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## *The Geordie joke: the role of humour in the reaffirmation of regional identity*

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There are two parallel themes involved in the construction of this thesis. One of these themes is the goal of showing the sociological relevance of the study of humour, and the other is the means to achieve the goal, by showing the role of humour in the reaffirmation of the imagery informing the regional identity of the north-east of England. Consequently the first chapter of the thesis is designed to qualitatively develop the theme of regional imagery.

From having decided to use regional imagery to illustrate the significance of humour as a social discourse, the focus on the north-east assumes the characteristic of a case study. This enables the research to expand into detail on the working of humour, by keeping to the scope of the regional frame of reference. Within this regional frame, chapter two shows humour as a social practice on the level of professional performance, rather than on the more private level of conversational expression. This is deemed analytically expedient, insofar as the professional comic text can be assessed in terms of its appeal to the region's public. This is to say, that the appeal of the comic text will depend upon the ability of the comedian to produce humour and laughter. Hence chapters two and three are set to find out what makes a professional comedian successful in the north-east.

The findings of chapter two suggest the importance of establishing the complete contextual location of live performance humour in the region. This is to show the influence of audience and setting on the success of humour. Chapter three aims to conclude the thesis, by taking account of the extent to which regional image structures feature in the practice of successful live performance humour in the north-east; and thereby display the communicative value of humour.

THE GEORDIE JOKE:  
THE ROLE OF HUMOUR IN THE REAFFIRMATION OF REGIONAL IDENTITY

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THESIS PRESENTED TO THE  
UNIVERSITY OF DURHAM  
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

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DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

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21 MAR 1991

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### Declaration

None of the material contained in this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree in this or any other university.

None of the material contained in this thesis has previously been submitted for publication.

None of the material contained in this thesis is the result of joint research.

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## Introduction

It hardly needs to be said, that a student writing a postgraduate research thesis has had the benefit of choice as to the direction of the work, and that the chosen direction will be largely due to a particular interest. I suppose this often gives rise to an idle curiosity, on the part of others reading the thesis, as to the origins of the author's interest. Seeing, for example, a thesis concerned with the regional identity of the north-east, as this one is, could easily be settled to the reader's curious mind by simply pinning a native regional commitment to the author. But, to do so here would be a grievous mistake.

Although I am a north-easterner born and bred, the only research commitment I have for this thesis, is to study humour as a significant social practice. The focus on the north-east serves as a vehicle to this study, as it provides a frame of reference which is expedient to the original commitment. Were it not for the methodological advantages of my being from the north-east, any other area of Britain with a recognised regional identity could have been used - London Cockney or Liverpool Scouse for example. This is certainly not to say that the results would have been the same, but it is to say that the north-east is quite literally used for the purpose of research into humour.

Given the direction of the thesis, the development of the detail on the regional identity of the north-east becomes essential, as the aim is to show the working of humour within the context of that imagery. As such, there is a mutual dependency between humour and regional imagery within this thesis, which must be accepted if the research objective is to be realised. To explain this, it is necessary to be clear on the definition of humour, or, at least, be clear on the definition as it is applied to this thesis. I add the qualifying remark of applicability



to the thesis, because there is no single or standard definition of humour. In fact, humour remains an enigma despite its recognised importance to the human condition, as has been conceded by social thinkers from Plato to Freud, and a great many since. The only common ground to the definition of humour is that it is an essentially human activity, which ironically provides the foundation for theoretical diversity.

One thing which does surface from the search for detail on humour, is the comparative lack of sociological concern with the subject. Most of the research and writings on humour fall under the auspices of philosophical, literary or psychological endeavour. This is seen to further obscure the possibility of a working definition of humour, as the emphasis of these schools tends toward the individual. To adequately justify this statement would be a thesis in itself, but there is no need to dig into such detail for this thesis, as it would serve no purpose. This thesis is not concerned to distinguish between the critical strengths and weaknesses of at least eighty different theories of laughter(1), or to examine and evaluate variant humorous forms, such as satire, sarcasm, irony or pun. Rather, this thesis is concerned with humour as a social practice, and as such, a sociological definition is drawn from the generally accepted interactive characteristics of humour(2).

A sociological definition of humour does not mean that the aforementioned literary, philosophical and psychological work on humour and laughter is to be ignored. On the contrary, such a sociological definition means that the findings of those schools of thought can be used to inform the sociological analysis of humour. For example, awareness of the competing theories on the mechanics of humour allows an understanding of the factors involved in the activation of those

mechanics. This means it is possible to appreciate what people are laughing at, so that the cause can be identified. Of course, this would be an extremely difficult position to defend, if the research was geared to explain why one individual laughed at a certain thing. But, because this research is geared to an investigation of collective social laughter in a conventionalised setting for anticipated comic performance, the emphasis is on the analysis of successful comic forms on the public level of a cultural practice, and not on the private level of individual psychology.

It is accepted, that within the collectivity of an audience, different people may laugh at the same joke for different reasons, or indeed, may laugh simply because other people are laughing, as a result of the infectious quality of laughter(3). Nevertheless, there remains the sociological qualification to override such psychological considerations undermining the credibility of this thesis: namely; that there are substantial factors involved in the cultural practice of live performance humour in the north-east, to prevent humour slipping into the private world of psychological determination. Indeed, it is the whole point of this thesis to show the public activity of humour, and to show that there is more to humour and laughter than a psychological mechanism reflexly responding to an external comic stimulus.

Telling a joke may make a few people in an audience laugh, and the comic structure of the joke can be revealed to show why they laughed, but this will not explain why the rest of the audience didn't laugh; accepting of course that they did 'get' the joke. In this research, I have found that members of an audience can refuse to laugh at a comedian, which suggests there is a great deal more to

humour than an automatic mental response. There is further support for this suggestion from the research findings on one of the most popular comedians in the region. The 'comic phenomenon' of Bobby Thompson, in the north-east, bypasses those explanations of humour which emphasise cognitive mechanisms responding to the joking stimulants of shock and surprise, and see laughter as the result of the relief the individual experiences. This is because Bobby Thompson's audiences are almost able to recite his comic material word for word, from having seen him perform it so many times. Yet, his popularity only increases as he continues to pack the concert rooms throughout the region, with people demanding that selfsame material. It is as a consequence of observations such as these, that there is seen to be a legitimate place for the sociological investigation of humour.

First, it is the domain of sociology to account for the interactive dynamics involved in a social practice. If an audience refuses to accept a comedian as funny, then it is necessary to explain the rejection within the social action frame of the cultural context, and not from some grand uniformity of individuals in an audience not to have had their humorous responses activated. Professional comedians who are technically adept to supply comedy and have not fared well with an audience, can only have their failure registered in terms of the audience, and not as a result of their comic abilities. This statement is made from the weight of evidence of commonly witnessed failures of top television comedians, performing live in the north-east.

Second, it is the concern of sociology to investigate meaning, and it is the particular characteristic of humour to engage and 'play with meanings'(4). There is the level of meaning directly exploited

by the joke to produce humour. These 'played with' structures of meaning must be familiar to the audience to allow the humour of the joke to be appreciated. For example, if someone was to begin a joke with: "There were these two Irishmen..." then the joke would rely on the listener's familiarity with the structures of meaning for its comic effect. Also, there is the level of meaning which may be transmitted through the joke, in the form of a specific message. For example, is it possible for humour to challenge social reality with politically 'alternative' messages being encoded into the joke, or does humour function to dispel any such meaning into the realm of playfulness? This thesis does not have the scope to examine whether or not it is possible for a joke to articulate radical consciousness, it does, however, have the scope to investigate the recognised reliance of humour on commonly understood structures of meaning. As such, this thesis will examine the extent to which humour serves to compound and confirm the meanings of social reality, within the context of an institutionalised social practice.

It is the aim of this thesis to demonstrate the validity of sociological inquiry into humour, by showing how humour works with meaning to form a social discourse. To do this, the regional imagery of the north-east will be used to exemplify the significance of humour. In other words, the structures of meaning attached to the imagery of the north-east are to be studied and illustrated, so that they can be shown to be transmitted through the practice of live performance humour in the north-east. The result of this transmission is shown to be a reaffirmation of the regional imagery of the north-east. Any social activity, which can engage and compound structures of meaning in this way, must qualify for sociological attention.

## Chapter One: The Geordie Genre

In order to examine the range of issues relating to the social, cultural and ideological aspects of humour in the formation or preservation of a regional identity of the north-east, it first becomes necessary to document what that identity is, or is deemed to be. To do this, I have used an interpretive approach to provide an ethnography of regional imagery and identity. I am aware that the prescribed methods of this approach are open to a wide range of criticism. The main source of this criticism, as far as structuralist writers are concerned, is the experiential basis of the conception of knowledge, which the methods of interview, participant observation and personal history are seen to vindicate. Also, there is the broadly 'objectivist' standpoint which is put forward by Alvin Gouldner, to illustrate the positivist argument of subjectivist invalidity undermining interpretive methods of sociology. This is to say, that such methods are criticised because of their inherent failure to meet the positivistic demands for empirically quantifiable data, which can supply the objective truth of social reality(1). However, as will be seen during the course of this chapter, the interpretive methods are used in this thesis to supply only the required ethnographic documentation of the perceived regional imagery of the north-east. These methods are intended to facilitate analytical investigation rather than form it, and will not, therefore, be used to formulate a statement as to the 'objective truth of social reality'.

Because I am native to the region of north-east England, I have a personal experience of much of the custom, practice and accepted

wisdom of Geordie credibility which goes towards my understanding much of that, which people of the region have spoken to me about on the subject of regional identity. This is because both the content and the style of speech can be appreciated in terms of the regional context. Seemingly casual references to geographical locations such as Scotswood Road for example, can be understood in relation to a particular concept they may be used to convey. Such a reference to Scotswood Road could be used to communicate any one of a wide range of conceptualisations on the north-east. These can vary from historical - nostalgia/folklore/myth, to contemporary - violence/'roughness'/class, and it will rest largely on the knowledge of the interviewer to spot the conceptual usage of the reference intended by the respondent. By being aware that Scotswood Road is very much a regional location which is charged with this range of relevant conceptions on regional imagery, it is more likely that the significance of references to it will be comprehended as they are intended. Being able to recognise the inflected usage of such references is, therefore, beneficial in terms of realising the qualitative value of the content material offered by respondents.

