The Sad Clown Paradox: A theory of comic transcendence

ABSTRACT: One prevailing cultural sensibility of our time is a concern with the state of our mental health, another is our desire for a good 'sense of humour'. At present the two are conflated through a paradoxical cultural figure: the sad clown – those who make us laugh the most tend to be the most prone to mental health problems. This article views this 'sad clown paradox' as less about the peculiarity or exceptional status of a comedian's psychology, more about how the cognitive burdens of modernity are rendered bearable and collectively recognised in thought and sentiment by humour. Accounts of comedy and mental health conflate good comedy with mental anguish. By unpacking this knotted relationship using the humour of Jewish-American comedians, it is argued that comedians' humour performs a way for contemporary persons to deal with modernity's fragmentary character of life from within their own inner-worlds and selves.

KEYWORDS: Mental health * Comedy * Transcendence * Jewishness * Maron

Introduction

One of documentary filmmaker Louis Theroux's unrealised projects was for a film concerning the emotional lives of stand-up comedians, the distinctiveness of which lay in the stand-up comedian's emotional payout:

> These people who spill their guts on stage, they transmute the angst of their lives into comic gold, and that's a high-wire act. To me that's the beginning of something interesting. It embodies a sort of tension between, you know, you're turning your wound into your art, [...] you [the comedian] pay a price, and the people around you pay a price. (Theroux, quoted in Maron 2017)

By 'pay a price' Theroux means both the commercial and critical success of the comedian, as well as the emotional toll that comedy routines have on both comedians and their dependents. Because, as Theroux (quoted in Maron 2017) points out, "in stand-up comedy you're playing a version of yourself but it impinges upon your own life and relationships." Theroux shared his vision for his unreleased film while speaking to one of his film's subjects, Marc Maron. For Maron can be taken to be as much an archetype as living proof of what the present article explores: the sad clown paradox. Maron, as with other comedians in his comic tradition, is a highly successful comedian, but his success comes at the price of his obligation to suffer.

It is the lesser ambition of this article to enter the late-twentieth, early twenty-first Anglo-American stand-up comedian into the genealogy of figures of what Scott Lash (1990) called 'second modernity'. This tradition maintains that the critic could probe at the hidden depths of social life from marginal, ephemeral, or fragmentary aesthetic materials or surface products, be they detective novels or Parisian Arcades (Kracauer, 1995; Benjamin, 1999). At the same time, this diagnosis of modernity's conditions of lived experience was epitomised and

channelled through the figures through which this worldview took shape: the detective, the *flaneur*. There is large literature capable of confirming this for the stand-up comedian: their art is vulgar and transgressive and their aesthetic material, jokes and laughter, are ephemeral (Smith, 2018; Kuipers, 2015; Brodie, 2014; Limon, 2000). As cultural figures of transgression, comedians have been offered up as trickster, or folkloric, figures propagating alternative forms of knowledge to official or hegemonic beliefs (Keisalo, 2018; Weaver & Mora, 2016; Berger, 2014; Brodie, 2014; Feltmate, 2013). But with stand-up comedians we seem to be moving into a different context to the figures theorised in that 'second modernity'. The figures of the 'second modernity' were marginal, and through marginality they gained their privileged status to capture realities of social life beyond official discourse. In the Anglo-American context this article traces, theorists have noted a shift toward the mainstream for comedy (Smith 2021; Giamario, 2020).

While like the detective or *flaneur*, stand-up comedy was once the preserve of marginal figures in identity terms, Limon (2000) predicted that potential stand-up comedians would be drawn from diverse as well as hegemonic identity contexts; a fact confirmed by empirical studies (Smith, 2018; Krefting, 2014). Parallel to this we can note another cultural development emblematic of twenty-first century experience; a concern over the state of our (so-called) mental health. As psychoanalysts have noted, while the so-called 'mad' were once sequestered from the so-called 'sane', the prevailing language and sensibilities of our time is one where madness is a form of common currency which could be said to diminish or increase (Phillips, 2003; 2006; Leader, 2011; 2013). As Darian Leader puts it in *Strictly Bipolar* (2013:1): "The question today is not 'Are you bipolar?' but 'How bipolar are you'?" It will be my claim here that we cannot understand our cultural preoccupation with our mental health without understanding the stand-up comedian, and vice versa.

It is the higher ambition of this article to account for this simultaneous mainstream marginality to stand-up comedy alongside the mainstreaming of so-called mental health problems. My guiding assumption is that contemporary people can find in the figure of the stand-up comedian a vision of subjectivity which is able to both affirm a felt sense of incoherence in their lives as much as offer a sense of resolution to discord or tension. In second modernity, the figures were allegorical: their materials offered a way into hidden meanings (e.g. the detective and their clues) as much as being themselves allegories (Lash, 1999:324ff). As such these figures held much in common with the treatment of the so-called mad prior to our present moment; they were seen as exceptional to the normative realities the so-called sane inhabit. By contrast, what I wish to demonstrate is that it is through the stand-up comedian that we can trace some of the lessons of psychoanalytic accounts of madness: 'being mad' is not to be mistaken for 'going mad' (Leader, 2011). That inhabiting forms of thought or reasoning that are, *prima facie*, illogical or perplexing, reveal upon closer scrutiny perfectly sensible solutions to one's predicaments.

