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Book Review

Sam Friedman

Comedy and Distinction: The Cultural Currency of a 'Good' Sense of Humour
Abingdon: Routledge, 2014, £85 hbk (ISBN: 9780415855037), 228 pp.

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Being the first sustained Bourdieusian analysis of comedy, this is an important text that will contribute to the mainstreaming of comedy studies in the academy. Friedman, through a study of the 2009 Edinburgh Festival Fringe, shows that British comedy taste is stratified by class with 'intellectual' performers, such as Stuart Lee, holding favour with bourgeois consumers and observational or 'vulgar' acts appealing to those deemed to have low levels of cultural capital. In short, Friedman discovers that 'universally strong distinctions exist in the patterning of comedy taste' (p. 4). High cultural capital individuals also have the knack of consuming high comedy with a set of embodied dispositions that further distinguish themselves and mirror the Kantian aesthetic of disinterestedness. Omnivorousness, in relation to social mobility, is not discovered in this study. Friedman describes 'only partial signs of omnivorousness' (p. 4) – that those who have mixed taste caused by some social mobility often express this as 'a hindrance rather than a form of capital' (p. 4).

Friedman provides one of the most accessible descriptions of Bourdieusian theory I have encountered and the book should be useful to students who wish to apply Bourdieu to any topic. The book contains a concise history of British stand-up comedy and explains why comedy has been ignored in academic discussions of cultural consumption. A methodological

appendix, that really should not be an appendix at all, provides a useful toolkit for students of Bourdieu. Friedman has collected survey data, conducted multiple correspondence analyses, followed up with semi-structured interviews with comedy fans from different social backgrounds and comedy scouts (from the same social background). Added to this is a textual analysis of comedy reviews in British newspapers. Friedman is clearly aware of the limitations of the project, which he describes in the conclusion. Turning to the limitations, perhaps the 'stilted flow of LCC [low cultural capital] interviews' (p. 172) is one of the most significant. Friedman explains how he had difficulty building rapport with those not of his background. It was disappointing to read that this issue was never resolved. It suggests that much valuable information from this group was left on the table.

An omission from the study is the lack of textual analysis of the *content* of comedy or the jokes that the participants find funny. Using textual analysis to search for the meanings of comedy for audiences is dismissed early on as problematic. It is possible that the textual analysis of comedy could have added to the findings. Friedman is critical of all of the taste groupings he uncovers and the foundation for this is his suspicion 'that such a system of cultural classification is largely "arbitrary", with no taste culture able to validly claim

universal and essential value' (p. 53). Yet there are tensions – in many ways this stance prevents a rigorous identification of classism, which is surely the point of the study. It is also significant that the high cultural capital taste is critical of the offensiveness of much low comedy, which suggests that *some* distinctions are progressive (this was, of course, a founding principle of the alternative comedy movement). The text struggles with the problem of critiquing the distinction of high comedy consumption and the implicit acceptance of this genre as a progressive move away from offensive comedy. A textual analysis of the comedy in question might have resolved this through showing the variety of identification with particular jokes, some of the complexity of *all* comedy in relation to offensiveness and thus what is and is not problematic in each genre.

The disinterestedness of high comedy, as we might call it (which contains the funny idea that comedy is not supposed to be *just* funny), and the offensiveness or the banality of low comedy, leave British comedy – and probably many other comedy industries – in a deeply pessimistic and indeed socially problematic location. We might ask where the revolutionary potential of comedy resides? And can comedy ever be detached from processes of distinction? There have, in the past, been examples of revolutionary humour (see, for example, Brigstocke, 2014) and it seems that Friedman has identified an inverted revolutionary/reactionary humour dichotomy. The comedy of those with high cultural capital is required to have 'a political and moral commitment to prick the pomposity of the privileged and powerful' (p. 165). This is a part of their *illusio*. It is a contradictory 'revolutionary' humour that is actually afraid of mass appeal. It highlights that, for comedy studies, the critique of comedy can have no boundaries, favourites or rarefied objects.

Reference

Brigstocke J (2014) *The Life of the City: Space, Humour, and the Experience of Truth in Fin-de-Siècle Montmartre*. Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, VT: Ashgate.