the distances of role differentiation and life-world plurality in modernity.

### **The comedic cult of the individual (2): stereotype and stranger**

Viewed more broadly, therefore, stand-up comedy registers the tensions between collectivity and individuality as it ritually performs a contradiction modern democracies face (Krefting, 2014). The tension between *ethnos* - the multiplicity and specificity of life-worlds we are obliged to live amongst and with - and *demos* - the contingent and diverse political community that is the people (Nielsen, 2002). Crucial for the overall argument is that stand-up utilises aesthetic affordances within the intra-personality of *comic persona* to register this tension. But this happens in a distinct way: comic personae register this tension through negative stereotypes. Hari Kondabolu performs within and through forms of minstrelsy (Krefting, 2014:196ff); Dave Chappelle inhabits the stereotypical "Negro" in order for laughter to awaken sentiments of democratic possibility (Tonder, 2014); Omid Djalili performs stereotypes of the Muslim to at once acknowledge and subvert them (Weaver, 2011). Acaster's comic persona is a stereotype of white, masculine impotence ('a nerd').



If comic personae register individual identity in collective laughter, the larger work of laughter is to aesthetically bring to mind the structural tensions of ethnos/demos *in* individuality itself. In modernity, humor serves a double purpose of in-group and out-group sociability. Structurally, on the one hand, jokes have been demonstrated as evidence for intensely shared in group sentiments: joking together shows a dexterous intelligence in how to be with and among one's own (Kuipers, 2015; Medhurst, 2007). On the other hand jokes and a "good sense of humor" has been argued to be a requirement to live with the incongruities and inconsistencies of modernity, to navigate the pluralities of beliefs and worldviews we live amongst (Krefting, 2014; Berger, 2014; Billig, 2005; Wickberg, 1998; Mulkay, 1988). Consequently, having a good sense of humor is, under modern conditions, to know the limits of one's life-world as much as it is an economical means to find one's place amongst one's own. For Weaver (2011) joking is the thorn within modernity's project of order-building. Jokes register the semantic side-effect of order-building: ambivalence. We must treat ourselves as stereotypes in joking *about* ourselves, as much as we must treat others as stereotypes to make sense of living with difference and imperfect knowledge of others in modernity. At an *intra*-personal level, this gives us the following observation: to laugh *at* and laugh *with* someone requires recognition and misrecognition in equal measure. We must sacrifice our mutuality with others in order to laugh *at* them. We also have to sacrifice a monopoly of self-knowledge to laugh at *ourselves*.

The comedic cult of the individual indicates that the aesthetic affordances of jokes and laughter mean stereotyping is a path toward the sacralisation of individuality. This is because (a) comic personae encourage being seen *as* bearers of identities with specific stereotypical qualities; and (b) laughter is the sensuous means for stereotyping to be a process of both recognition and misrecognition. Stereotypes, counter-intuitively, become necessary for more than the prelude to their subversion in the comedic cult of individuality. This is because comic

personae sensuously bring to mind a predominant form of association which underlines modernity's fragmentary social relations: the stranger (Simmel, 1971b).

Simmel defines the stranger not as an identity or role but a *form of association* (Simmel, 1971b:143; see Goodstein, 2016:43-49). The stranger's 'strangeness' is not one of absolute Otherness, nor complete insignificance to us. The stranger "is a specific form of interaction. [...] an element of the group itself...whose membership within the group involves both being outside it and confronting it." (Simmel, 1971b:143) As such, the stranger embodies the unity of nearness and remoteness present in *all* forms of association but in a way that *symbolises* something distinctive about the ordering of social relations in modernity: the bringing together of a diverse *ethnos* within a plural *demos*. Such is the sociability of the stranger that they become a symbol of our relation to Others: a symbol of how "repelling and distancing moments... constitute a form of being-together" (Simmel, quoted in Goodstein, 2016:49) in modernity.

