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“This Is Totally Inappropriate”: Louis C.K.’s Use of Narrative to Build Dialogic Connections

Steve Granelli

The performance of stand-up comedy is variously isolating, inviting, linear, and transactional. The stand-up comedian occupies the stage alone, appearing distinctly independent from the audience. Simultaneously, the audience offers their feedback consistently through the presence or absence of laughter. Audience responses to, and judgment of, the stand-up comedian’s performance forms the inexorable bond between these two parties. As such, this (inter)relationship between the comedian and audience is co-created, interdependent, and dynamic. Through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin, and a review of relevant narrative scholarship, this paper explores the use of narrative by comedian Louis C.K. as being a mode of self-disclosure that connects him with his audience. In particular, I examine how C.K.’s comedic narrative functions to build stronger dialogic connections with his audiences.

Keywords: stand-up comedy, dialogue, narrative theory, Bakhtin, Louis C.K.

The performance of stand-up comedy is variously isolating, inviting, linear, and transactional. The stand-up comedian occupies the stage alone, appearing distinctly independent from the audience. Simultaneously, the audience offers their feedback consistently through the presence or absence of laughter, and their responses to and judgment of the performance forms the inexorable bond between these two parties. The relationship between the comedian and audience is co-created, interdependent, and dynamic. Treating this relationship between comedian and audience as dialogic uncovers a rich ground for analysis. As such, this paper explores the use of narrative by prominent stand-up comedian, Louis C.K., as being a mode of self-disclosure, and examines how his narrative functions to build stronger dialogic connections with his audience.

To view stand-up comedy as a one-sided performance is delimiting. The unique relationship between the stand-up comedian and audience is one built on spontaneous feedback from the audience, to planned messages from the comedian. Each message created by the comedian is dependent on context, because their desired response goes beyond a mere comprehension of their message. The preferred response for the comedian is laughter from the audience, and this cycle hopefully continues for the duration of the comedian’s set. In a 2011 special entitled *Talking Funny*, stand-up legend Jerry Seinfeld explains his perception of the relationship between comedian and audience by stating, “No one is more judged in civilized society than a stand-up comedian. Every twelve seconds you’re rated” (Moffitt-Lee). The delicate balance between the preparation of material and the subsequent

judgment of that material by audiences on a regular basis, provides for a fruitful area of dialogic research.

Judith Yaross Lee's analysis of storytelling in the 20th century across multi-modal delivery systems uses Garrison Keillor as an exemplar, but also addresses the challenges that stand-up comedy faces in connecting with audiences. The lack of a definitive text that the audience can judge the performance against, much like a score that accompanies a musical performance, creates an opportunity for stand-up comedians to deliver a performance, seemingly out of thin air (Yaross Lee 103). Yet, a benefit of the stand-up comedian is the immediacy of perceived conversation with audience members. Without a script or score explicitly shared with the audience beforehand, a comedian can maintain the illusion of spontaneity in their performances. In understanding this context, the lens through which we examine stand-up comedy must incorporate the identity of the comedian, engage in dialogue with the audience, and seek to see what can be accomplished when a dialogic bridge is built between performer and audience.

Bakhtin in Stand-Up Comedy

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the utterance is productively applied to stand-up comedy here, with the necessary component of the other as audience, and the context in which the utterance exists in, is taken into account. The construction of the utterance is based in the social situation in which it is delivered, and the specific norms relating to that situation are paramount. The stand-up comedian requires an ability to perform audience analysis in the creation of material – which includes accounting for an understanding of setting and situational orientation. Thus, the interconnected nature of each utterance requires the comedian to grasp the creation and management of their role as author as well as performer. Bakhtin acknowledges different strata in the same language in his idea of heteroglossia, and elaborates on this double-voicedness in *Discourse in the Novel*, here:

The internal dialogism of authentic prose discourse, which grows organically out of a stratified and heteroglot language, cannot fundamentally be dramatized or dramatically resolved (brought to an authentic end); it cannot ultimately be fitted into the frame of any manifest dialogue, into the frame of a mere conversation between persons; it is not ultimately divisible into verbal exchanges possessing precisely marked boundaries. (326)