I build this argument in two stages. First, I situate the prevailing scholarship on comic transcendence in dialogue with Simmel's (2013; 2010) framework of life's fragmentary character and transcendence in ('second') modernity. Within humour studies, the meaning of comic transcendence is often situated at an impasse: either humour is a signal of transcendence (Berger, 1997) or evidence transcendence's impossibility (Critchley, 2003). Simmel's definition of transcendence is that, unable to escape themselves, the modern self nevertheless remains oriented toward going beyond themselves as a defining quality of their selfhood. Second, I conceptualise this view of transcendence through two sides of the sad clown paradox: on the one hand, comedians are both laughed 'at and with' (Smith, 2021), while, on the other, comedians pivot between thinking of themselves as 'sane in a world gone mad' or 'mad in a

sane world'. This shall be substantiated through an interpretation and analysis of Marc Maron's comedy as well as his 2011 Montreal Just For Laughs Comedy Festival keynote speech.

Let me note, however, some important scope conditions to the argument: as I am writing a theory of comic transcendence in our 'second modernity', my argument is written in a general tone but reflects only a very small portion of comedy in the Anglo-American world. It is important to remember that the comic who is ironic, self-deprecating, erudite, angst-ridden, and anxious is only one figure in the history of comedy in Anglo-American democracies. Equally: if 'modernity' is *only* as it is described here, we would all be depressed comedians (thankfully, this is not the case).

Comedy in (Second) Modernity: Simmel's fragmentation and transcendence

Lash's (1999:2) concept of 'second modernity' sought to offer theorists a means to appreciate that there is "another modernity, inscribed in a different rationality." First modernity saw societal processes of fragmentation as accompanying a rationalisation of life broken down into mutually exclusive political, economic, familial, erotic, value spheres (Weber, 1986); where there arises a plurality of lifeworld's so different ethnicities, races, classes and status, subcultural worldviews or religious beliefs become mutually exclusive (Berger et. al., 1976). In the first modernity, rationality was one where "we must reflect and find the rule under which a particular case is to be grasped": what belongs to 'this religion', 'this class', and so on. While the different rationality inscribed in the second modernity "meant that a rule had to be found." (Lash, 1999:2) Lash (1999: esp.231ff) would conceptualise the figure of second modernity and their different rationality as 'Judaic'.[1]

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[1] It is beyond the scope of this article to fully substantiate the claims to the 'Jewishness' of much contemporary humour, and its role in Lash's second modernity. However, scholarship that has been helpful to my thinking and understanding have been: Baum (2017a/b), Limon (2000), and Berger (2014). While it may be exaggerated to claim, as Slezkine (2019:1) does, that "modernisation …is about everyone becoming Jewish", I am saying that much of popular humour (not all, but especially that which is inflected with mental health concerns) in Anglo-American culture owes itself to Jewish experience in modernity.

A joke from one archetypal Jewish comedian, Lenny Bruce, captures the different rationality of second modernity that Lash (1999:3) called reflective judgements:

> …If you live in New York or any other big city, you are Jewish. It doesn't matter even if you're Catholic; if you live in New York, you're Jewish. If you live in Bute, Montana, you're going to be goyish even if you're Jewish.
>
> Kool-Aid is goyish. Evaporated milk is goyish, even if Jews invented it. Chocolate is Jewish and fudge is goyish. [...] Negroes are all Jews. Italians are all Jews. Irishmen who have rejected their religion are Jews. Mouths are very Jewish. And bosoms. Baton-twirling is very goyish. (Bruce cited in Baum, 2017a:152-153)

We could say this joke is not merely an example of reflective judgement but rather reflective judgement itself takes the form of a joke. For Bruce is giving us, as Baum (2017a:153) puts it, "a whole new way of telling the difference. Neither Jewish nor goyish are absolute categories…" Bruce's skill is to both invent and confirm implicit forms of thought in his litany of indeterminate differences and distinctions. In the joke, Bruce "creates, in the very telling, its own community and rules of belonging." (Baum, 2017b:10)