Stand-up comedy is a ritual microcosm of this wider symbol of modern "being-together." Adopting the position of stranger means performing as stereotypes and encouraging being viewed as a *type* to build a comic world. In doing so, comedians aesthetically realise the tensions of modern individuality: we inhabit collective identities but are morally obliged to live and think of ourselves and others as individuals. As comedians register this at an intra-personal level, the social form of the stranger symbolises not only a way of being together but a vision of self and subjectivity, too. Being strange to others by thinking of ourselves as somewhere between authentic and comic selves, we sacrifice a monopoly of self-knowledge and present the possibility to laugh at, and with, ourselves. We misplace our view of ourselves with the view others take, and remain both in and outside ourselves as a result. If comic personae register the link *in* sociability for the comedic cult of the individual, Simmel's stranger symbolises the

“sacred vacuum” around the self that allows us to be “both believer and God” as Durkheim envisaged.

### **Acaster’s persona: nerd, mediocrity, ranter**

The following examination of Acaster’s persona will draw out the claims and themes above. We see how Acaster’s persona moves from the presentation to representation of self, followed by how his persona registers the possibility to realise individuality through a stereotype of white impotence (“nerd”). The discussion then explores how Acaster’s persona registers tensions between *ethnos/demos* as the nerd becomes the mediocre form of white, male hegemony. Finally, the nerd-mediocrity position is outlined as the means through which Acaster’s stand-up sustains the comedic cult of the individual: repelling and distancing moments of being together from within the intra-personality of the self.

Goldsmith describes Acaster’s persona as follows:

I think you have a quality ...that is so dynamic. You’re between two things on-stage. I say this on the podcast often about the performer being the most powerful, but also the most vulnerable person in the room. But in your case, [...] *it’s like you’re triumphant nerd*. You seem to represent the voice of the downtrodden; you look like you were probably bullied at school. [...] He’s the nerdy kid everyone remembers from geography class. You ...have that, in slacks, dressed by your mum, kind of quality. Which you use to make yourself powerful. [...] You’re what happens when the nerdy kid gets revenge, gets self-belief...

(Goldsmith, 2018b; added emphasis)

*Power and vulnerability: Representing the nerd*

Goldsmith attributes ‘power’ to Acaster in two senses: first in the performance of stand-up as the *presentation of self*; second in terms of comic persona as *representation of self*. As argued, the move from presentation to representation of self registers the ‘true link in sociability’ Durkheim longed to find for individuality’s cult. The dynamics of power and vulnerability help elaborate this sociability in Acaster’s persona.

In terms of social *inter*-actions, few situations grant an individual sole speaking rights and the privilege to preserve sustained attention upon one’s self. Stand-up, as a situated performance, is a *powerful* social position. However, as Goldsmith points out, Acaster’s persona is dynamic, “between two things.” This liminality bleeds into the second part of stand-up self-presentation, Acaster’s vulnerability. Of course, we could say that all social actors are vulnerable to losses of face, mismanagement of situations, slippages of ideal reception. However the vulnerability Goldsmith attributes to stand-up comedians arises from the interactional order of stand-up: without laughter a comedian’s power and individuality is without recognition. The interactional order of stand-up itself feeds the meaningful attributes Goldsmith identifies in Acaster’s comic persona: “powerful vulnerability” fuels the liminal position of the “triumphant nerd.” Acaster represents the voice of the “downtrodden” yet is powerful as a result. There is a confusion, or deliberate misrecognition, between the power and vulnerability of stand-up as a social interaction and the power of the persona in Goldsmith’s speech.

Goldsmith’s account places Acaster in positions of impotence but does not identify, explicitly, his power or triumph. One may suggest the power arises from his humor, but if so it is a defensive humor: he responds to attack. Unlike nerds who, in contemporary Anglo-American culture, have achieved power (Mark Zuckerberg; Steve Jobs; Bill Gates), Acaster has not achieved power through subsequent successes of their magnitude: he is not a nerd whose revenge manifests itself in a form of megalomania. Rather Acaster retains a subordinate

position. Acaster's power comes from his impotence; his power is power acquired at a distance. Acaster's comedic power confuses the *presentation of self* (stand-up *as* powerful) with the *representation of self* (the power of collective labels).