The style of speech, or what is commonly referred to as 'patter', is, ironically, often unspoken in form in the north-east. It rests heavily on an understanding of the structures of custom and practice, which allows meaning to be exploited with supreme economy of words. For example, one old man I was talking to in a pub in Stanley, Co. Durham, smiled wryly at me after turning his eyes from a man standing at the bar. The old man said to me: 'stranger', as he nodded his indication of the man at the bar. This may have had little or no meaning to an 'outsider', perhaps the old man would have made no communication to

an 'outsider', but to the acquainted, the old man's gesture and single spoken word were perfect in their simplicity to communicate a scathing dismissive ridicule of the man at the bar, who had ordered a bottle of Newcastle Brown Ale and poured it into a pint glass. The point, of course, is that I was able to understand it\*.

It was on the basis of my acquaintance with the region, that I settled for the use of 'open', or ethnographic, interviews to obtain detailed accounts on the perceived regional imagery of the north-east from respondents. Obviously, the act of questioning people, be it formal and structured, or informally woven into conversation, is seen and identified by respondents. Judith Okely, in her book on traveller-gypsies, argues that this respondent recognition is likely to carry potentially damaging results to the research, as she writes:

'I found the very act of questioning elicited either an evasive and incorrect answer or a glazed look. It was more informative to merge into the surroundings than alter them as an inquisitor'(2).

However, I found myself able to avoid the drawbacks of questioning which Okely records, because my experience and my recognised belonging to the area enabled me to merge into the surroundings, as an inquisitor, without altering them to a perceptible level of research liability. Hence, I was able to participate in interviews with a great many respondents, rather than simply conduct a line of questioning with them.

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\* In the north-east there is a Newcastle Brown Ale drinking rite which involves the use of a half pint glass, which is replenished with measures of beer from the bottle (Newcastle Brown Ale is only available in bottled form.) If the old man perceived he would have had to describe this process to an uninitiated interviewer, it remains highly likely that he would not have bothered making any comment at all, and the parochial significance of his remark would have been lost. Even if he did make his remark and then go on to explain the reasoning behind it, the stylistic impact, in terms of the stinging sarcasm his comment contained, would certainly have been missed, just as a punch line loses its punch when the joke has to be explained.

By this I mean I could join in a discussion by blending into a group with a type of familiar anonymity, which is beneficial to the qualitative research techniques employed. The benefit is quite simply to reduce the awkwardness many people feel when they are spotlighted to give their own thoughts on a particular matter. By having the resource of familiarity, I was able to remove myself, as far as possible, from a conspicuous role of academic researcher, and thus help lift the spotlight and let the persons involved relax. To capitalise on this advantage, many interviews were carried out in 'safe' settings. Social clubs and pubs were prime targets for many reasons concerning the nature of this thesis, not least the feeling of security they afforded respondents. Safe in the knowledge of their being on home ground and amongst friends, my presence became even more innocuous, and the more immediate fears of ego preservation, which arise in the company of strangers, were averted. As a result, many comments were made with a spontaneous ease that may have remained unspoken because of the fear of sounding ignorant. A relaxed familiarity seemed to serve the same function as alcohol in removing the barriers to expression, but when the two were combined I gathered information of the highest quality and value to this research. Ego-built dams were opened to allow discussions on the subject of regional identity to run their most natural course, and completely flood the straight and narrow canals along which respondents can check and guide their conversation to a more calculated end. So, instead of listening to people say what they thought I wanted to hear, or say the opposite to what they thought I wanted to hear, I was fortunate to be in a position where most of the participants to this research were not at all bothered what it was I may have wanted to hear. This



meant I heard a lot. As an inconspicuous compotator, I had my ears filled and my eyes opened by the free-flowing thoughts of other people, who just like me, are from the north-east of England.

Not least, my being from the region gave me the essential attribute of being able to understand the colloquialisms and dialect which heavily underpin existing notions of Geordie apocrypha. Indeed, many people I spoke to believed that reference to colloquialism and dialect, grossly misrepresented regional parlance, and insisted that Geordies had their own language! A host of regionally specific words and phrases were cited to me as substantial examples to their claim. Words such as 'clarts' (mud), 'yem' (home), 'plodge' (to wade in shallow water), 'dad' (hit), 'hinney' (dear/darling) and 'netty' (toilet), were most frequently quoted along with phrases such as 'cowp your creels' (to fall or roll over) and 'what fettle?' (how are you?). Some of these people made reference to Scott Dobson's book: 'Larn Yersel Geordie'(3), as a means of strengthening their case for the recognition of an independent Geordie language.

However, while the majority of people to whom I spoke did acknowledge that there were regionally specific words and phrases, they considered there was no sufficiency to the claim that a distinct Geordie language existed. I was repeatedly informed that all regions in Britain had their own specific words and phrases, and their own accents and dialects, and that it would be a nonsense to talk of a Yorkshire language, or a Scouse language, or even a Scottish language. Again numerous examples were given to support this claim that regional exclusion through speech does not amount to a language. Cockney rhyming slang and Robbie Burns Scottish were the most common examples to be placed on par with Geordie as nothing more than regional idiom,

while Welsh was exemplified as: 'a regional language in the true meaning'.

It was also made clear to me that not all people in the north-east speak with a Geordie dialect; that it was mostly working class people of the region who spoke in that manner. Very significantly, many respondents made the concession that the Geordie dialect carried the connotation of ignorance and inferior status, especially to people from 'down south'. (The significance here lies in the recognition that it was predominantly working class people themselves who were making these candid remarks.) Why then should the Geordie dialect be defended? The answer unanimously given, by both advocates and critics of there being a Geordie language, was that it quite simply served as a means to signal regional identity - that Geordie vernacular could be called upon to give a definite indication of regional exclusivity. The vast majority of respondents did agree that the heightened particularity of regional identity vis à vis speech, which is popularised in Dobson's 'Larn Yersel Geordie', is not espoused as regional orthodoxy. But, they did make it clear that Geordie speech could be 'played-up' to that Dobson pitch, if the intention was to show regional distinction.

In order to explain why a dialect, which the people of the region acknowledge to be associated with lack of intellect and lowly social status, should be 'played-up' to project regional identity, it is first necessary to discover the prestige of the identity the dialect is used to signify. Quite simply, there must be some form of prestige signalled by the dialect, otherwise it would not be 'played-up' at all, it would be played-down. Indeed, I was told of numerous instances where efforts would be made to play down the Geordie

dialect, such as formal situations like a job interview for example.

Judging from the comments made to explain the 'playing-up' of the dialect, it appears that the justification for this rests on a long and well documented history of regional exclusivity, which is built on a historical pedigree of heavy industry hardship and sufferance. The many references to bygone days of strong communities and Geordies pulling together, alone and apart from the rest of the kingdom, gives indication to the imagery of the region which shoulders the prestige the dialect is 'played-up' to signify. It is a prestige of exclusivity, and there is a snob value of Geordie pride attached to it. This is a prideful snobbery, drawn not from superior regional wealth, power or social standing, but from the long depicted regional lack of these conditions. It is, therefore, to be more precise, an inverted snobbery from being hard enough or resilient enough to cope and get by in the adversity thrown upon the region by industrialisation:

'We're a world apart up here man. We've always had nowt but ships and coal, and now they've gone, but we're still here'.

'...oh aye it's hard now, but we've had it worse and got by....In fact it's never been owt else but hard up here has it'.

To keep to the point of speech being important to the research of north-eastern regional identity, there is the recognition that if the individual north-easterner intends to accentuate regional difference by using heavy dialect and colloquialism, in order to hammer home the notion of regional exclusivity; and so exploit the inverted snobbery it facilitates, then a researcher from outside of the region may struggle with an over-stylised nostalgia which can be pretentiously built into the speech and dialect. Because I am from the region, and therefore able to speak the native tongue, I was acutely aware that I was being spared the exaggerated 'tourist' Geordie

oration of 'outside netties', 'stottie cake' and 'clippie mats'.

The acuity of this awareness comes from the embarrassing memories I have of meetings with other Geordies, who were, like myself at the time, away from home. (The embarrassment stems from the affectation which was characteristic of these meetings.) While living in London for three years, these encounters were quite frequent, and the scenario altered little. Once the obligatory exchange of determining our respective home town locations in the north-east had been made, and nearby geographical references were given to display regional familiarity, there would follow a completely inane exchange of flag flying regionalist platitudes such as - 'They divvent nar about beor doon hear'. These would be delivered in a ridiculously over emphasised Geordie accent, which was designed to bewilder southern onlookers, but at the same time kindle within them the opinion that they were witnessing the meeting of two estranged members of the same brotherhood. Bemused southern smiles, shrugs of the shoulders and comments about 'gathering of the clan', showed the desired result had been achieved.

Nevertheless, on home ground, and for the purpose of this research, my familiarity with the peculiarities of Geordie speech has served to cut through any elevated esteem it may have been called upon to bestow, and the business of investigating regional identity was given the benefit of unhindered verbal communication with people of the region.

### 'Us and Them'

For the vast majority of people from the north-east who spoke on the subject of regional identity, there was one particular form

of reference they made which acted as a spur to the defence and protection to the region's identity. It was a reference which worked like a bugle call to bring discordant regional impressions into harmony. In every instance this reference was made without any inducement or suggestion from myself, and it pertained directly to how the south sees the north-east: 'how them see us'. It seemed almost a prerequisite that respondents should draw comparison to the south, or find mentionable southern perceptions of the north-east, however inaccurate the north-eastern speaker considered those perceptions to be.

From this almost compulsive reference to the south being made by respondents from the north-east, I became aware that a much clearer view of the constituent parts of the region's identity was being expressed. North-easterners seemed to use the south as a third person in order to give themselves the facility for mentioning the less complimentary aspects of the region's identity. Having done so, however, it was common for the more negative aspects to be strongly challenged. They could be dismissed, attacked or relocated into a more favourable context, but they were never compliantly accepted. For example, a complete lack of intellect was the most common derogation the south was seen to level at people from the north-east. The people of the north-east who made this observation, gave me the opportunity to see into the thinking attached to regional affinity, because their attacks on the southern perception amounted predominantly to a defence of the region. It was as if the observation they had made had been taken as a personal insult, rather than a whimsical anecdote which referred to some distant and irrelevant image of a geographical area in which they happened to live.