Similarly, the comedian is tasked with managing this double-voicedness, as in balancing the direct intention of the character that is speaking with the refracted intentions of the author (Bakhtin 324). In the case of performing stand-up comedy, the lines between author and character are purposefully blurred in order to reduce the perceived difference between the performer and audience as much as possible, with the intention being to create a more

dyadic connection between the two positions. This action allows for the audience to perceive the performance and resulting feedback as analogous to a conversation. As Bakhtin sees it, the responsibility of the author is to grasp the speaker, the other, and the context, while maintaining authorial and character-based intentions.

When reading the author and stand-up comedian as playing the same role, the application of Bakhtin's discussion of ideology is important. As Bakhtin explains, the author's ability to create characters that have a stable ideology throughout a novel is vital. Bakhtin emphasizes, "The action and individual act of a character in a novel are essential in order to expose – as well as to test – his ideological position, his discourse" (334). Each utterance of the character is a risk and a threat to both character and author, thus testing the ability to maintain a consistent ideology as well as continuing to serve authorial and character-based intentions. This constant test throughout a novel (in Bakhtin's context) refers to the situation of each utterance in reference to those that come before and after it. Bakhtin defines dialogism as "the characteristic epistemological mode of a word dominated by heteroglossia. Everything means, is understood, as a part of a greater whole – there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others" (426). The utterance, then, is fully understood as it relates to those utterances preceding and following it, as it fits within a larger whole.

Bakhtin uses the metaphor of speech communication as being a chain, with each utterance serving as a link connected to the utterances before and after. In stand-up comedy, the creation and devotion of and to an overarching ideology (or thematic worldview) is essential for the audience's extended connection to the material, through the comedian. Each subsequent joke, bit, routine, or narrative exists in the context of what occurred prior, and to what will occur after. As such, this constant test throughout the performance requires a relatable common identity for the audience to grasp on to. The use of narrative, especially, in stand-up comedy allows the audience to situate the performer in contexts outside of the direct performance, as the anecdotes provide windows into the life of the comedian beyond the stage. In these instances, the character that the comedian embodies must be fully understood by the audience, transferable to the context that is being described, and ultimately, be *believable*. This comedic ideology created throughout the performance extends to the stories shared, and supports the ways in which the audience will gain entry to understanding the comedian as a fellow being.

Ian Brodie's analysis of the levels of conversational intimacy in stand-up comedy states that "one of the characteristics of stand-up comedy, and one of the hallmarks of stand-up as a performative genre, is how it tends to be predicated on the illusion of intimacy, a disregard for the distancing of the stage" (156). This illusion of intimacy is paramount to the treatment of stand-up comedy as dialogic, and especially so for the purposes of exploring the

use of narrative to establish deeper connections with the audience. Brodie's work actually departs from Bakhtin's concept of dialogue, stating that stand-up comedy falls somewhere between monologic and dialogic (160). I feel that Brodie's discarding of Bakhtin's concept of dialogue limits his analysis of the routines performed by Chris Rock and Ellen Degeneres. I believe that Brodie's analysis would have benefitted from the consideration of how the created identities of both Rock and Degeneres serve as standpoints for their narratives and how they function. This additional insight concerning their identities, would have reinforced the categorization of stand-up comedy as solidly dialogic. Douglas Glick's study of stand-up comedy also uses a specific act and comedian as exemplar, however Glick uses a semiotic approach to explore the construction of a joke in stages. Glick's work extends to an application of Bakhtin's concepts of the social voices, character, and plot of the novel as analogous to a stand-up comedy routine, with British comedian Eddie Izzard as the focus of the analysis (292). Glick's approach is most closely concerned with temporality and language choices that reflect an underlying theme of the various sections of Izzard's routine, and is less concerned with how these aspects of the routine affect the relationship between performer and audience.