Acaster's power arises from his *representation* of the downtrodden. Goldsmith's remarks are in the past tense: "you look like you *were* probably bullied at school." Goldsmith speaks not in terms of presence, but what Acaster re-presents at an intra-actional level. Representations refer to an absent presence: when Acaster appears before others his persona sensuously brings to mind qualities which are beyond immediate apprehension. Acaster is someone you've encountered before: a stranger of a certain type. The representational form is crucial to the comic power Acaster's persona foregrounds: you're not seeing the once impotent, now powerful. You're watching what the impotent does with a position and/or experience of power.

Acaster's comic persona of the triumphant nerd is not a transformative position, it is a constitutive position. Even in his stand-up position he remains impotent, downtrodden. As Acaster says in response to Goldsmith's summation of his persona:

Definitely a huge part of me developing my own voice was going: 'oh I'm not cool' and realising that [...]. I didn't realise, but since going on stage, and you get a certain reaction, and you realise, 'oh, no, I'm this person'. This is at least how other people see me. (Acaster in Goldsmith, 2018b)

Acaster's comic power does not arise from adopting a position of power but rather he defines his sense of self, at an intra-actional level, by conforming to how he is recognised by others. While Acaster's humor and laughter is read as evidence of power, the origin of his power is located in representation, a secondary source over its primary source (in self-presentation).

Performing power without potency for Acaster requires, first, obliviousness to impotence and, second, having acquired power, being in a position of incompetence:

something I always find funny ...is someone who has absolutely no right to be the most confident person in the room, [...] walking round like they own the place, [...] they think they're Zach Morris when they're Screech. [...] I've deliberately done it on-stage because I think it's funnier ...there is an element of anger in it as well, that I have to, on stage, ... know when to use it and how to use it. And I find [...] when I'm fully in *persona* only a certain amount of anger makes sense, and it's more channelling it through frustration a lot of the time rather than getting angry. The ending of a lot of the shows ...is me getting frustrated and wound up by stuff (Acaster in Goldsmith, 2018b).

Obliviousness to impotence is a prerequisite to acquiring power for Acaster. When power is acquired impotence becomes anger and it is an anger which reflects what the uninitiated to power do with power: not know how to use it. Power in Acaster's *persona* becomes caught in its own field of force: "frustrated and wound up."

Recall how for the comedic cult of the individual, the form of association of the stranger and the position of a stereotype reflects modernity's "repelling and distancing" forms of togetherness. Underlying Acaster's *persona* are discrepancies of recognition and misrecognitions of stereotyping. The result is: individuality's powers are sourced in discrepancies of recognition in collective type-castings.

*The Nerd's secondary power: stand-up and mediocrity*

In a position of power, (Acaster doing stand-up), the nerd, (Acaster's *persona*), acquires power as a secondary quality. Acaster's *representation of self*, the triumphant nerd, achieves power at a distance.

The secondary quality to the nerd's power is how Acaster, as a hegemonic subject, is able to register the tensions between *ethnos* and *demos*. However, Acaster's secondary power differs to others who come to power by distance. The "secondariness" of power has been theorised by Edward Said (1989) as the position of the colonial subaltern which entails a mixture of having been freed from subordination but remaining a victim of past subjugation: "the dreadful secondariness of people who ...are condemned only to use a telephone, never invent it." (Said, 1989:207) This interpretation may be insightful but it does not capture (a) the aesthetic form of stand-up comedy which *is* a marginal (subaltern?) art-form (Brodie, 2014; Double, 2014; Limon, 2000) or (b) Acaster's position as a hegemonic subject. Unlike minority ethnic stand-ups such as Hari Kondabolu (Krefting, 2014:196ff), Dave Chappelle (Tonder, 2014) or Omid Djalili (Weaver, 2011), Acaster is unable to deploy forms of minstrelsy to reorient collective labels. Yet he retains a secondary form of power nonetheless. Given his status occupying a hegemonic position but retaining a secondary relationship to power, what Acaster's triumphant nerd subject position implies with regard to its relation to hegemony is his *mediocrity* when measured in relation to other hegemonic subjects. Mediocrity offers a more fruitful line of analysis to comprehend Acaster's comic persona and how, as a hegemonic subject, he still registers the tensions of *ethnos* and *demos* in modernity.