The allusion to being 'thick' only appeared to be taken lightly

when the individual north-easterner wished to give the impression that s/he considered the perception to be worthy of no more than a dismissive scorn. Other than this, well reasoned arguments and considered explanations were put forward to dispel this southern derision of the north-east. These ranged from seeing the heavy regional dialect acting to exclude anyone from outside of the region understanding Geordies, (therefore southerners called Geordies 'thick' because of their own ignorance of the Geordie 'language') to graphic illustrations of regional achievement and expertise. I was left in no doubt as to the affrontery this perceived southern aspersion caused; it was plain enough to see in the veracity of the responses it provoked. This in turn left me in no doubt that there was some genuine feeling of identification to the region, which went beyond the comfortable safety of politely accepting romanticised images of the past. It was as if certain images fell heavily from this nostalgic grace to prick the present-day individual regional conscience in a realistic way, and the consistent references to the south seemed to provide the needle.

When speaking first hand on the region, some variations relating to the question of identity were given by north-easterners. For example, the level of pride attached to being a Geordie was seen to be affected by class and occupation. Respondents felt that working class people from the area had a greater level of regional pride than their middle and upper class counterparts. The general opinion was that the Geordie pride was a working class pride, because it came from the roots of working class life. It was seen as a pride in being able to fulfil, or at least aspire to, social and moral obligations regarding primarily work and family, despite the adversity

of working life in the harsh industrial climate of the north-east. Middle and upper class people were seen not to have faced this adversity. They had not won their spurs in the battle against hardship, and, therefore, could not have the same prideful feeling as working class people whose families had.

For the most part, I found this type of reasoning was consistent with the imagery of the Geordie label on a more practical level. For example, one restaurant owner in Durham City explained how he saw the Geordie label would be a definite handicap in his business, and that although he was born and bred on Tyneside, he had no wish to be seen as a Geordie:

'Look, if you want to create an image of refinement and sophistication to attract a good class of clientele, the last thing you want is people saying it's run by a couple of Geordies'.

Certainly there is the recognition that the possible claim to a Geordie pride is given a very low premium, concerning the feasibility it offers to up-market restaurateurs. Also, the variable scale of regional pride, which is seen to heighten as it approaches the working class, is illustrated as conforming largely to the consensus opinion of the people of the region. Yet such a variation in the level of regional pride does not reduce the feature of regional identity, rather it lends support to the affirmation of an actual regional identity. This is shown by certain individuals, such as the Durham restaurant owner, making every effort to deliberately avoid the Geordie label. This type of action gives an obvious indication as to an actual image being attached to that label, which is understood to be totally incongruous with refinement and sophistication. Furthermore, I was reliably informed by a former employee of the Tyneside based independent radio station, that an informal code

existed concerning the advertising of products on the air. Namely that heavy Geordie accents would not be used, as they were believed to spark the imagery of unsophistication which could be harmful to the advertising campaign. Professional actors with a 'refined northern accent' were used instead, in order to indicate a regional affinity to the product, but avoid the more negative aspects of the Geordie image.

It is this incursion of the Geordie image into the practical reality of everyday life, which informs the claim to the actuality of regional identity, as it is impossible to conspire to avoid something that is not believed to exist. Hence the variation in the acceptance or refusal of that image does not constitute a challenge, or a disagreement, as to the central themes of that image; the variation serves to strengthen and unify those central themes into the image of a regional identity which can encroach upon the practice of everyday life. In short, the Geordie identity is built upon set images which are understood throughout the region. They can either be exploited or rejected depending on the intention of the individual.

The point being made at this juncture is that this type of variation in the regional acceptance or refusal of the Geordie identity is completely overshadowed by the uniformity of the content within the references made by north-easterners to how: 'the south sees us'. The epitome of this southern image of the north-east was given by John Angus, a marketing manager for the Tyneside based Federation brewery, when he stated:

'I go down south often, on business, and the image they have of us is the thick cloth cap and whippet Geordie'.

Although Mr. Angus did go on to denounce the validity of that image appertaining to the 'real life situation in the north-east', his statement



on the southern perception was absolutely purist in its typicality. I can vouch for this typicality from having listened to so many native north-easterners, during the course of this research, give alarmingly similar estimations. Indeed, the typicality of the responses concerning the image the south was perceived to have of the north-east, proved to be the overriding consistency across the complete sample of respondents from the north-east, who spoke on the identity of the region. Conversely, having spoken to many native southerners, I can also vouch for the typicality of the cloth cap and whippet image they so readily apply to the north-east.

It is most significant that this typicality is enhanced by a curiously transumptive quality, which operates, despite a complete lack of palpable evidence, to support the southern formulation of their Geordie image. When an image of the north-east, which does not rest on the grounds of direct southern experience of the north-east, can be transported from the south to the north-east, and assume a typicality of elevated proportions, there is an undoubted significance to the study of regional identity. More so, when that image does not have to be experienced 'prima facie' by north-easterners for it to be known to them. People of the region were all too well aware of the southern image of the north-east, regardless of their having had no confirmation of it from any form of contact with people from the south. The basis of this imagery, therefore, rests outside of any experiential foundation, yet it has a cast iron frame of reference which refuses to allow the typicality it has to slip.

Further, there emerged an equally significant realisation, that there was a very close correspondence between the regions on the full spectrum of the north-eastern image. People of one region would pick

out identifiable characteristics from the image of the north-east, which would be validated by the repetitional identification of the same characteristics by people from the other region. It seemed like both regions were playing a canon on the theme of a Geordie melody. The identification of north-eastern characteristics such as; heavy drinking; football fanaticism; racism; sexism; unemployment; manual labour and whippet and pigeon racing, rolled from the tongues of both Cockney and Geordie like an involuntary motion. It was as if the term 'Geordie' produced a reflex response of neatly wrapped stereotypical images, irrespective of geographical location, and irrespective of any identifiable causal agent.

The apparent absence of a causal component underpinning the regional imagery of the north-east, became even more obvious with the recognition that people of both regions gave very pointed remarks, on the north-east's image, which could easily be classified into 'positive' and 'negative' categories. Yet, respondents showed no discrimination as to one or other of the categories being the more valid description. There was instead, the tendency for respondents to wander freely between positive and negative attributes, in their estimations of the north-east. While people of the north-east emphasised the positive aspects, they consistently acknowledged the negative by way of reference to the southern perception. People from the south, however, tended to use negative words such as; 'thick', 'sexist' and 'rough', in equal proportion to words of a more positive kind, such as; 'friendliness', 'warmth' and 'community'. Often I would listen to a southern respondent begin by giving negative impressions of north-eastern life, and finish by accrediting positive attributes to that way of life.

As so many people, of both north and south, gave positive and negative aspects of the north-east region rolled together in a single response, without any registered incongruence on their part, it became obvious that they were unaware of any contradiction between the two. Not once did any person falter under the weight of a contradiction in their speech. This appears to suggest there is an absence of an actual factual base to the Geordie image, which would act as an empirical yardstick, against which certain impressions of the north-east region could be judged invalid, incorrect or contradictory. There was, for example, no refusal put forward by people of the south of community life being an admirable and even an envied way of Geordie life, despite having simultaneously expressed the negative characteristics they deemed concomitant with that way of life. Certainly there was a choice of emphasis on the part of the individual. Some people would emphasise the positive, and some would emphasise the negative, but it only required me to suggest that side of the north-east image they had not emphasised, and it would be accepted as coherent.

This unanimous southern refusal to accept a strain of negative aspects of the north-east region, which would preclude the acceptance of positive aspects, or vice versa, was most clearly displayed by two eighteen year old cousins from Eltham in south-east London. (The clarity stems from their honesty rather than their eloquence.) They laughed between themselves as they told me of the beer-belly image of the north-east, and of how women had to stay in or go to the bingo while the men went to the pub or the dog track. They referred to Andy Capp a few times and a television character called 'Oz'. 'Oz' was to them the 'typical Geordie'(4). I suggested that the characters they had mentioned did not show a very positive image of the north-east.

Judging from what they had been saying, it would not have been unreasonable for me to expect them to give some form of reply which either denounced, or did not recognise, a positive image to the north-east. But the opposite happened. They dropped their smiles, and in an altogether more serious manner, they informed me that the people of the north-east: 'are very warm and friendly'. This they knew to be a fact because when they were about eight years old they went to stay with their auntie in Sunderland, for a fortnight. They told me with great sincerity, how they wished they lived in Sunderland, like their auntie, because:

'You're all so friendly up there....you don't lock your doors - our auntie doesn't'.

The final impression given by the complete sample of respondents, is that the positive and negative images of the north-east are two sides of the same coin. Turning the coin in the mind of the southern individual; to allow both sides to be seen to be present and correct, proved to be an easy task of simple suggestion. The key to understanding how it was turned, came with the observation that the positive image of the north-east rested heavily on the central theme of community.

Without exception, people from both north and south made it perfectly clear that community life was believed to be a characteristic of the north-east, and as such, it was a definite plus for the north-east. By looking more carefully at what community life was understood to be, there emerged an association between the duality of images towards the north-east, which removed the ambivalence which was common to statements on the image of the north-east -- i.e. why should people of the south find community life so praiseworthy when, at the same time, they acknowledged ignorance, sexism and drunkenness as characteristic traits of the people of the region; who would obviously make up those communities?

Firstly, there was the recognition that the term 'community' equated more positively with a romanticised notion of working class life, than any present day example. Pictures of well known neighbours 'popping in' to borrow a cup of sugar, or to look after a sick friend, were frequently painted by respondents of both north and south. These pictures were portrayed to an elaborate clarity, and framed the kind of images of community life that would be seen in a sentimental look at old black and white photographs of short trousered boys playing football on cobbled streets, or middle aged women leaning over garden walls watching the menfolk heading off for work at the pit.