Dustin Bradley Goltz's examination of Amy Schumer's use of ironic performativity uncovers a key connection between audience and performer. In discussing Schumer's ability to broach subjects during a roast that was later criticized for exceeding the boundaries of appropriateness, Goltz states:

Faced with a joke, the audience, as active and reflective meaning makers, must, in turn, negotiate their laughing, their politics, their identities, and their investments within this exchange [...]. The gasps, groans, and awkward grumblings in "racy" comedy are part of the communicative process and the negotiation of meanings. One comment pushes a delicate or offensive topic, and these vocalizations or pained silences mark a dialogic offense. There is great risk/value in these ironic moments – the "Oh damn" and the "s/he did not just say that" – for they open up a space, a discomfort, and a performative doing. Discursive meanings are breached. The transformative laugh is not usually the easy one. (283)

In this case, the bond between comedian and audience is marked not necessarily by laughter, but by the nature of challenge and response. Goltz highlights the audience's negotiation of understanding and appropriateness, and the application of Bakhtin could help to uncover how these connections are managed by the performer.

Joanne Gilbert's work exploring the use of self-deprecation by female comedians Roseanne Barr and Phyllis Diller, reveals the connective tissue that is important for the present study. Gilbert asserts:

Using self-deprecation along with other strategies in their rhetorical arsenal, Diller, Barr, and many other female comics engage in a powerful autobiographical performance of personal identity and cultural criticism [...]. By transgressing boundaries and inviting women to be the laughers rather than the laughed-at, they are attacking hegemonic power and privilege in the public sphere. (328)

This use of self-deprecating humor by the comedian functions to articulate a carefully crafted identity for the audience. That identity is paramount to the potential connections being built through this dialogue, and functions similarly to Bakhtin's stable ideology.

Max Van Manen's explanation of the anecdote as a methodological device is useful to apply to the use of narrative in stand-up comedy. Understanding the anecdote as a social product that operates as part of an oral tradition, illustrates how the short narrative is dependent upon its ability to be understood by an audience. A narrative, in this sense, can serve to carry an insight into the context in which it is told, as well as reveal personal characteristics of the storyteller. Van Manen looks at the power of the anecdote as an insight into the performer – acknowledging that anecdote is often the information that is left out of written records (115). However, the inherently conversational nature of the anecdote is in its perceived absence from written record. This perceived asideness to the audience reinforces the illusion of spontaneity that stand-up comedians often use to maintain connections.

The ability to recreate experiences through narrative with relatable circumstances infuses the storyteller with the power to establish resonance with audiences. The result can be an empathetic reading of the narrative as well as provide validation to the audience member (or reader) of their own experiences that they see as similar to those represented in the narrative. As Amy Shuman states,

Storytelling is about particular people and their unique experiences. When stories travel beyond their owners, however, by way of storytelling, in ordinary conversation, and in works of fiction, the messages they convey are larger than an individual incident or an individual life. (6)

Creating a narrative as a function of examining self and one's identity in everyday life is a common theme for the stand-up comedian, and this is why I have chosen to employ this lens in the forthcoming analysis. As Kristin Langellier states in her research on the narratives of refugees, "Ideally and crucially, the performance reframes the audience as witness to personal experience, shifting the evaluative role from objective judge of refugee status to empathic listener of story" (446). The abilities of stand-up comedians to engage their audiences in ways that build affinity between storyteller and

audience, while also challenging conventional beliefs about controversial topics, represents an interesting dance of language, performance, and (dialogic) empathy.

Louis C.K.'s Use of Narrative Dialogism

A comedian that is culturally relevant in terms of his following and is primarily known for his ability to tell long-form narratives, is Louis C.K. C.K.'s proclivity to tell stories that challenge the audience's connection with him as a performer, present an interesting case to examine by using the lens of dialogism, as stated above. By articulating stories that are self-deprecating and uncovering the poor decision-making of the storyteller, C.K. takes full advantage of the connections he builds with his audiences. Using his position on the stage to generate contexts in which narratives take place, in explaining and unpacking his complex relationships, and also how he shows the interplay of roles that he plays on a day-to-day basis, C.K. has become a master of controlling the ways in which audience members can enter his life. When discussing the role of stories as they connect storyteller and audience, Langellier explains, "Telling personal stories and listening to life histories is an intimate interaction, with the gaze and ear trained on the vulnerable body as a site of experience and testimony, [and] especially in live performance" (447). This creation of a vulnerable body from onstage, while still eliciting laughter from the audience through these intimate interactions, is a space in which Louis C.K. thrives.