Limon (2012: 76-77, 83) neatly outlines the subject position of the mediocrity. The mediocrity is relationally defined by their non-greatness: the mediocrity models themselves on greatness but from a position unable to comprehend, nor approach it. A mediocrity is a hegemonic subject unable to comprehend or approach its own (implicit) powers. "The only

technique of independence,” for the mediocrity, “is secondariness, subinstitutional mediocrity, because the only originary power is institutional power.” (Limon, 2012:90)

*Stand-up and the art of ranting*

Limon (2012:66) claims “[t]he essential art of the mediocrity ... is the rant, because the rant is the elevation and imposition of powerlessness.” The rant is homologous to the art of stand-up as both are ambivalently placed to one’s audiences:

Ranters are like jokers, because you cannot rant in private; you cannot exempt your audience, which makes your rant possible, from your rant. You rant to gather an audience to alienate it. ...The Jewish comedian’s own term of art for the rant is the Spritz: insults delivered to a seduced, repulsed, enraged, engaged crowd (Limon, 2012:76-77, my parenthesis)

A stand-up’s audience, in this account, is ideally in an equivocal and vacillating position. But what are they at once seduced and alienated by: the comedian’s material, or the comedian? This also applies to the comedian: are they ranting at themselves or their subject? Acaster, too, is confused on this point:

With the British Museum one... I’m more kind of going after what I am annoyed about, but I still have to paint a more, not surreal, but a silly picture [...] I think if I went into it differently, and I did, when I was writing that routine, I was just angry and it didn’t work, [...] sometimes I forget to go into persona, [...] so it’s knowing that once the persona is on the whole thing, I’ve got to be a bit a sillier, a bit more left of centre [...] *people aren’t*



*supposed to identify with 'him' all the time...* (Acaster in Goldsmith, 2018b, added emphasis).

Misrecognition of the subject of laughter, Acaster himself or his idiotic approach to the colonial politics of museums, is essential for humor registering individuality's cult. In the comedic cult of the individual, the stereotyped position of the stranger Acaster adopts - an impotent white, male middle-class mediocrity - registers repelling and distancing modes of togetherness. Acaster's anger and the laughter he receives *intra-personally* registers the tensions of *ethnos/demos*: Acaster, the hegemonic subject, is unable to, or ask his audience to, identify with his anger of colonial politics *because of* his hegemony. But his routine evokes laughter as his mediocre-nerd persona confuses identification of collective categories (white, middle-class) with individuality (Acaster). Through the stand-up position of stranger-stereotype, the comedic cult of the individual gives us a vision of self and subjectivity which provokes association through repelling others (ranting) and distances this connection through misrecognition of *who* and *what* is being laughed at.

### ***Reset's Escapology***

Acaster's *Reset* (2018) relies structurally upon comic misrecognition and misidentification as a white, male, middle-class millennial attempts to evade the politics of white, male, middle-class privilege.

Acaster describes *Reset* as follows: "this is about me going into witness protection ... because every time I am not enjoying comedy I want a fresh start in life, I want to go to Kenya and start again... (Acaster in Goldsmith, 2018a) The origin of the escapist fantasy, to move to Kenya, has its origin in the desire to escape stand-up and by implication himself. Yet the irony is that he performs this escapist fantasy through the medium of stand-up. While escapism is figured through Acaster's desire to escape himself and stand-up, the allegory of witness

protection throughout the show fuses with a desire to escape his own society: Britain “After Brexit”. The climactic routine of *Reset* conflates his own self-hatred, his existential desire to escape himself, with the triumphant politics of Brexit and a desire to escape this political threat. *Reset*’s escapism aesthetically underlines the comedic cult of individuality: stand-up as an attempt to both live *as* a type and *achieve* individuality. Escapism is for Acaster the means by which his identity as a ‘normative mean’ collapses in upon itself.

*Reset* has two designs on escapism: to escape himself (& stand-up) and to escape Britain “After Brexit”. These fuse, and become confused, throughout *Reset*. They fuse as follows: first through stand-up *as* escapism, second through escapist fantasies *in* stand-up. The first treats stand-up as an escape of existential dangers (insecurities and terrors of stand-up); the second confronts political dangers (Britain “After Brexit”) with fantasies of escape.