Undoubtedly, the generally communicated ethos of community life was emotionally charged with the belief that the people were in an envied state of close comradery, which maintained itself on a moral code of dignity, loyalty and familial responsibility. But, while some people pointed to the miners' strike of 1984 to show how these qualities had become manifest in the struggle against pit closures, the majority openly condemned the aims and actions of the mineworkers but continued to extol the virtues of community life. Again, this fuels the general impression that community was seen more akin to the simple happy lifestyle of honest folk going about their daily lives in the 'Sing As We Go' Gracie Fields/Basil Dean tradition(5), rather than a concrete entity which could be realised by respondents in a practical way. Accordingly, southern definitions of community life were complementary and generously awarded as a characteristic of the north-east, yet there was absolutely no practical association sufficient enough to allow any consideration of moving north. My suggestions to this end were usually dispelled with polite laughter.

Working from this recognition of the romanticised imagery involved

in the appraisal of community life, it became apparent that the word 'community' itself was instrumental in erecting the barriers of romanticism upon which most people rested their thinking. By simply replacing the word 'community' with others such as 'lifestyle', or 'existence', or 'living patterns', a far clearer impression was given by respondents in their perceptions of life in the north-east. This linguistic side-step, around the symbolism attached to the term 'community', allowed respondents to introduce an altogether more objective documentary type analysis of life in the north-east. Consequently, consideration was given to political, economic and social factors, which were deemed to be conditioning agents to the lifestyle/existence/living patterns of north-easterners. This brought respondents to focus on the region in the bright light of today, rather than the soft warm glow of the past which the mythology of community life creates. Issues such as the degeneration of traditional regional industries such as coal, steel and shipbuilding, were located within a general commentary on the high unemployment, low standards of living and Labour Party politics, which were seen as endemic to the region.

While this type of measured contemporary analysis of the north-east did not produce any challenge to respondents in their ascription of community life as a defining feature of the region, it did force the reasoned association that community life equates with underprivilege in a material way, rather than it being purely a privilege in a romanticised/ideal way.

Perhaps not surprisingly, it is this fundamental association of material inferiority being a prerequisite to the working notion of community life, which generates the favourable light people choose to see community life in - that community life itself can be used as

compensation for material deprivation. Statements such as, 'money isn't everything' and 'you can't buy friendship' were frequently made, while respondents from the north-east gave a more direct indication of the compensatory complexion to their claims of community:

' .... well people can talk all they want about the poor north and the affluent south, but to me it's a poor place when you don't know who you're living next door to'.

'There is no denying that the south has the money, but anybody will tell you that it's a cold place to live .... it comes down to how you define quality of life doesn't it? I think that the community spirit up here counts for a lot more than money'.

It is, therefore, in spite of the compensatory zeal with which people of the region herald the virtues of community life, or the concessional generosity with which the people of the south acknowledge the virtues of community life in the north-east, that there remains a paradox locked within the notion of community. That is, the paradox of romantics equating with material deprivation. As such a paradox exists, the positive image of the north-east, which is seen to hinge on the presumption of community life being characteristic of the region, can never be positive per se. It will always carry the less than positive material conditions of working class life as a qualification to the validity of community life as a living practice, within the capitalist confines of Great Britain.

However, in relation to the positive and negative imagery of the north-east, the paradox within the ascription of community life as a positive characteristic of the north-east remains a problematic when only the positive side of the coin is considered in isolation. As stated earlier, to understand the imagery of the north-east it is necessary to consider both positive and negative impressions as two sides of the same coin. By doing this, the paradox of a positive ascription to material deprivation is removed along with the ambivalence

of respondents' statements which wandered indiscriminately between positive and negative images of the north-east.

In order to explain how this is so, it is illustratively better to consider the positive and negative imagery of the north-east as analogous to Siamese twins rather than an inanimate two sided coin. This is because the perceived independence, or separateness, of positive and negative images of the north-east is totally fallacious. Rather, it is a case of both positive and negative images being actively functioning constituent parts of a single regional entity. Like Siamese twins, each needs the other completely if the whole is to survive. The more the positive image of the region grows in strength, the more it feeds the negative, and vice versa. The strength and substance of one depends entirely upon the other, and as such, they are the same thing.

This sameness can be seen in the cognitive continuity respondents displayed in their refusal to separate positive from negative images of the north-east. Time after time respondents followed a cognitive trail between positive and negative dimensions of the region's imagery, which must have remained unbroken to their rational thought, otherwise there would have developed separate trails of thought (from the separate images of the region) which would crash into contradiction if their paths were crossed. For the positive and negative images of the north-east to be separate and then forced into an overlapping association to give a complete picture of the region's identity, respondents would find themselves giving positive compliment to negative features, which would not be acceptable to the rational mind. Instead, the rationale is such that (once the penny dropped that there is continuity between the images of the north-east) it is quite a simple task to chart the logical continuity which wrapped positive and negative images together,



inseparably and indiscriminately, in individual responses. For example, if a respondent was to begin by giving the negative images of the beer-swilling sexist Geordie, then the logical association is to a strong masculine identity. This in turn associates to the historic regional nature of heavy and 'extreme' occupations, which in turn acts as a referent to that masculine identity. This in turn associates to the comradery generated by the nature of the work, which is seen to carry over to inform the social and political make-up of everyday life, with the men having their whippet, pigeon, leek growing hobbies along with drinking with their mates in the social club, while matriarchal women run the home and meet for cups of tea or bingo. This in turn is the imagery of the close-knit community which is the positive image of the north-east\*.

This trail of reason does not allow one side of the region's identity to exist without the other. They are manifestly essential parts of the same whole regional image, and because of that it is spurious to impose a categorisation which aims to separate positive from negative images of the north-east. This is, however, exactly what I had tried to do and consequently suffered the penalty of creating problematics which hampered the appreciation of content material offered by respondents. It was not until the realisation that the contradictory and paradoxical flaws contained within the responses were of my own

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\* It should be noted that the range of characteristics which are associated in this explanation of the trail reasoning respondents are seen to have followed, are fully accepted and described by dozens of sociologists writing on variant aspects of working class life in post-war Britain. See for example: 'Coal is our Life' by Dennis, Henriques and Slaughter (Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1956.) 'Family and Kinship in East London' by Young and Willmott (rev. edn., Pelican, 1965.) 'Family and Social Network by Elizabeth Bott (Tavistock Publications, 1957.)

doing, that the necessary insight into the mental mechanics involved in the construction of the region's identity became available. My fault was to apply the positive and negative categories, and compartmentalise the content of individual replies into one or the other. All this was to do was to obscure the reasoning which rational people gave in their estimations of the north-east, by breaking up the logical continuity of the trail along which they followed their reasoning. So by forcing their responses into my preconceived categories, I created the contradictions and paradoxes they were observably, and rightly, ignorant of.

Nevertheless, under the weight of the observed contradictory ignorance from respondents, my own positive and negative category reasoning was itself forced into the recognition of its inapplicability. It is from this that the development of the Siamese twins analogy is forwarded as a graphic representation of the regenerative quality of the north-eastern regional identity. Not only does this analogy illustrate the powerful logical motor which functions on the underlying rational association of negative material conditions to positive community ideals, to knit together the completed image of the region, but it also delineates the harmony of the cognitive processes which would otherwise pose a dissonant threat to the validity of the regional identity. There would, for example, emerge the contradictory problematic of advocating material deprivation to enhance the virtues of community life with which it equates, or, in order to avoid this ridiculous position, lay emphasis only on either positive or negative imagery of the region and implicitly refuse the association of the other. It is argued that if this were so, the regenerative motor to the regional identity of the north-east would fail, and the now typical imagery of the region would collapse into

vagueness and uncertainty. This is because there would be no logical unity to hold together the complete frame of reference from which the Geordie identity draws its strength. At no stretch of the imagination would it be possible for so many people to exhibit a feeling of pride in their regional Geordie identity, given its negative chauvinistic characteristics, unless those characteristics were legitimated by the very same factors which gave rise to the positive prideful feeling of that identity-i.e. hard working men providing for their families in a hard industrial climate enjoy their hard earned leisure. Disassociate the hard work image from the hard drinking image and the legitimating prop to a Geordie pride is kicked away - the Trojan becomes a bum.

This scenario, as a derivative of the contradictory problematics stemming from the separation of positive from negative images of the north-east, was never seen to be enacted by respondents because the contradiction itself, of romantic ideals equating with material deprivation, is removed by the rationale of positive and negative images being accepted as constituent parts of the same regional identity. The reasoning, as applied by respondents, makes positive romantics logically equate with negative material conditions. Hence the contradiction exists only when positive romantic/ideal images are considered separate from, and independent of, negative material conditions. The mutual co-existence of these images obviously removes any contradictory or paradoxical uncertainty from the thinking on the north-east's regional identity. This indeed was seen to be the rested case in explaining the total lack of any incongruity across the complete sample of respondents, as they were giving the full spectrum of characteristics attributed to the north-east.

### Into the Genre

The ramifications of this uncovering of the way individual thinking works concerning the issue of regional image and identity, are far reaching within the parameters of this thesis. Primarily it has served to indicate the theoretical direction of the research.

The signs shown by the individual psychology of the respondents speaking on north-eastern imagery and identity, pointed clearly to the narrowness and limitation of trying to establish an empirical validation of a regional identity, when individual participants to this research (especially from the north-east) were themselves not able to discriminate between ideal or real images of the region. This warned against trying to trace causal agents behind the regional identity which could act as a yardstick against which images could be measured, rejected or corrected as being true or false, ideal or real.

Ironically, the key factor to advise against this empiricist position, is the universal consensus about the accepted imagery of the region, shown by people from all parts of the country as well as the endogenous population. This is because the account that has been made of the cognitive unity of the imagery of the north-east, does not override the possibility that the component characteristics of that unity could be equally well applied to other regions of Britain with a similar historical precedent for the heavy and extreme industry which is seen to causally legitimate the very characteristics ascribed to the regional identity of the north-east. The rigid attribution of these characteristics to the Geordie identity, as opposed to any other heavy industrial region, urgently suggests there are cultural and ideological factors at work to frame a universality of causal components, such as class or the nature of employment, into a regionally specific identity.