Bruce's illustration of a 'second modernity's' reflective judgements brings out the meaning of Simmel's (2013) 'fragmentary character of life'. As we come to experience fragmentary value spheres and mutually incompatible lifeworld's predicated upon different meaning-systems, the individual's psyche is obliged to become a centre of certainty in a life of fragmentation. An obligation we are by no means able to meet in an absolute sense. For in a fragmented world, an individual's consciousness mirrors life's fragmentation: everyone is obliged to turn life's processes into something of which they become "mentally conscious." (Simmel, 2013:238) Bruce's indeterminate litany of 'Jewish or Goyish' can be read as a play upon this obligation individuals must take up; to 'make up' much of what appears to them in

modern life. Simmel appears to suggest that when we are all obliged to unify that which is fragmentary, we all unify fragments in our own fractured sense. Those 'in' on Bruce's joke are 'in' on its meta-comic element: the fact we all make up our own, private idiosyncratic distinctions between that which appears to be strangely personal and impersonal, from chocolate to Baton-twirling. Life becomes fragmentary in a deeper sense than is usually meant by first modernity's societal process of fragmentation. First, all of us inhabit a consciousness whose mental contents are shared with others but only provisionally so: none of us inhabit the same consciousness but we do share points of reference. Second, our thinking and reasoning is fragmentary in the sense that each reflective judgement is limited in its scope of comprehension. In short: we all know Bruce's Jewish or Goyish list is a fiction, but we enjoy that he can make it up so convincingly and we can 'get' on its wavelength.

Viewed more closely, Bruce's joke can help us illustrate two competing visions of humour found in current comedy literature. One prevailing view of humour pictures society confronting the individual: as our worlds become fractured but stand alongside one another, a comic sensibility arises which emphasises wit, irony, and a sardonic detachment to lived realities (Berger, 2014; Cormack et. al. 2017; Feltmate, 2013; Billig, 2005; Wickberg, 1998; Mulkay, 1988). In this view, what we call having 'a sense of humour' is a sensibility which emphasises the subject's own distance from themselves in their lived surroundings. A sense of humour becomes about 'not taking yourself seriously' (Wickberg, 1998) to mitigate for the inconsistencies and incongruities of logic, understanding and competing claims a plurality of life worlds and value spheres puts in place (Billig, 2005). As Bruce tells us what is Jewish or Goyish we are involved in this intellectual play of perceptual distance from ourselves; we can find our Jewish or Goyishness in our ethnicity, domesticity, and so on. The second view of humour pictures the individual confronting society. Because of modernity's pluralisation of life worlds, humour becomes an index of a high degree of social differentiation. Humour

becomes specific to social groups and indexes the faultlines of structural divides (generational, gendered, classed, racial and ethnic, and so on) (Kuipers, 2015; Weaver, 2011; Fine and Soucey, 2005). Humour thereby becomes both the evidence and test of our obligation to piece together experience, knowledge, and forms of understanding. When we find people who 'get' our jokes we are testing how far our ability to form fragmented patterns of thought into humorous statements resonates with others. But this ingenious logic is, given its status as humour, evidence of our uncertainty about whether such a way of thinking or seeing the world is cogent or otherwise. That is, Bruce's own litany of what is Jewish or Goyish is, in fact, confirmation of his marginality as he "seems to take the side of minority, outsiderness, and difference." (Baum, 2017b:10)

Whatever way we settle this dialectic, humour appears to be a double-edged entity where in-between lies the modern individual. An individual who uses humour to, at once, navigate a world which exceeds their capacity to comprehend and cognitively master its intricacies, and one who also uses that same technique of cognitive misapprehension to be reminded of their particularity and difference to others. This is not a heroic position in which to be: there appears to be no escape for the modern individual. For theorists of modern humour, this position is a problem of comic transcendence (Berger, 1997; Critchley, 2003; 2007; Feltmate, 2013). For humour at once offers a signal of the individual's transcending themselves and their normative, ordinary realities of perception and meaning (Berger, 1997). But equally, humour makes use of those same normative, ordinary forms of logic and reasoning to acknowledge impasses, contradictions, and tensions within said normative patterns of thought. Humour thereby reminds the individual of their particularity and roots themselves to themselves (Critchley, 2007). In my view, this is not an impasse in our theorising about humour in modernity but instead an illustration of the meaning of modern transcendence which arises out of Simmel's view of life's fragmentary character.

In 'Life as Transcendence', Simmel (2010) argues that the modern worldview can be characterised by a problem of the 'beyond'. Modern individuals place transcendent beliefs 'beyond' themselves (God, the Other, moral authority, etc.). However, unable to know anything beyond their contingent existence and experience, these beliefs of the 'beyond' become thoroughly imbued in the subjectivity of the modern individual. We cannot think certain things without the concept *of* the 'beyond'. In our case, we can see that humour attempts to go beyond our immediate self as Bruce's reflective judgements take on the character of never ending distinctions; but, equally, arising from his own particular, limited and inescapable self, Jewish or Goyish can only go so far and illuminate so much. But rather than an impossibility of transcendence, Simmel suggests that being orientated *to* the 'beyond' *is* transcendence. We find the meaning of ourselves not in going beyond ourselves but by our being orientated toward going beyond ourselves.