As to the former, there is irony in using a stand-up comedy show to perform an escape of stand-up comedy. Acaster does this by, intra-personally, bringing to light the sociological conditions of stand-up. *Reset* begins with a routine where Acaster addresses the audience with glee and delight:

Good to see you all. I hoped it be you. I did. On the way here I said out loud, ‘Hope it’s them’. Hope it’s you every gig. Hope that’s not too gushy early doors. Every gig I’ve ever done I’ve hoped it was this exact group of people in the room and until now what a long and disappointing career it’s been. I’ve hated every second of it. Sometimes, none of you are here. (Acaster, 2018)

Acaster’s delight that his hoped for audience are finally assembled before him neatly formalises, in joke form, the sociological form of stand-up: stand-up is a stranger producing, intra-actionally, relations of intimacy and mutuality with other strangers. The sociality of

moderns is compounded with the fantasied, impossible demand of the perfect assembly of random strangers. By the end of *Reset* we learn, through Acaster's escapist fantasies, that the illusion of the perfect audience comes from his desire to escape audiences.

Acaster's escapist fantasy of the perfect audience rests upon modern humor's confused logic of recognition and misrecognition. The perfect audience for Acaster is his way of finding his perfect self: if comedians overly-rely upon their audiences for confirmation of their sense of self, the perfect audience is the escapist fantasy for perfectly fitting in with a society of different individuals neither obliged to accept us, nor from whom we necessarily desire acceptance. Acaster ends a rant on dying in front of Glasgow audience thus:

Chucked out for laughing. That's what they said. Complained at the Box Office: 'He chucked us out for laughing'. That's what they would have said to their friends when they got home.

'How was the comedy show?'

'Not good! He chucked us out for laughing.'

'What? At a comedy show? Were you just doing your normal laugh?'

'Yeah, you know the one when I go 'you're fucking shit, mate?', that one? Didn't like it'.

You mustn't focus on bad shows, bad crowds. That's why you spend most of your time thinking about the perfect audience.

(Acaster, 2018)

For the comedic cult of individuality, one has to reconcile the double-edged sword of humor in modernity as an economic means to find connection with one's own, and a means to

reconcile the limits of one's own worldview amongst difference. Acaster's escapist fantasy however does not solve but dramatizes this problem intra-personally: he does not desire to be accepted by either himself or those who won't accept him. In order to be humorous he must make himself ridiculous (that is, open to ridicule). In order to find acceptance he must repudiate himself. A (meta-)escapist fantasy, to perform as if not there, aesthetically brings to mind the repelling and distancing forms of togetherness found in modernity.

The inspiration of the witness protection allegory arises from his desire to escape stand-up, but in *Reset* escapism merges existential escapist fantasies with the desire to escape real political dangers: Brexit and the resurgence of racist politics. The escapist fantasy of witness protection begins with the fusion of a desire to escape stand-up *and* escape the politics of British nationalism. Throughout *Reset* Acaster confuses, and fuses, the populist sentiments and imperial fantasies which have surfaced around the Brexit vote. These begin and remain within the confines of observational comedy routines on his own idiosyncrasies. He explicitly enters routines about Brexit with the following:

Listen. I'm as bad as all of y'all. I'm as bad as all of y'all. I make the same mistakes everyday of my life, never learn. Same mistakes. Everyday. Never Learn. ... I've got a set of blinds in my bedroom. Seven years I've had these blinds for! Not once have I pulled the right string to open them. Not once! There's two options by the way, there's not a wall of strings like a harp! There's two strings. Every morning I look at them. Haven't the foggiest.

[...]

Two options. Get it wrong every day. Two options. We never stood a chance in that Referendum. (Acaster, 2018)

What might be the political and existential significance of confusing two forms of escapism? Why conflate the escape of an existential position (stand-up) with a political situation (escaping real fears about Britain “After Brexit”)? In fact the confusion and conflation are essential for the joke work of *Reset*.