Louis C.K.'s 2011 concert special, *Live at the Beacon Theater*, was a star-making turn for the comedian – as he served as writer, producer, director, editor, and performer of the 62-minute film. C.K. distributed the special on his own website as an exploration of a new model of digital distribution, and was awarded a Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Writing for a Variety, Music, and Comedy Special (Abramovitch 1). Over the past six years, C.K. has set the standard for productivity in stand-up comedy by releasing a new full-hour of material each calendar year. After his material has aired, C.K. refuses to use these jokes again. This constant turnover of material is not done without revisiting common themes, however. Among the topics often covered by C.K., fatherhood is a repeated theme that has been a consistent staple during this period.

In *Live at the Beacon Theater*, C.K. reflects on his new role as a single-father, following a divorce from his wife. However, these challenges that C.K. faces in fatherhood are not generalized. Instead, they are discussed in the context of specific quotidian events that present struggles for him on a regular basis. I provide an example of this presently. For the purposes of my analysis here, the longest single narrative in the special was chosen. In a story that is excerpted on *YouTube*, C.K. explains his hatred of one of the children who attends school with his daughter. He acknowledges just as he begins the story that, "It's really fucked up because I'm forty-four, and I hate a six-year-

old. I mean I hate him, with a grown-up preoccupied hate” (“Louis CK”). The audience’s response is laughter, and points to the emphasis C.K. places on absurdity; but this also humorously reflects his own understanding of the inappropriateness of what he is saying. By acknowledging his own hatred of the child as being wrong, C.K. mitigates some alienation of the audience members who consider what he is expressing to be inappropriate. In this case, he is giving the audience entry to criticism of his emotions through his own self-deprecation. He gives the bullying boy a made-up name, because as C.K. explains, “He’s a real child, who lives in this city so I have to make up a name to tell a story about him” (“Louis CK”). The name C.K. gives the boy is Jizanthipuss. C.K. explains over the course of the next few minutes how he has come to hate this six-year-old child, by detailing the ways the boy breaks rules at school and is generally undisciplined. After each detail C.K. gives, he reiterates how his hatred also extends to the boy’s mother for not disciplining her child, for not making him clean up after himself, and for neglecting to teach him how to behave at school.

The bulk of C.K.’s story focuses on an incident that occurred while C.K. was serving as a volunteer at his daughter’s school, monitoring the children during recess. An interesting moment occurs in the midst of the story when C.K. makes a comment about masturbating during recess at his daughter’s school, which draws groans and uncomfortable laughter from the audience. In this moment, C.K. references an earlier joke that was also particularly off-color by saying, “Okay, now that is the worst thing I’ve ever said... don’t worry, we’ll get there” (“Louis CK”). Utilizing Bakhtin’s concept of ideology, this small throwaway line is significant because of how it functions within the persona C.K. has created on stage. This aside, separates C.K. from the audience, and then immediately draws them back to him. By creating the barrier of a groan-worthy joke, C.K. acknowledges how awful it is to say this, and then uses inclusive language to keep the audience invested in the story he is telling – just as he did earlier by acknowledging how inappropriate his hatred of the six-year-old child is.