What I hope to have intimated for what follows is this: being obliged to turn fragments into coherent wholes that nevertheless retain their fragmentary and fragile status is a cognitive burden. It takes its toll on the psyche. It is this facet of 'second' modernity that accounts for the sad- or madness of the comic above anything else, sociologically speaking. For to list everyday objects as belonging to mythic categories of Jewish or Goyish is …odd: having a grip on reality means that, sometimes, a cigar is just a cigar. This produces a social analogue to the socio-psychic origins of humour such as Bruce's. On the one hand, we are laughing with Lenny Bruce; we are 'in' on his thoughts; but, on the other, we are laughing at 'him'; his particularity and peculiarity. Equally, he is sane in so far as we 'get' his meta-comic level but, at the same time, he is insane as chocolate is nothing other than chocolate. As such, I shall now demonstrate this vision of comic transcendence as being oriented toward the beyond but nevertheless remaining in one's self in these two guises.

The Sad Clown Paradox I: Laughing at/with

Groucho Marx is often attributed with the following joke about the celebrated, proverbial 'sad clown', Grock:

A man falls into a deep depression.

He tells his doctor.

"I have the perfect cure" remarks the doctor. "The great clown

Grock is in town, go and see him and you'll feel much better."

The man replies. "But Doctor, I am Grock."

In his biography of Groucho Marx, Siegel (2015) argues the Marx Brothers inverted the 'tears of the clown' trope with this joke: the original idea is that the humour of the clown on stage is a transfiguration of a mental wound off stage. By contrast, the Marx Brothers "channelled the wound directly into the humour without any kind of transfiguration at all. The pain is not repressed, suppressed, sublimated, or converted. It is a transparent and crucial component of the joke…" (Siegel, 2015:98-99) We 'feel sorry' for Grock as much as we are amused by his predicament. By making the wound part of the humour the Marx Brothers achieve a double effect of pathetic/bathetic identification in one. They are "putting the villain into the clown suit, as well as the victim." (Siegel, 2015:99) Much like Theroux's vision for his documentary on the emotional toll of comedy routines on comedians' lives off-stage, the sad clown joke relies upon the belief that transmuted angst *is* the substance of comedy: that the wound is the humour.

We can find versions of Marx's Grock joke in a tradition of Jewish humour, through Woody Allen up to Marc Maron. Devorah Baum's *The Jewish Joke* (2017) gives us Woody Allen's opening monologue to 1977's *Annie Hall*, a joke Allen attributes to *both* Grouch Marx and Sigmund Freud: 'I would never belong to any club that would have me as a member'. It is as much a joke to Allen as it is "a piece of scripture to be traced back" (Baum, 2017a:4) to its origins in Marx, Freud and his own mid-life crisis. We can even see the same logic in Maron's joke about suicide:

I've thought about suicide a lot. …It's not because I want to kill myself, I just

find it relaxing. …To know that I can if I have to. …I don't know what kind of

person you are, but you've never had that moment, like, "Why the fuck does my

life !! Oh, Hey!? I could always kill myself [phew] ah, back to work." It's the

spiritual reprieve of the faithless (Maron, 2011)

As Baum (2017:2) asks of these jokes' humour,

…is it the way of telling the joke so hesitantly that its punchline gets

overwhelmed by the joker's neurosis? Are we laughing along with the

comedian, or are we laughing at him? Or …[m]ight we be laughing, for

instance, at how seriously the joke gets taken by a joker who has no sooner

uttered it than he adds a commentary detailing an existential view of the world

- one with a distinctly melancholic undertone?

To answer Baum's questions, I shall argue that these jokes all exemplify an indeterminacy of

laughing at or laughing with the comedian. An indeterminacy which itself reveals the

conditions of subjectivity and societal inclusion within our tradition of 'second' modernity.

In the history of humour, the distinction between laughing at or with has long been

associated with the moral peculiarity of humour: is laughter sublimated aggression (Hobbes,

Freud)? Is laughter mixing pleasure with malice (Plato)? Is laughter that punches up good, and

laughter that punches down bad? (Limon, 2009) Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (2007) remained

uncertain (Giamario, 2020). Initially, Kant drew a categorical distinction between how persons

embody humour: "A person with whom such variations are not a matter of choice is said *to

have humours,* but if a person can assume them voluntarily …he and his way of speaking are

termed *humorous*." (Kant, 2007:164, original emphasis) In this division, Kant (2007:165f) saw

some people as patients of humour (funny things are *done to do them*) and some people as

agents of humour (they *do funny things*). Another way of putting it would be to say that some

people benefit from humour by being an object of ridicule (laughed at), others by being the agent of the ridiculous (laughing with). But in the 'sad clown' jokes of Marx, Allen and Maron, the comedian is both agent and patient of their humour.

It would be helpful to view these jokes in two ways: first in terms of their incongruous logic or reasoning; second in terms of the 'existential commentary' on the world Baum detects. At the level of logic, the Grock joke is a comic version of what philosophers refer to as Russell's paradox. Russell's paradox illustrates that certain classes cannot be members of themselves. In the Grock joke, the logical paradox of the sad clown is the following:

- The clown cannot make himself laugh because he only makes those laugh who cannot laugh by themselves.