Acaster’s entry into witness protection masks his refusal to go on performing; through performing his stand-up in witness protection he makes his escapism meta-escapism (Limon, 2000:106; 2016:58-59). The moment when Acaster introduces us to his escapist life, now in witness protection, is the exact moment when he is most exposed: standing-up in front of audiences. This barefaced admission is central to the politics of stand-up and the political allegory Acaster performs through *Reset*: to evacuate the stand-up position through stand-up becomes a means to excavate the politics of Brexit through a witness protection fantasy of a new life, new start. He conflates the nostalgic imperial fantasies that surrounded the EU Referendum vote with his desire to escape his life and society. This is the central joke-work of *Reset* precisely because it confuses attention: the laughter Acaster receives on his failure as a stand-up fuses with the national failure of Brexit. The shame of standing-up merges with the shame of imperial fantasies. Here we have arrived at precisely the moment where the contradiction between a diverse *ethnos* and plural *demos* in modernity fuses within the identity of the individual stand-up. As the hegemonic norm Acaster cannot escape from normativity: personal shame fuses with national shame. Through a position of strangeness/stereotype, Acaster sacrifices his view of himself with the view of how a generalised Other sees him. Escapism becomes the way a normative man, Acaster, conducts a critique of normativity within himself. For Limon (2016:52), “escapism is only escapism when it conducts a self-critique...” In *Reset* Acaster wants to escape his life, his society. But in reality he is performing

this escapism, publically admitting that his escape is fantasy and unable to resolve the tensions he identifies.

Acaster is, like much of his generation, a Remainer (someone who voted Remain in the 2016 UK, EU Referendum). This reveals itself in the rant which (a) begins with an admission of his own self-hatred, then (b) acts out arrogance and self-assurance to foreground this self-hatred, and finally (c) merges into anger and frustration with himself but voiced from the position of an (imagined) Leave voter.

I'm going to change, though. That's the best part of the whole deal [Witness protection]: new identity, new personality. All of us hate ourselves, on some level, that's not weird. You know? I was talking to a friend of mine the other day, told him I was going to go home and have a spaghetti bolognaise. But I didn't say, 'I'm going to go home and have a spaghetti bolognaise'. I said, 'I'm going to go home and have a *spag bol*.' As soon as I heard 'spag bol' come out of my mouth, I thought, 'I hate you so much! Like more than I've ever hated anyone as much I've hated you right now, James! *Spag bol* to another adult.

*Spag bol!*

[...]

That is what you say to people you intend to see again? *Spag!*

[...]

None of us go into the supermarket on a normal day and are like, 'Excuse me? *COME HERE! Excuse me! Come here I said!*

*Excuse me! Is my voice invisible? Come here! Come! Yes, you!*

*Where is your spag aisle?* (Acaster, 2018)

From “come here!” Acaster has become the Leave voter: his histrionic assertion that spaghetti be called ‘spag’ in the face of all opposition and reason becomes the synecdoche for Brexit. He begins to turn the routine from his own self-hatred to an indistinct European’s hatred of the The English: pretending to perform a perspective photograph trick of holding up the Leaning Tower of Pisa, Acaster continues to shout “spag!” while failing to hold up the tower. He begins to chant the Brexit Campaign’s unofficial slogan, “You need us more than we need you!” intercut with “*Spag Bol!*”. Eventually he falls to the ground, abandons the stand-up position, and weakly asks: “Help us?”

Muddling the escapist fantasy of witness protection with the desire to escape “Brexit Britain” performs the function of showing both to be impossible for Acaster: escapism shows you only better return to yourself. Acaster says ‘spag bol’ repeatedly; he self-lacerates himself, then puts it in the mouth of the populist Leave Voter. The iterant chant “*Spag!*” raises the banal idiom from the restricted code of English slang to the level of geo-political argument. “Spag bol” is not a universal contraction of spaghetti bolognese in Britain. It would rarely be used on mainstream television cookery programmes; nor is it used to advertise bolognese sauce in Britain. It is not official language, but fading unofficial language. More specifically “spag bol” belongs to a series of older idioms for foreign foods (many of which are now politically incorrect). Presumably Acaster has something of this in mind when he makes it the chant of the Brexiteer.