The overwhelming consensus as to this identity of the north-east rejects the plausability of any query or correction to be made to it. While the previously mentioned characteristics were continually framed into a Geordie typicality, they were never questioned as being perhaps the characteristics of working class people in general, or the characteristics of workers in heavy and extreme occupations in other areas of the country. Furthermore, there was no correction made to these characteristics being regionally particular to the north-east by respondents from other traditional working class areas such as the East-End of London, South Wales, South Yorkshire or Clydeside for example. Correction, it was also found, was not forthcoming from natives of the region, southerners, or anyone else for that matter, to any part of the complete range of imagery the north-east is saddled with. From the base of the ridiculous: of wooden clogs on cobbled streets; to the romantic organics of community life, the general perception of the north-east never seemed to be in any peril of correction.

Ultimately, this consensus is demonstrated by the spontaneous ease with which respondents quip off certain images of the north-east, which obligingly slip neatly into their acknowledged place, regardless of their positive or negative complexion, like pieces of a Geordie jigsaw which cannot be rejected, corrected or ignored because of their vital contribution to the final composition. Indeed, these images can be seen to force their consensual acceptance by virtue of their strategic importance to the completed regional picture/identity. As such, these images of the region settle into a comfortable certainty which encourages familiarity with them. This promotes the imagery of the north-east to become even more firmly established, as it is the very familiarity of these images which enables them to be exploited for material or artistic

ends, which consequently further compounds the structures of meaning attached to them. For example, from the working imagery of the north-east, it is generally accepted that it is the north which holds the expertise on beer drinking over the south. This has enabled advertising agencies to fully exploit this familiarity of the regional image by using it as a ready made frame of reference to their television beer commercials. A prime example of this is a Whitbread Best Scotch advert, circa 1988. This particular ad. shows a chirpy 'cock-sure' character, with a cockney cabbie accent, walking into a pub that is obviously unknown to him. He introduces himself to the barmaid as a sales rep and asks to see the 'gov'nor'. She signals the pub is in the north-east by her accent and use of colloquialism, and then gives him a pint of Whitbread Best Scotch beer while he waits. The cockney rep. makes a series of critical remarks about the beer. After each of these remarks there is a camera shot of exaggerated shock reactions by locals to the pub (a severe miscue on the pool table is one of them). The end result is that the sales rep. has displayed a blasphemous ignorance of beer to offend the northern connoisseur, which provokes the landlord to refuse to buy the bar-snack products he is trying to sell, (one of which is jellied eel flavour to ensure he is recognised as a cockney).

This advert is perfectly well referenced against the accepted and understood regional imagery to produce the desired effect of humour at the ignominious expense of the southerner, as it provides an easily digestible play on the structures of meaning attached to the regional imagery, i.e. the southerner is to beer what Cyril Smith M.P. is to hang-gliding. The concluding text of the advert enforces a categorical interpretation of the message: that it is the people up north who know

good beer, when a pronounced northern accent voice-over states: 'There are those who know and those who don't know'.

There are plenty more examples of this type, not only from a series of Whitbread Best Scotch advertisements, but from other brewers such as Scottish and Newcastle advertising McEwan's Best Scotch, and Vaux advertising their Samson Ale. Each one of them takes hold of the common understanding of the regional image appertaining to beer and hands it back to the audience. This can only be described as an exercise in confirmation of the regional imagery which actively diffuses any potential for correction.

Indeed, there was found to be a number of active confirmational agents to the regional identity of the north-east, and a distinct lack of any vein of refusal or correction running through it. The very point of not one person saying to me that it was incorrect to attach the Geordie identity to Andy Capp, or that it was incorrect to say there was a cloth cap and whippet image to the north-east, or that southerners saw Geordies as thick, begs that the question of the feasibility of correction to the Geordie identity be addressed.

As the whole idea of correction obviously involves the notion of a false statement; it also involves the notion that such a statement can be shown or proven false. But in the area of research into regional identity, there has emerged only a growing awareness that it is not at all an obvious possibility that this can be done. The only thing that is obvious is that people accept the image of the regional profile without regard for tenable factual causal components. A large number of people from the north-east rattled off the identifying characteristics of the region, and they confirmed their views on those characteristics as being the core of the

regional image - an image they could identify with. Yet about eighty per cent of those respondents said they believed that it was only a tiny percentage of the people from the north-east who actually: 'lived-up to the image characteristics in reality'. So from the general acceptance of the regional image being 'unreal in the real world', there is little chance of being able to show a falsity to that image which would be accepted, as the image already transcends the boundary of reality in the minds of the people who acknowledge it, subscribe to it and unreservedly accept it. This means that there can be no value in trying to establish an empirical yardstick to gauge the 'correctness' of images pertaining to the north-east, as the common understanding of the structures of the regional image will not yield to any factual basis of correction. For example, if I was to point out to people that the pigeon racing characteristic fixed onto the Geordie identity should be more correctly applied to southerners because there are more people from the south engaged in pigeon racing, this would be annihilated as a factual correctional threat to the imagery of the north-east. In fact it was pointed out; and it was annihilated. People from the south as well as the north just did not want to know. There was a unanimously healthy disregard for the 'stupidity' of the fact I had pointed out.

To fully explain why such a correction to the Geordie identity is so highly improbable, it is necessary to appreciate the complete range of dynamics involved in the construction of that identity. One of these powerful dynamics is the familiarity people have with the structures of meaning attached to the constituent parts of the regional image of the north-east. The brute strength of the dynamic, however, comes from the national rather than regional familiarity



with those structures. It is the national familiarity which keeps the regional identity of the north-east polished and in good working order, as it allows the structures of meaning to be continually exercised.

It is apparent to the people of the north-east that people from other parts of the country know the imagery of their region. A great many examples of holiday encounters were used to reiterate this point. One couple I spoke to sat pulling their faces into expressions of painful resignation as they recalled the amount of black-pudding they were force-fed by a landlady in Blackpool, once she found out they were Geordies. Together, respondents from the north-east illustrated a nationally common understanding of the imagery of their region which is used confidently as an accepted referent to social interaction. Because of this, the imagery of the north-east is not allowed to relapse into a fixed stationery form which would cause its rusting decay into vagueness. Rather it is seen to be the case, that the daily usage of the imagery of the north-east, as a communication visa, ensures the momentum the imagery needs to maintain its healthy well-being. There is, therefore, the need to accept the imagery of the north-east as a process and not a factual structure.

By acknowledging a process, account can be made of the interactive dynamics which supply the fundamental energy to preserve the regional imagery and identity of the north-east. This is practicable because the common structures of meaning which enable interactive exchanges to be successful on the basis of predictable responses, are necessarily drawn from the same common understanding of the contextual referent to those structures of meaning. One particular conversation with a 28 year old north-eastern man called Dennis, who had worked in London as

a kitchen porter for over two years, helps clarify this point.

DENNIS 'It was really strange at first. They all seemed to think they knew me once they heard me speak.'

CB You mean when they heard your accent?

DENNIS 'Aye. Until then they were a bit stand-offish and seemed a bit dodgy about me but as soon as we got on talking they were saying, 'Oh, you're a Geordie' and like seeming relieved.'

CB Why do you say relieved?

DENNIS 'Well not relieved, but it was like when you see somebody and you don't know them, then they tell you everything's alright.'

CB So they thought they knew you from your accent?

DENNIS 'Aye.'

CB Was it like they expected certain things from you being a Geordie?

DENNIS 'Oh, Aye, yes. But the thing was, I knew they would. You know, like being a good drinker and having a bit daft carry-on, and the thing was I was doing these things so as to get in with them. You know like at the hotel bar I would knock a good few [pints] down because I knew that they thought us Geordies were good drinkers - they kept saying that .... it wasn't long before I was just one of the lads down there .... we had a good laugh.'

As Dennis illustrates, there is a common understanding of the structures of meaning attached to the regional identity of the north-east, which is utilised by participants in an interactive situation to reaffirm the expectations of the other. There is, therefore, a dyadic reciprocity secured on a platform of regional familiarity, and it is this which is argued to provide the dynamic that maintains and reinforces the regional identity of the north-east. This means that truth or falsity cannot be imposed onto the region's identifiable characteristics. Again I refer to the pigeon racing example. Instead, it falls onto the common understanding of individuals

in everyday life to say what is true or false, in a practical way, by either accepting or rejecting regional character traits on the basis of a familiarity of meaning. Further, it is familiarity with the structures of meaning which advantage confirmation of the imagery of the north-east rather than correction to it. Correction induced confusion over the image of the region would only weaken the image of the region to the point of insignificance.

So, by accepting a dyadic process as an integral dynamic to the generation of the identity of the north-east, the recognised security of the identity is rejected as a facility for shouldering a premise to a thesis on truth or falsity; as defined against an object, material reality.

However, it was plain to see in the responses of every interviewee who tried to explain 'what makes a Geordie a Geordie', that a distinct and definite claim was made to an empirical validation of the Geordie construction. One typical example of this is taken from a conversation with an English lecturer in a college of further education in South Tyneside.

'Well you immediately think of the hard worker and a rough lifestyle because that's what the area is built on. It's always been heavy manual work up here. It's the history of the region.'

It is from their own perception of the image and identity of the region, which individuals recognise is subscribed to at a nation wide level, that reason must prevail, and this dictates the legitimating search for its rationalist companion: truth. The truth of industrialisation and heavy manual work is sufficient to supply the reasoning behind the identity of the north-east and so ease its acceptance to all involved in British society. The effect of this obligatory claim to material determinants is one of reiteration:

i.e. the north-eastern identity becomes substantial. This removes the perceived identity further from any peril of 'correction', as it assumes the prestige of an accepted reality on the practical day to day basis of understanding and familiarity. It is then, an accepted truth and as such it lends to the confirmational and dissipates correction.