- If the clown makes himself laugh, he is no longer the clown.

- But if the clown does not make himself laugh, he is also a member of the group of people who would be made to laugh by the clown.

Allen and Maron also utilise this paradoxical logic: of being included while being excluded (Allen); of death preserving life (Maron). But notice how once this incongruous or paradoxical logic is in place, it can then become a way to say something about subjective experience of social belonging. As Baum says of Allen's joke, (but could be true of all three): "you surely need an ironic sense of Jews as quintessentially members of a club to which they only really belong to the extent that they resist their membership." (Baum, 2017:4)

To deepen these claims, let me elaborate psychoanalyst Darian Leader's (2002; 2013) thesis that Freud's (2002) *Jokes and their relation to the unconscious* is, simultaneously, a contribution to the study of psychosis (mania) and aesthetics, (or existential commentary and logic respectively). Freud's *Jokes* is a study in mania insofar as Freud treats the talent for humour as not universally distributed in human personalities. For, like Kant, Freud believed some persons have a talent for humour. This talent consists of making illogical forms of

reasoning nevertheless work; there is method in the madness of jokes. But this illogical reasoning doesn't work on its own. Other people become necessary to not only confirm the incongruous reasoning of the joke-work, but they are required to remedy the loss of pleasure of that incongruous thought in the joke teller. But, at a deeper level, Freud observes that there is a relational dynamic to this form: incongruous reasoning is often immoral and the status of the Other becomes compromised in the process. Is the Other morally innocent or compromised by laughing at something suspect?

Leader's *Strictly Bipolar* (2013:26) pinpoints this exactly: "Jokes always involve a third-party, as if our affect of laughter both depends on someone else laughing and is sanctioned by them." Leader makes this central to the psychic form of mania rather than a symptom of mania. "Manic depression is the attempt to separate, to maintain an elementary differentiation in the place of a more confusing set of painful contradictions. And this is perhaps the real sense of manic depression" Leader (2013:64) asserts: "What appear to be extremes of behaviour in manic depression are thus ways of purifying extremes: grey must be separated into black and white." Mania is what happens when black and white become grey; the joke is the symbolic and intellectual expression of a mind and life seeking to purify extremes, often with a moral hue. Therefore we can see how Marx, Allen and Maron all seek this elementary separation: sad/happy; included/excluded; dead/alive. Within the joke-work, the intellectual reasoning of the witticism and the witty individual, is the effort to separate goodness from badness; to keep morality pure and immorality at bay. But to do this, the joker must assume the position of the grey, to become coloured with the impurity of immorality while seeking to purge morality: they must be sad *and* happy; included *and* excluded; dead *and* alive. Jokes involve guilt because they name the transgression they seek to absolve. Hence why jokes require a third-party: jokes need someone to conspire with (to acknowledge improper moral sentiments) as

well as to collaborate with (to purge morality of its imperfections). The moral ambiguity of the joke-work arises from the imperfections of morality being revealed in joke-form.

In this way, it leads onto how Freud's *Jokes* is also a study in aesthetics. In *Stealing the Mona Lisa*, Leader (2002) argues that art and jokes are about revealing the form of semiotic systems; showing how they operate and their consequences. Art refers to useless objects which have no purpose but command the highest price. Jokes are illogical statements that nevertheless mean more than logical statements. Art and jokes articulate the void upon which semiotic systems rest: "jokes involve a privileging of this dimension of meaning 'between the lines' that is actually sanctioned, recognised by the code itself. … A joke, in this sense, is a message about the code." (Leader, 2002:85) In our case, insofar as comedians are 'laughed with' it is because they have brought to mind modernity's form: they are making a commentary upon the code of social membership modernity puts in place. But, insofar as we 'laugh at' comedians, it is because they have localised the guilt and immoral transgression within their comic sensibility.

We have a vision of transcendence where being unable to escape oneself is, nevertheless, orientated to going beyond oneself through the twin processes of the joke-work: pathos and bathos, inclusion and exclusion, in one and the same moment. While Kant (2007:160-164) reasoned that jokes and laughter appeal to the body, not the intellect, the intellect is far more central to his claims (Giamario, 2020). The talent for humour is

> being able to put oneself at will into a certain frame of mind which everything
> is judged on lines that do not follow the beaten track (quite the contrary) and yet
> on lines that follow certain principles, rational in the case of such mental
> temperament. (Kant, 2007:164)

It is in the logical form of their jokes that comedians get themselves out of the impossible situation of being ineluctably themselves: first in the internal logic of the joke as it rewrites

normative reason, second in audience laughter as rewritten reason finds its collective recognition.

The Sad Clown Paradox II: Sane/Insane

While there is a psychoanalytic literature which argues that a talent for humour goes hand in hand with psychoses (Ando, Claridge & Clark, 2014; Leader, 2013; Janus, 1975; Freud, 2005, 2003), for me, more than anything else, comedy is the cultural performance that dramatises the problem that mental health names. Comedy becomes a way to talk about what it means to live in our second modernity. If laughing at and with reveals the incongruous logic of our societal membership, then to perform comedy in this way is to inhabit sanity and insanity in one and the same moment. Often through comedy performed by 'sad clown' figures, we find the comedian is either sane in a world gone mad, or mad in a sane world.