Far from the “dreadful secondariness” of the subaltern inheriting the language of the oppressors, the hegemonic subject inherits the language of the hegemonic national ancestor. The vote to leave is, demographically, located in the middle-aged to elderly middle class in the

south and east of England. But demography is culturally useless to situate meaning, (and comedy). “*Spag bol!*” is, however, highly productive: to a native English person who has grown up amongst these middle-aged, to elderly English people it perfectly brings to mind their politics. “*Spag bol!*” becomes a comic signifier of the “Brexitteer.” It is a linguistic symbol whose relative autonomy to the demographic group who are responsible for Brexit is such that it goes beyond demography and generational divides to compound them within Acaster. The humor of the “*spag bol!*” routine is such that it perfectly combines escapist fantasy with the real danger from which Acaster wants to escape. Acaster wants to flee stand-up comedy as no perfect audience exists and the laughter he receives is ambivalent in its designs on him. With this climax, the two escape routes combine: the audience laugh at him as he says “*spag bol!*”, only for this to transform into ridicule of the Brexitteer, to whom the phrase wilfully belongs. Acaster ends, frustrated and wound up by his own hegemonic normativity, lying down dramatically simulating the impossibility of escaping himself.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this article has been to demonstrate that Durkheim’s cult of the individual can be found in comic form in contemporary stand-up comedy. Centrally it has argued that the aesthetic affordances of stand-up comedy constitute individuality in a distinctive manner. However, the question remains whether stand-up comedy is a privileged form of popular performance because it reflects our time more than modernity’s conditions of individuality. Indeed, Acaster is one case in point of a larger form of personhood which prevails in our time: a flawed, self-deprecating individual who performs a celebration of their own flawed self-deprecation. One could easily make the case for stand-up comedy not being timeless but thoroughly contemporary: as an auto-biographical art-form it responds to the life and times of the performer and their immediate socio-historical circumstances. The present article, however, has focused upon the internal dynamics of stand-up comedy performances to



illustrate how far the two - stand-up comedy's contemporariness and place within modernity's conditions of individuality - could plausibly go hand-in-hand. The connection between modernity's cult of individuality and contemporary society outlined above is the following. We have inherited a world-view which relies upon implicit forms of individual sacralisation, but the larger philosophical discourses underlying the sacredness of the person are far from universally accepted, nor necessarily intuitive. That is why human rights require dramatic narration in the language of the sacred/profane in and through collective processes (Alexander, 2017; Baker, 2014; Joas, 2013). However, stand-up comedy rests somewhere between these two processes. Stand-up comedy gains its plausibility and appeal by providing a cultural space for the performance of a cult of individuality as well as being a means to facing up to the present limits, tensions and compromises which circulate within our wider cultural conversations.

As a larger contribution to cultural sociology, therefore, the suggestion is that when we study the cult of the individual we examine the varieties of moral fates individuals undergo in various institutional-aesthetic settings. However, recent studies give little indication of the diversity of individual fates (e.g. McCormick, 2015; King, 2010; LaChance, 2007). They all express the conflicted ideal of moral individualism found in disparate realms of social life in an aesthetically coherent way: individuals undergo a *tragic fate*. The tragic form is how two equally legitimate but incompatible ends foreclose action and show no way out. As Simmel (2010:§148, p.184) says: "in tragedy a universal fate is enacted by individual characters." Read this way, Durkheim's cult of individuality is once again shown to fail under the conditions of modernity: collective categories subsume individuality. To view modernity as inherently tragic has longstanding precedence. However, the implications of this article suggests that alternative modes of aesthetic ordering to individuality prevail. The relationship between individual personality and collective persona explored here takes a comic form. It relies upon a perceptual distance between collective identity and individual personality which actively confuses the

triumph of one over the other. For “[i]n comedy a thoroughly individual fate is enacted by type characters...” (Simmel, 2010: §148, p.184). This is another way of posing the problem of collectivity and individuality in modernity: living as a ‘(stereo-)type’ in a society where we are encouraged to think of ourselves as unique individuals. In comedy we must submit ourselves to how the generalised Other sees us in order to find both mutuality with others and limit the extent of identification. We become recognised by being mis-recognised, mis-recognised so as to be recognised. In a religion where the self is ‘both believer and God’ confusions on the grounds of collectivity and individuality are needed: conditions found in the sensuous qualities of comedy.

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