C.K. continues the story, referencing the chaos of recess with particular touchstones to the audience, allowing them entry to the context he is invoking. The climax of the story comes when C.K. explains that he sees “Jizanthipuss” approaching his daughter on the playground, and C.K. is convinced that Jizanthipuss will harm her. Instead of rushing to her aid, C.K. states, “Let him do a little something first... because I want this kid in my life... I want a reason to waterboard this little motherfucker” (“Louis CK”). The ethical qualities that C.K. has gone out of his way to express at this point do not paint himself in a very good light, however, the audience’s continued laughter shows that C.K. has effectively made Jizanthipuss the antagonist of the story. The addition of “waterboarding” elicits a laugh, and C.K. holds that moment with an extended smile. Bakhtin’s concept of the utterance situates this smile back to the context of the earlier reference to waterboarding, and

illustrates how effective this additional detail is. His extended smile serves almost as a wink to the crowd, as if C.K. is well aware that his suggestion is completely inappropriate and ridiculous, but there is still a kernel of truth buried somewhere in the exaggeration.

What C.K. details next shows his mastery over an understanding of the narrative, and how he has positioned himself in it (as well as his understanding of the audience's needs). C.K. compares this moment to an action movie scene playing out in slow motion as he explains how Jizanthipuss does in fact grab his daughter by the arm, leading to her screaming. C.K. breathlessly explains his hurry to get to his daughter, knocking other children out of the way en route, as he describes how he rescues his daughter from Jizanthipuss:

I run over, I grab him, and I look in his little face, and I say, "Listen to me Jizanthipuss, if you ever, ever in your life, touch her again," and as I'm doing this, I realize, this is *not cool* that I'm doing this. This is *totally* inappropriate. It's *really* wrong. It's way over the top, it's too grown up... and he starts crying pitifully, and I just walked away from him, I just got away. ("Louis CK")

This moment perhaps holds the greatest importance for the relationship that C.K. has established with the audience. Through his self-deprecation, honesty, and unbridled self-disclosure about his feelings toward this child, C.K. has acknowledged how the audience might also feel uncomfortable by addressing it directly, yet he has still been able to construct Jizanthipuss as the antagonist. In this moment, in which Jizanthipuss is getting what seems to be his comeuppance, C.K. steps outside of his narrative to explain how his actions were completely inappropriate. The audience laughs along with C.K.'s acknowledgement of his out-of-line punishment of Jizanthipuss, as well as his decision to flee the situation before C.K. could get into any real trouble. A connection has been built with the audience through the multiple perspectives that C.K. is able to take throughout this event, which further illustrates these diverse points of identification he has made with his audience. The context in which C.K.'s narrative takes place is one that welcomes exaggeration and embellishment, yet the earnestness of his performance pulls the audience along the narrative track, leading to the welcome surprise of his honest self-realization.

Summary

Louis C.K.'s ability to use narrative as a dialogic device speaks to his understanding of the audience's role in his performance. By creating multiple points of entry for the audience to understand or judge his perspective, C.K. validates the role of the other by creating a context in which their feedback is not only sought after, but necessary and expected. The audience's reaction serves as the completion of the utterance he intends to glean, and the entire act is created around this understanding. C.K.'s material is presented as a

glimpse into the life of a father who is sharing his thoughts and perspectives that, perhaps, should not be said out loud. The nod to the (in)appropriateness of this context, and his conscious violation of these expected standards in order to draw a reaction from the audience, illustrates C.K.'s high-level of understanding he has of his audience.

Bakhtin's definition of both utterance and ideology are useful in better understanding how C.K. builds a dialogic connection with his audience. The application of this Bakhtinian lens in this case, is bolstered by the additional related examples C.K. summons during his stand-up performance. Long-form stories centered on self-deprecation are a hallmark of C.K.'s comedy, and his dedication to producing a new hour of stand-up material every year, ensures that a wealth of additional material for study (and enjoyment) should be rolling-out soon. The co-created relationship between comedian and audience member provides for a rich field of study. Especially through the use of narrative as a dialogic tool, and as a mode of analysis that can be effectively applied to comedians who employ a similar strategy as C.K. The use of Bakhtin's utterance and ideology could similarly be applied to popular and prolific comedians such as Patton Oswalt, Bill Burr, Hannibal Buress, and John Mulaney, among others. Honing this dialogic analytic lens through an application to other comedians and stand-up routines might lead to greater understandings of how dialogic connections form between audience and performers, and how they are created and maintained.

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