To see this, let us bring into focus the comedian who can be taken to be the pioneer to the new language of mental health within stand-up comedy. The cultural proliferation of documentaries, podcasts, and increasingly stand-up comedy specials, which are *about* mental health owe themselves, in part, to Marc Maron's *WTF Podcast*. Louis Theroux's unrealized film, with which we began, took its impetus from a recommendation from one of Theroux's colleagues that he listen to Maron's *WTF Podcast*, a podcast known for its confessional disclosures by prominent comedians on their depression, suicidal ideation and other mental health problems. Bill Hader would say of Maron's ethos for *WTF*:

> …There is this very interesting thing where you go into the backroom of his house and it's this little garage, and it's just the two of you, and it is very, it's like going into a therapist's office or something. You know, the door closes and all the air goes [*gasps*] out of the room, and you're kinda in this hyper-sealed, little room and you feel almost compelled to, you know, talk about whatever. (Hader, quoted in Buxton, 2016)

All of this tells us not that comedy is about mental health problems, but rather that the therapeutic discourse which has come to pervade Anglo-American culture (Illouz, 2007) finds itself amenable to a comic rendering. However, that said, there is something specific to the tradition of self-deprecating, ironic, witty, and largely 'Judaic' humour, as Lash (1999) termed second modernity's 'different rationality', which makes comedy and psychotherapy apt bedfellows. Psychoanalysis has found comedians insightful in the making of diagnosis: Leader's *Strictly Bipolar* (2013:98) could not have been written, by his own admission, without the autobiography of Stephen Fry.

Psychoanalysis has, in fact, become an important driver in not only understanding the nature of comedy but also demonstrating the affinity between stand-up comedy as humour *and* talking cure. In 'The Great Comedians', psychoanalyst Samuel Janus' (1975) reported that many in his sample of 55 comedians recounted the joke of the comedian going to the psychoanalyst. The comedian "was told to "lie down on the couch and tell me everything you know." … followed up with the punch line "And now he's doing my act in Philadelphia." (Janus, 1975:172) Only to go on to note that "…all the subjects viewed themselves as experts on human relations, suffering, and psychotherapy. …40 percent stated that they felt that they understood themselves better than their therapist had." (Janus, 1975:172) The role-reversals of doctor-patient, psychoanalyst-stand-up comedian are available because both practise the same profession, seemingly, by other means. Both are (proclaimed) experts on human suffering, and both have versions of a 'talking cure' performed in front of a – variously imagined – hostile or receptive audience. But what differentiates Maron's *WTF Podcast*, and those that follow, is that his podcast is an education to 'us', his audience, not in the therapeutic value of humour but instead: how a comedian sees their obligation to their society. While Bill Hader can see the 'spirit' of analyst-analysand relations behind Maron's podcast, "we", their audiences, come to

their acts and self-accounts as visions of how comedians figure the relationship between themselves and the world, and the sanity or insanity of both.

A perfect illustration of this is Maron's keynote speech to the 2011 Montreal Comedy festival. In this speech we can discern not only a clear psychoanalytic ethos but the very 'different rationality' of reflective judgements which reveal an indeterminate sanity and insanity in the figure of Maron. Maron's first joke is to reference his recent success with the *WTF Podcast* as follows:

> Things are going pretty well for me. I don't know what kind of person you are, but when things are going pretty well for me, there's a little voice inside of my head that says '*You're going to fuck it up!' [small laugh*]. And I really just wish that voice were louder than the voice screaming: *'LETS FUCK IT UP!!' [big laugh]* [...] I'm the kind of person who needs to deconstruct even a good thing so I can understand what is expected of me, and who is expecting it. (Maron, 2011)

Maron, at this point, is questioning why he is giving the keynote speech given his abject failure as a career comic: while giving a speech in recognition of his success, he tells us that he is undeserving, immoral, and bad. Maron is not lying, or feigning modesty: as Freud (2005) would remark of the melancholic subject, they seem "to be grasping the truth more keenly than others who are not melancholic." Freud is puzzled by this: like Maron here, if the melancholic "describes himself as petty, egoistic, insincere and dependent person, …he may as far as we know come quite close to self-knowledge, and we can only wonder why one must become ill in order to have access to such truth." (Freud, 2005:206) The truth that Maron has found is that a reflective judgement upon one's inner-neurosis requires external confirmation. We need to be 'in' on the character of 'Marc Maron'. Only the character 'Marc Maron, mad and sad clown' can tell this truth. To Maron, being a stand-up comedian is to embrace 'their clown':