This truth is therefore a Gouldner truth(6). It is a truth kindled from an interaction between subjects and historical and sociological concepts. The subjects fan the embers of the past into a blaze of regional identity. The fuel to maintain the fire is drawn from the sociological attention given to the region, ranging from traditional mythologies to facts and figures on everything from unemployment to beer consumption(7). Just like Gouldner's point that sociology in general has become part of popular culture, contributing to society's view of itself(8), regional emphasis in sociology becomes part of the social imagery contributing to society's view of itself regionally. Picking up on Gouldner's remarks concerning the two-way process involved in the sociology of the professions playing an important part in defining and maintaining a professional culture(9), Philip Elliott introduces the tangential notion of 'routinisation'(10), which will be used in the score of this thesis. Elliott accepts; 'the professions have always occupied a marginal position in society'(11). He acknowledges there is a professional identity on the basis of the work situation which is recognised, 'by others in society outside any particular work situation'(12). Elliott's claim is that this identity is not the reality of a unified group, rather it is the ideal. He argues professionalism is characterised by a series of contradictions and

that professions are divided on the lines of individualism, 'subject, tradition and status'(13). As such, Elliott writes:

'There is a continual tension between ideal and reality in any account of professions and professionals. Indeed, perhaps one of the most distinctive features of professionals is that they have such an ideal available to them'.(14)

The core of Elliott's work is accepted within the rubric of this thesis, as in detailing the tenuous link between 'ideal and reality', he shows the 'ideal' as the support to an identity of 'autonomous individuals' occupying a marginal position in society(15). The divisions within that identity, be they a result of the complexity of factors involved in the work situation or (in the case of regional identity) geographical location, are papered over by the ideal. So, when Elliott writes:

'The professional is a responsible, autonomous individual, and yet at the same time the professional is the one who is sufficiently integrated into a situation to recognise the cues and know the routine responses'.(16)

the transposition of this reasoning from profession to region is accepted and will be demonstrated during the course of this thesis.

From this, my starting point in addressing the question of the compounded nationwide image of the region of north-east England, is an acceptance of the ideal type as a methodological device which Bulmer argues is by nature ahistorical and heuristic(17). To accept the ideal type in this capacity is necessary within the theoretical premise of this work, which is not concerned with notions of truth or falsity concerning regional identity as an empirical reality constructed against actual historical determinants. There is no attempt made by this thesis to formulate a statement as to a reality of regional identity which is 'correct' or 'incorrect', by analysis of empirical factors involved in a material historical substantiation

of a true identity.

Such statements as to the north-east of England having:

' .... a strong regional identity formed out of industrial development in the 19th Century, which brought industries such as shipbuilding, heavy engineering and steelwork to an existing coal-mining industry that expanded massively.'(18)

are of that historical prescription, which, in relation to imagery and identity, Anderson argues is 'fraught with methodological difficulty'(19) and Bulmer argues is characterised by 'emptiness'(20).

The ideal type is, therefore, to be employed within its heuristically intended purpose; to act as a reference point for theoretical analysis(21).

The analysis itself is of a social practice which Zijderveld argues, 'needs a social context in order to make any sense', and that the quality of this practice as regards its success or failure will, 'depend on interaction within a social situation'(22). The practice referred to is that 'eminently social'(23) activity of humour and laughter.

It is the contextual prescription of the success or failure of humour which further promotes the use of the ideal type. This is because the broader aim of the thesis is an analysis of humour and laughter as either an opiate or an engine to image, identity and consciousness. As such, the north-east, with its nationally accepted identity of 'Geordie', is used as the context in a regional case study conducted to examine the role of humour and laughter as an agent in the construction of that identity. The use of the ideal type is to provide the conceptual methodological framework against which contextual analysis can be considered free from any descriptive prescriptions of reality. The ideal type will be used as Weber recommended, that is,

not as a statement as to reality, but as a logical construct of the most essential and extreme features of a social phenomenon(24)

'It is not a description of reality but it aims to give unambiguous means of expression to such a description.'(25)

The concept of the genre is forwarded to supplement and assist the use of the ideal type in providing an unambiguous means of expression to the description of regional identity. This is deemed necessary from the basic supposition of regional identity being a confirmational dyadic process, rather than the fruit of an empirical historical root. The use of the concept of genre will therefore advantage the requirement of definitional specificity which can be explained in terms of the process rather than an ideal-type template from which 'theoretical analysis starts out but from which it is expected to diverge'(26). Further, there are problems raised by Alfred Willener concerning the formulation of ideal types in terms of social value judgements which founder on an 'us' and 'them' dichotomy between the sociologist's 'ideal' being imposed on an image of the population which may itself be 'ideal' to the population (the good old days)(27). He asks such questions as, 'which are real and which are not so real ideal types?' and 'how 'ideal' is a specific (real) ideal type?'(28). Given that Willener argues that the ideal type as a kind of 'theoretical frame of reference' is only a 'pseudo-solution which pushes the whole question a little farther away through more conceptional complexity towards the 'academic'(29), the use of genre will aid analysis by emphasising the process of image construction. This is what Willener argues should be the aim of the sociologist:

'Perhaps the sociologist of images should reach beyond the

comfortable simplicity of a straight forward causal chain, and look more closely at the processes which involve various interdependencies. And one path towards progress would, I suggest, be to find ways of conceptualising 'reciprocal inclusions.'<sup>(30)</sup>

The genre is therefore advanced as a way of conceptualising 'reciprocal inclusions' as the formal and ideological characteristics of the genre will give definition only of those expectations which the term 'Geordie' triggers within individuals. Tom Ryall argues that genre conventions involve expectations which are constantly varied but rarely exceeded or broken<sup>(31)</sup>. It is to these conventions that the active agents of regional identity must adhere in order to perpetuate the image of 'the Geordie'. It is into these conventions that the systems of meaning are encoded, structured and articulated as a form of regional identity, from which the genre can be used to acknowledge a reality which exists in the form of an institutionalised appreciation of meanings. The argument is not that the genre can define reality, but that it can define the signs which push forward and maintain the ideal type construct of the north-east of England. It is as if everyone is familiar with the Geordie motor car. We are familiar with its form, pattern, structure and style. We recognise its function as a vehicle of regional identity. The aim of the genre is to lift the bonnet and investigate how it works.

Genre thus forms a vital conceptual tool to this thesis. This is because it works on the acceptance of reality as a process structured on meanings and their appreciation within an institutionalised context which can shift and change. Genre is locked into the dialectic of this process because of its definitional specificity which locates the expectational as a pre-requisite to the appreciation of those meanings. Hence in rejecting the 'causal chain' initiation to a statement on



reality as an object truth, my acceptance is of the confirmational aspects of a national dyadic process which instance a reciprocity of regional identity construction on the basis of a 'Northern Self' to a 'Southern Other'. The systems of meaning become common to the national culture from this process and individuals understand these institutionalised meanings in terms of their ideal typical regional structures.

'Our perception of what is 'normal' is socially determined and must be repeatedly reinforced by symbolic interaction with our social and physical environment. Confirmation of our perception is satisfying; disconfirmation is disturbing - often to the point of mental collapse.'(32)

As stated, this generates the use of genre to understand the dynamics of this process, as confirmation is the particular domain of a genre. Bennett argues genres organise our expectations in relation to a particular text by specifying its relations to other texts(33) and therefore, the generic regional text is forwarded on the same grounds of expectational confirmation. When Ryall argues for the transcendent supervisory capacity of the genre in both its construction of film and the audience reading of film as 'pattern/form/style/structure', he locates a discourse of signalled expectation based on the recognition of the genre itself(34). The genre is the motor to expectational confirmation. As such, the genre of a regional text floats on the interpellative process of regional identity as a reality. Hence it is from the discourse of genre that routine regionalist exchanges will invariably be locked within the confirmational platitudinal familiarity, reflexive of, and at the same time constructed by the genre. The existence of the genre is its continued existence.

This allows a valuable contribution of genre as an analytical

concept to tunnel into the reciprocal dyadic maintenance of the stability of image embodied in the ideal type; an embodiment which Willener argues, 'appears very much as a limiting case in the analysis of the sources of stability and instability of social imagery over time.'(35) So, while there is an acceptance of the stability of regional image as an ideal type, derivative of the process of confirmational reinforcement, there is also the concept of genre to combat those 'limitations' to the analysis of the source of the image and identity of that region.

One major limitation which is deemed concomitant with analytical weakness as to the source of stability of image, is the acceptance of causality as a source of that stability. The limitation is the strait-jacket containment of analysis within the causally defined fixed or mechanical reality. This is a reality which can be understood reductively simply by 'referring to the logic of a deep structure or the mechanics of a totality where, 'any reality, once described is struck off the inventory''(36). To dig for empirical justification of a regional identity from the history of experience completely engenders the 'striking-off' process. It facilitates a flavour for truth - a truth which is located in a fixed object reality. An empiricist, historicist truth beyond ideology which can be known from a crude falsificationism whereby deductive reasoning 'strikes off' snippets of inapplicability between regional realities manifest from their causal characteristics. Consequently there is the logic that the history of heavy industry hardship in the north-east must therefore differ qualitatively from the history of heavy industry hardship of Clydeside, Yorkshire, South Wales or the south-east. Thus the dye is cast for the researcher to examine and detail the complexity of

cultural, social, sexual, symbolic, political, economic or class factors which combine to form a causation of those qualitative regional differences.

'In relating images to social structures, the most immediately realisable aim is to show congruences between particular social characteristics and particular types of imagery, rather than to demonstrate necessary causal relationships between the one and the other'.(37)

The acceptance remains that a mechanical reality does exist to inform a structure of meaning - even by writers supportive of interactive research aiming to dig out the active attachment of meaning. Blumer, for example, as a strong supporter of interactive research, and a prominent critic of causally based positivistic analysis, is himself clearly seen to be working with a notion of an objective social structure which he refers to as 'influencing' individual action(38).

Such empiricist strains have brought stinging criticism to a great deal of research into imagery. One particular area vulnerable to this criticism is the employment of the ideal-type as a 'picture-framing' concept to a defined reality of image. The criticism immediately raised is one of definitional association in that there is a subjectivist assumption of reality, and that the ideal-type corresponds to that reality. For example, Cousins and Brown show Lockwood's acceptance of a 'traditional proletariat' as a basis for class consciousness to be of an ideal-typical level of homogeneity which, they argue, does not correspond to reality. They expand to destroy Lockwood's claim of a unified 'traditional proletarianism', with example of demarcation and fragmentation of workers within such 'traditional' occupations as ship-building on Tyneside(39). However, the criticism itself involves the necessary claim of showing a material reality of diversity of traditional workers, which differs from the ideal-type reality of Lockwood's

'traditional proletariat'. As such it locks the debate within the truth/falsity dichotomy in order to show which is more real. Consequently this involves the well documented problematics of theory and method inherent in that dichotomy.