As I've said I've been doing comedy for more than 25 years, I've put more than half of my life into building my clown. That's how I see it. I think that comics keep getting up on stage and, in time, the part of them that lives and thrives up there is their 'clown'. My clown was fuelled by jealously and spite for most of my career. (Maron, 2011)

It is not that madness is feigned, performed, or a comedic conceit in Maron or other stand-up comedy; it is instead to say that it is *acted* madness, as Adam Phillips (2012) would put it. As sociologists and psychoanalysts have noted, those we deem 'insane' or who 'go mad' break social bonds (Goffman, 1967; Leader, 2011; Phillips, 2003). Whereas those who 'act mad' do the opposite: "Acting madness means holding and keeping people's attention" *and* "getting people to be attentive in a different kind of way." (Phillips, 2012:177-178) While if Maron's clown were to exist in the realm of what Goffman (1967) called 'public order', he would break social mores and bonds quickly. But as 'Marc Maron, mad and sad clown' he is able to achieve that melancholic truth Freud discerned. An example from Maron's stand-up is instructive here.

"I almost died on a plane" begins one of Maron's (2019) routines. Maron is an extremely nervous flyer and to cope he must 'fly the plane in his mind'. But that is too much to bear:

So I stuff that fear and that's a spiritual decision. I have no control over this, the guy who is flying should be able to fly this without my help. (Maron, 2019)

It just so happens that the pilot is mad: on a plane headed for a serious storm, the pilot thinks he can miss it. "What is he gambling with our lives?" Maron exclaims (2019). So as the plane enters the storm, Maron sits with his headphones on while the man behind him is screaming. As Maron falls through the sky, he screams like a man, unlike the infantile screaming man behind.

But I am ashamed to say I did let out one 'Oh Jesus! Not like this!!'

And he's not even my guy. He was never my guy. My people come from the

father, the original, the only true God. But live the lie you want.

But Jesus is so catchy. What am I going to say? "*Yahweh! No!"*

Then you've got to explain yourself: "It's an Old Testament thing, I don't even

know what language it is. It's stupid." (Maron, 2019)

Lacan (1966:238) defined psychosis as an inability to foreclose the Name of the Father to the Other: madness arises when the subject no longer believes in the symbolic order shared with everyone else. The result is that psychotic subject makes an exception for themselves (Leader, 2011:92-94). Here we see this in Maron's routine on two levels: first he does not believe pilots fly planes, he does; second, he does not believe in the saviour he calls out when falling to his death ('My people come from the father…'). Maron's psychosis takes the form of a Jewish joke where it is "hard to tell the difference between laughter and trembling" (Baum, 2017:179). Taking the place of the Other, Maron makes what is terrifying (a plane crash) pathetic, and what is pathetic seem all important ('live the lie you want'). Leader (2011:93, original emphasis) sees the tendency for the psychotic subject to make an exception of themselves as "a way of situating their existence as involved in yet also *outside* the world they inhabit." We are back at Grock and the sad clown paradox.

But there is a difference in the exception Maron makes for himself, and the exception of the person who has 'gone mad'. In Maron's routine, you go down with him, believe in his reality completely, until the punchline. He turns to the woman next him: "I had my earphones on, was everybody screaming?" And she said: 'No. Just you two guys.'" (Maron, 2019)

For Maron it is "the clown" that is the truth of comedy:

The clown. When I was a kid watching comedians on TV and listening to their

records, they were the only ones who could make it all seem okay - they seemed

to cut through the bullshit, and disarm fears and horror by being clever and

funny. I don't think I would have survived my childhood without watching stand-up comics. (Maron, 2011)

When Maron is 'Marc Maron, mad and sad clown', he is insane in a sane world but when he turns to his clowns, the world is insane and the clowns are sane. For in the reflective judgements of jokes "they seemed to cut through the bullshit" and with it "disarm fear and horror" as in Maron's near-death experience. This is the intellectual achievement of jokes as they create fragmentary bonds out of fragmentary material. To recall Simmel's (2013) observation that when we all must unify that which is fragmentary, we all unify fragments in our own fractured sense, the 'acted madness' of the comedian is a performance of this feeling. Hence why jokes often feel like "cut through bullshit": while we all live being told the whatness of what is, it's only the insanity of the comedian that perceives the truth we so often feel is being withheld.