It is to avoid this problematic, that the notion of genre is used. It removes the need for any flawed ideal-typical definitional association to be made by me, which could later be proven false. The genre provides the definitional association between image and reality by making no statement as to one or the other's truth or falsity. Instead, the genre frames signalled expectation, from which signs are understood as signs of the genre and not of 'reality'. As Barthes points out in his opening essay of *Mythologies*, 'The World of Wrestling', there is an acceptance of the signs of pain, anger and distress as part of the signifying practice of the wrestling match, yet there is no question raised as to the reality of these signs. Indeed, Barthes states that people would not be surprised to learn that matches were fixed! Rather, it is the conventionalised cultural context of wrestling which is appreciated and understood in terms of its mythical signification(40). My argument is that what I term the Geordie genre provides the conventionalised cultural context of a region of England, against which signs and myth can be understood without recourse to a causally defined true reality.

This provides the foundation for the intended methodological usage of the concept of genre, in that the regionally identified character traits which procure ideal-type status, can be analysed on the basis of meaning as an accepted reality, irrespective of their claim to truth. It is the genre which frames truth insofar as it fuses an association between image and reality, and it does this by

providing the regional context for the working of myth.

I am using myth in the same sense as Chapman and Egger, as:

'independent of any truth function', to refer to:

'....any real or fictional story, recurring theme or character type that appeals to the consciousness of a group by embodying its cultural ideals or by giving expression to deep, commonly felt emotions. In this way, to describe an element of social life as 'mythical' is to refer to the way that it is somehow 'culturally distinctive as both a meaningful and expressive element of the culture or subculture in question'.(41)

And like Chapman and Egger, whose work here concurs with Levi-Strauss, I am concerned to:

'....clarify not so much what there is 'in' myths as the function of myth in 'confering a common significance or unconscious formulations...'(42)

As with myth:

'....its action is assumed to be stronger than the rational explanations which may later belie it'.(43)

There is no doubt that a thick-set, broken-nosed male wearing hob-nail boots, a miners helmet and holding a leek, is a car sticker image of 'Geordie' which everyone recognises.(See plate 1.) There is also no doubt that this could be an image of a working miner from any area of Britain. And there is no doubt that few individuals of any region, including the north-east, correspond to this image. Yet, everyone understands that this picture image is 'culturally distinctive', and they understand the 'common significance' of the image to the region of north-east England. The understanding of the reality of the image is shown in the general public's acceptance of the chain of concepts related to the image which the car sticker triggers off. From each of the respondents presented with the image related concepts of the Geordie, regarding patterns of lifestyle and leisure, not one of them rendered any such concept invalid by its incongruence or their ignorance of it. Many respondents from the north-east did, however, protest that some or other of the concepts were not 'real', but they conceded that they were



Plate 1.

how 'them down south would see us'.

My respondents reassured me as to there being a unified public knowledge of this car sticker Geordie. He is a 'hard' man who will spend his non-working hours drinking many pints of beer with his work mates. This is not contested, it is a reality. No-one is allowed an opportunity to make up their own mind as to what Geordie may or may not drink. The generic location of the car sticker refuses the possibility that Geordie may drink mineral water, or gin and tonic, or halves of lager, or even drink anything in moderation. We know that his favourite pets will be pigeons and whippets rather than tropical birds or toy poodles. We know his favourite sports to be football and horse racing rather than rally cross or show jumping. We are invited into his terraced council house to see his wife working and cleaning only to stop to get his dinner ready. We know their son William will be called Bill or Billy and that he wasn't named after a 19th century populist poet, nor is he likely to develop a stimulated taste for such poetry. We only have to look at Mr. Geordie car sticker to know that he would have little tendency to watch 'Panorama', listen to radio four, read the Guardian, take his wife to a restaurant or help her with the housework.

The domino effect of conceptual congruencies stemming from the iconic sign of the car sticker is fully recognised as the image of 'Geordieness'. This recognition is made at the expense of the car sticker showing an image of heavy manual workers throughout the regions of Britain. The image is definitely not Welsh although it carries a leek, and definitely not of Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire or Kent although it does wear a miners helmet and carries a miners lamp. This is to be explained by the generic location of regional mythology. This means

that while the signifier of a hard-bitten manual worker remains the same irrespective of region, it is the genre which contextualises, or specifies, the sign and refers it to the myth order of signification of the north-east region. This sociologists recognise to be a third order of signification which reflects the broad principles by which a culture organises and interprets the reality with which it has to cope. It is the level at which the sign ceases to become an independent entity, as it enters the realm of 'intersubjectivity', whereby signifiers work from the public nature of symbolism. This avoids the truth/falsity problematic in which subjective responses to image are expected to correspond to a reality from an individual cognitive and psychological process(44). Gerbner argues this correspondence is not so: he states clearly that 'the symbolic world is often very different from the 'real' world'.(45) There is in Gerbner the recognition of the public nature of symbolism as a cultural truth insofar as the general response is one of an understanding of a meaning system, rather than searching for the reality to which it corresponds. This I accept as the most fundamental premise to the study of humour as a social discourse.

When one hears the opening line: 'There were these two Irishmen...' there is an immediate signal from an understood meaning system. The nature of humour itself requires a precise understanding of these structures of meaning, as the germ of humour is an ability to bend and 'play with meaning'(46). If the subjective responses to such imagery were individualistic in nature, Defleur argues the implication would be that individuals would react in general to the message of the signifiers in the same way as they would react to the reality it portrays(47). This would not be conducive to humour. The symbolism



of 'Irish' would be rejected for the individual cognition that Irish people are no more or less stupid than English, Scottish or Welsh. But from the symbolism which is characteristic of the myth, the subjective responses which occur in the individual; 'are not, paradoxically, individualistic in nature'(48) - they are public in that they are shared by all members of a culture.

Fiske and Hartley make the point that intersubjectivity is 'culturally determined', and it is through this that cultural membership is expressed.

'The myths which operate as organising structures within this area of cultural intersubjectivity cannot themselves be discreet and unorganised, for that would negate their prime function (which is to organise meaning): they are themselves organised into a coherence that we might call a mythology or an ideology'.(49)

This provides the fundamental statement as to the establishment of a contextual referent from which a particularity of humour may derive. Namely, the confirmational dialectic between mythology and subjective response generates a reality of image against which cultural identity can be expressed. Further, it is a reality of image which can only be confirmational and self-perpetuating because it floats on the public nature of symbolism which is the life blood of myth. For example, if the Geordie mythology was devoid of the public and cultural nature of symbolism, then it would be possible to develop a theory to demonstrate to individuals a cognitive incongruence of the Geordie imagery to the 'real' world. What happens instead, is that such a piece of work (this thesis is a prime example) falls into the wheels of the intersubjective dynamics and forms part of the organising structures of the mythology. So by simply writing about Geordies, or giving any amount of consideration to the image of Geordie, there is a positive contribution made to the signification of that image being

commonly understood on the basis of shared meaning. No matter what conclusions are reached, be they completely damning of the Geordie image or not, the effect remains the same, it is a recognition of there being an image; and it is that recognition which feeds the image. If I say there is no such thing as Geordie humour there may be heated debate on the issue. How else can the reality of that heated debate be explained other than by acknowledging the reality of the image of Geordie? Unless that image of Geordie is acknowledged as a tangible subject, there could be no discussion as there would be no point of reference.

Humour must itself have a point of reference, and this will always be a common understanding of structures of meaning because humour is essentially derived from playing with these structures. If one therefore accepts social reality as an interactive process constructed around a composite of factors such as image, myth and ideology, then an impression of that reality can be expressed in humorous licence simply by a joke being funny, as for it to be funny (or at least understood) there must be a real familiarity with the reference of the joke. If a person was to tell a joke which did not rest on the common understanding of structures of meaning; then it would fail completely. Of course jokes are told which are just not funny - the Tony Blackburn type corny joke for example, but they are accepted as corn. For a joke to fail completely it would need to miss every conceivable outlet (corn, satire, sick, nonsense etc.) resulting in it being left as purely incomprehensible and disturbing to the participants in that social action.

It is from this position that humour will be used to investigate the question of regional identity. The first stage of the

investigation will be to establish whether or not there is such a thing as a Geordie humour. This will allow the direction of the thesis to be rooted firmly around the most central questions which must be addressed pertaining to regional identity. For example, if it were found that a form of humour did exist to exclude people from outside of the region on the basis of a particularity of regional references with which they are not familiar, then the prescribed direction is to investigate those specific references. If, on the other hand, it was found that a particularity of Geordie humour in either form or content could not be supported, then the direction of this work must be to investigate the significance of the universality of the humorous references vis à vis the cultural and institutional factors involved in contextualising such a universal reference into a regional image - the Andy Capp syndrome.

Chapter Two: The Geordie Joke      Part I

If it was going to be possible to establish the existence of a regionally particular Geordie humour, then the prime objective was to interview an exponent of it. This became imperative because of a failure on the part of the general public to substantiate their affirmative claims to a distinctive Geordie humour. For example, people who insisted there was a particular Geordie humour, were usually unable to give any example of it by way of a Geordie joke which contextualised a universal referent in the manner of an 'Irish' or 'Jewish' or 'Gay' joke. Nor could any example be given of a Geordie joke which appertained only to Geordies in terms of content or style\*. However, this did not seem to dampen their belief in a Geordie humour because, more often than not, reference was made to one of several 'Geordie comedians' whom they believed were practitioners of a Geordie humour. Therefore, it seemed the most obvious course of action was to interview these 'Geordie comedians'.

To decide which of these comedians to target for interview purposes, I simply asked as many people in the region as possible to name a Geordie comedian. This request was left deliberately vague to ensure respondents applied their own definitional criteria in identifying a Geordie comedian. This would allow a pure sample of perceived Geordie comedians to be gathered without any qualificatory precondition (such as regional nativism) being set. Ironically, the

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\* There were examples given by people who believed that a joke that was told using a heavy Geordie dialect, or which contained dialect words, were particular Geordie jokes. These examples will be detailed in part II of this chapter in order to consider fully the issue of their regionalist claim.

name which was mentioned more than any other; was the name of the comedian I was unable to gain access to. It was the name of the one performer who was emphatically accredited by the region's public, as being the 'archetypal Geordie comedian'. His name was Bobby Thompson, and due to him writing his memoirs I was consistently refused permission to approach him\*. However, most of the other comedians who were named did agree to be interviewed, and their time and hospitality has greatly benefitted this work. Their names (in alphabetical order) are: Mike Elliot, Little Billy Fane, Alan Fox, Joe Ging, Bobby Hooper, Bobby Pattinson, Spike Rawlins, Bob Ritchie and Alan Snell.