Maron tells his Montreal audience what a stand-up comedian *is*:

Now, after 25 years of doing stand-up and the last two years after having long conversations with over two hundred comics I can honestly say that they are some of the most thoughtful, philosophical, open-minded, sensitive, insightful, talented, self-centred, neurotic, compulsive, angry, fucked-up, sweet, creative people in the world. (Maron, 2011)

We can take this statement and interpret it less as conciliatory congratulations to an audience of comedians. Instead we may read it as a conceptual definition of the sad clown. For here the sad clown amounts to being 'inside and outside' self and society at the same time. On the one hand Maron's psychological profile of 'what a comedian is' can be viewed from the inside-out: 'thoughtful, philosophical, open-minded, sensitive, insightful'. While on the other from the outside-in: 'self-centred, neurotic, compulsive, angry, fucked-up, sweet'. This is a model of sociality which is located in psychological categories, but when positioned through the societal figure of the 'comedian' it becomes a collective representation of self to society. In his

'How is society possible?' (1971), Simmel observes that one can view the life of the individual in society in two ways. Viewed as a causal nexus, the individual is one mere component in a network of association who owes obligations to others. Viewed as a teleological nexus, the individual is a source of autonomous desire who gets things from others. "It is the dual nexus", concludes Simmel (1971:22), "which supplies the individual consciousness with a fundamental category and thus transforms it into a social element." When Maron is speaking of being 'thoughtful, philosophical, open-minded, sensitive, insightful' he is speaking of that causal nexus: it is through the reflective judgements of jokes that acted madness builds bonds with others. But when he is speaking of being 'self-centred, neurotic, compulsive, angry, fucked-up' he is evoking the register of the teleological: psychic suffering is percieved to drive his humour. Raised to a cultural figure which expresses this self-society nexus, Maron's mad or sad clown moves from the virtuous ethics of modern sociality to the vicious, dark-side of modern sociality in one and the same collective figure. On the 'light' side of modernity, the individual needs to be 'thoughtful …open-minded… insightful' about self, the world and one's place in it (Berger et. al. 1971). On the 'dark side' of modern sociality, the individual is 'self-centred, neurotic, angry, fucked-up' (Alexander, 2013). The comedian localises the twin sides to modern social life as a figure who can perform this tension. As Maron ends his address:

> I love comedians, I respect anyone who goes 'all in' to do what I consider a noble profession and art form. Despite whatever drives us toward this profession - i.e. insecurity, need for attention, medical mania, poor parenting, anger, a mixture of all of the above - whatever it is, we comics are out there on the front lines of our sanity. [...] All this for what? For the opportunity to be funny in front of as many people as possible and share our point of view, entertain, tell some jokes, crunch some truths, release some of the tension that builds up in people, in the culture, in ourselves. (Maron, 2011)

The teleological nexus is "insecurity, need for attention, medical mania, poor parenting, anger": comedy is perceived to be motivated by madness. But, in the causal nexus, it is comedy that makes one mad: it makes one reach "the front lines of …sanity." Maron can be viewed as describing how modernity's cognitive burdens find their collective release. Therefore the "comedian" is the ground and figure to the light and dark side of modernity as their humour is generalised as moving from 'them, us, society at large'. Comic transcendence concerns how comedians tie together the fragmentary character of modern life in a form which appears to capture impasses of thought in a manner which is both triumphant and defeatist. Positioning their humour as the intellectualisation of individual life problems in jokes shared ('truth's crunched, tension released'), they find collective acknowledgement of their points of view in a medium which renders that point of view non-serious.

Conclusion

Having aimed to place the 'sad clown' within the figures of Lash's second modernity, we can observe that comedy and mental health go hand in hand as one specific response to the cognitive burdens of modernity. But while humour rewrites collective thought, it does not do so absolutely; it does not escape normativity's logic or conceptual categories. Comic transcendence is to appreciate being an outsider-insider, insider-outsider in both thought and social membership.

When Durkheim (2001:18) wrote that, "[t]o live, society needs not only a degree of moral conformity but a minimum of logical conformity as well", he certainly did not have humour in mind. But having traced the 'different rationality' inherent in the humour of the Judaic stand-up tradition, we can certainly argue that much depends upon walking the tightrope between logic and morality: our sanity itself. Contemporary comedians demonstrate just how dependent moral conformity is on logical conformity. In our case, the comedians surveyed here seek to acknowledge the failures of common-sense reasoning while making a case for some

form of collective 'common-sense' by way of their purported sad- or madness. It is in this context that viewing comedy as about mental suffering gains its societal appeal: a (so-called) "sad or mad" comedian becomes the champion for a form of 'common sense' by way of their idiosyncratic thoughts ('jokes'). A talent for humour becomes a way to render the impossibility of escaping yourself and others bearable in a thought almost shared, and a sensibility almost collectively experienced.

That this performance occurs with the starting point of 'I am not normal' is crucial: telling the story of yourself in a confessional manner, disclosing that which you would only, normatively speaking, tell a mental health professional is another way to speak about a world where we all are inter-connected and dependent upon each, but are unable to reconstruct the lines, byways, and routes of our connectedness in both thought and sentiment. However if this story contains a "joke" what happens is that, collectively, we have that surprising spark where we feel that from nonsense we have arrived at a sense of sorts. Humour appeals to collective sentiment by way of laughter, but the route to the laughter is hidden in a line of reasoning that is initially obscured or is, intellectually speaking, inchoate and individualised. Specific to comedy is that humour illustrates how far collective categories of thought are hard to come by, presently, and how far the individual is implicated in their cogency. Beyond comedy, however, it tells us how difficult it is to find a place in collective life and sentiments.

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