With the one exception of Joe Ging, all of these comedians were first watched on stage before they were interviewed, and some were seen more than once, performing in different settings. For example, Mike Elliot was seen in the theatre setting of Newcastle City Hall, then again at a working men's club in Pelton, County Durham. The aim of this was to be as familiar as possible with the actual 'live' performance technique/content of each comedian; to enable specific textual references to be made during the course of the interview, which would probe the question of the 'Geordieness' of their act. Indeed, some of the comedians themselves invited me to join an audience, as their guest, so that I could have the benefit of seeing their act. I only hope I do their hospitality justice.

Before going into any serious analytical depth on the interview responses appertaining to the actual performances of these professional

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\* The apparent confusion of tenses in this sentence arises because Bobby Thompson died in April 1988. However, all of the material in this thesis relating to him, was gathered while he was alive and working.

comedians, the regional audience must be considered first, for the reasons that will be given.

In regard to the interviews with the comedians, the starting point of the audience meant my initial line of questioning was aimed to ascertain their perceptions of regional identity in terms of a regional audience. The reason for this was to see if it was possible to bypass the common imagery of the north-east, and examine the possibility of uncovering any practical distinguishing regional characteristics by way of audience behaviour, expectations or preferences. In other words, was there such a thing as a Geordie audience? If it was certain in the mind of the comedian that Geordie audiences had definite peculiarities, then the ramifications, regarding the comic performance itself, obviously suggest there is necessary adjustment and modification in that performance to accommodate those regional peculiarities. Thus the sequence of the general line of questioning in these 'open' interviews was set to run from audience to performance, and not the reverse, in the hope that a clear statement as to the comedian's individual perception of a Geordie identity would be given, which could then be used as an indicative control against a firm insistence for a Geordie humour which could be unfounded in relation to the performance text itself.

The caution exhibited in the noted approach to these interviews was imposed directly from members of the audiences I had joined to watch the respective comedians I was to interview. By talking briefly to a selection of individual members of these audiences, I was immediately struck with a common opinion as to the 'success of a Geordie comedian' by virtue of the audience acceptance of them. There was an obvious statement being made on the audience, by the audience,

which was elevated to an impervious judgemental position which could command the life or death of a comedian. The claim was that Geordie audiences would not tolerate any sub-standard comic artiste, no matter where they were from, who did not cater to their tastes. This general feeling of audience autocracy in the north-east was summed up by an old man called Walley, who had had forty years of watching comedians perform in working men's clubs throughout the region. He told me the situation of comedians in the north-east was one of either 'make or break':

WALLEY 'Look son, we've seen and heard them all up here. The audiences up here know what's good and what's bad because we've seen the best. I've been in clubs when these supposedly top entertainers have been paid-off because they were no bloody good. You see, the thing is, people up here couldn't give a monkeys about how much so-and-so's been on telly or what have you. If they get up on stage up here and they haven't got the crack, then that's the finish of them'.

CB When you say they haven't got the crack, do you mean there is a particular type of crack\* that suits Geordie audiences?

WALLEY 'Look, what I'm saying is that the folk up here know what they want and if they don't get it then you'll know about it ..... they don't stand on ceremony for anybody ..... if the bloke on that stage is no good, then he's no good and that's that'.

While the implication of this general audience consensus, as illustrated by Walley, is that a regional preference may exist for a particular type of humour, insofar as certain performance standards must be attained by the comedian if s/he is to succeed with Geordie audiences, I was unable to secure any evidence of regionalist loyalty (on the part of the audience) towards comedians native to the north-

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\* The term 'crack' refers more to the entertainment value of the discourse, rather than purely a particular style of speaking (which some writers recognise as 'patter'(1)). In the north-east the phrase 'good crack' is used to indicate appreciation, be it of a film or a friend.

east. There was certainly no obvious regional prejudice which could guarantee the success of a comedian because s/he was a Geordie. Instead there appeared to be in operation a brutally meritocratic system which challenged all-comers from anywhere to entertain the region's public. What was obvious, however, was that those who failed to do so would receive no mercy from discerning regional audiences.

Yet, there does remain an altogether more slender implication, that comedians from the region should fare better, if for no other reason than that they should be acutely aware of what north-eastern audiences want, and this, if translated into the golden rule of show-business: 'playing to the audience', should ensure their success. But the moot point remains, that this success would be due to their performance capabilities, rather than any regional endogamy they could call upon to win over an audience. Standing up on stage was certainly seen not to be enough:

'Most of the buggers that get paid off are from up here anyway'.

On the face of it, this appears to suggest a contradiction between the critical detachment of these responses, and the generally voiced commitment to the idea of a Geordie humour, noted earlier in the chapter. This is to be explained by the interaction of regional imagery with the established performance artistes who are native to the north-east, as it is on this level that the concept of a Geordie identity can be given a substantive reference by way of a practical association. Namely, that native performers can work continuously and successfully, and achieve fame within the region, lends to an easy computation for a Geordie humour. However, because north-easterners are also aware of their regional image as a demanding audience, they retain a critical



faculty to expedite appreciation of performers in terms of their act rather than their regionalism. Yet, the fact that the most often mentioned names of 'good' comedians performing live in the north-east are the names of native north-easterners, would appear to dilute the avowed critical detachment of the regional audience. Is it, therefore, unreasonable for people of the north-east to assume there is a Geordie humour, while at the same time refusing any regional loyalty towards exponents of it? Having listened to the reasoning of north-easterners on the question of Geordie humour, this premise does not seem at all unreasonable.

To help elucidate this reasoning, there was one particular conversation I had with a group of people at South Stanley R.A.O.B. social club. They were two married couples in their mid-forties, and had just seen Bob Ritchie finish his act when I approached them. They were still applauding Bob Ritchie and said straight off that he'd been very good. They'd had a good night out. Our conversation reached the point of considering the Geordie issue by my asking if they thought Bob Ritchie was a Geordie comedian. They all agreed he was. When I asked what it was that made him a Geordie comedian, the basic criterion of their reply was that he made people from the region laugh and enjoy his act. I pushed this point by suggesting the possibility of Bob Ritchie performing in a London club, and there too making people laugh and enjoy his act. It was Anne who replied:

'Well why not? He's got to be a good comedian or he wouldn't go down well up here'.

It was the indignant inflection of this economical reply which seemed to prompt the hearty support of the group (and several other people who sat listening to our conversation at an adjoining table.) Anne seemed to have captured the popular sentiment in her incisive

remark, yet it wasn't for quite some time, and a good many interviews later, that I fully appreciated the acuity of it. Quite simply, she had hit the nail on the head and struck home the perfect complementary balance to the question of Geordie humour and Geordie comedians. Namely, that there is an inherent regional pride in being able to appraise the quality of comedians, which would only be compromised if regionalist loyalty towards a native performer was allowed to impinge upon critical appreciation. So, by maintaining high standards of what is accepted as good comedianship, Geordie audiences have reason to feel that there is a Geordie humour by virtue of a compliance to those standards. To compound this argument, one remark was made to me which I feel almost obliged to use:

'.... it's like a Frenchman isn't going to say that a wine is good just because it's French. If it tastes like piss he throws it out. That's how the French come to have the best wine in the world; and are proud of it'.

Thus the regional imagery, which shoulders the characteristic of regional pride\*, is given the perfect foil in the applicability of an acknowledged elevated critical esteem on the part of the regional audience, towards live performance comedians. It is a self imposed esteem, which does, however, draw from a variety of legitimating factors, such as the institutionalised setting of humour, and social class/power relationships. These factors will be given due consideration in this and the next chapter. But for the moment, it will serve to say that the hard-working industrial ethos, contained within the imagery of the north-east, invokes a complementary opposite regarding leisure, which is coherently instituted into that image. This is to say, that because people of the region know what hard work is, they

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\* See Chapter One.

know what is best to relieve them from the rigours of that work, in terms of entertainment.

Furthermore, from talking to people who were members of an audience, I was left in no doubt as to the influence of the interactive dynamics involved in the 'work hard: play hard' image label of the north-east, in forming the thinking behind the discriminatory esteem north-easterners accredited themselves with. For example, many audience respondents referred to comments made on national television, by celebrities such as Paul Daniels, Les Dawson and Des O'Connor, about their own experience of north-eastern audiences. These references were aimed to substantiate the view that the Geordie audience was very scrutinous and would not tolerate 'rubbish'. This type of reference (which was consistently made) was seen to serve as a qualification to the labelled regard north-easterners have for themselves collectively as a demanding audience. This enables regional audiences to maintain a high profile of critical detachment, fuelled by the image labels they enjoy appertaining to the exacting standards they demand from their entertainers.

'You see, they get this thing that it only takes someone on television to say, like Little and Large to say, that they went to some club in Newcastle or Sunderland or Gateshead and they died, and Oh what a hard audience, and it only takes them to mention the club and that's it, and the next poor act that comes on is crippled you see, he hasn't got a chance. They'll sit and it's 'make me laugh' and that's it - finished. They're fiercely proud you see, Oh very very proud'.(2)

It is the snug fit of this label into the accepted imagery of the region, which intimates the argument that regional audiences are active participants in the construction of a regional identity, rather than simply being consumers of comic performances which may (or may not) contain regionally familiar structures of meaning.

Because it is, therefore, a more complex question of regional

loyalty which refuses the simplicity of regional audiences applauding a comedian because s/he is native to the region, it is necessary for a detailed account of the audience to be made in order to uncover the significance of it. In addition to this, the recognised circumspection of the audience in replying to my general questions on Geordie humour and individual performances, was deemed sufficient to warrant further investigation of the audience prior to my interviews with the professional comedians. The reasoning behind this was informed by methodological considerations, as well as the growing realisation of the centrality of the regional audience to the whole issue of Geordie humour vis à vis the research objectives of this thesis.

Methodologically, a detailed understanding of the audience was aimed to act as insurance against the possibility of the professional comedian applying stereotypical image traits to the regional audience, in order to support any argument they may wish to make regarding their acceptance or rejection of the plausibility of a Geordie humour. To be armed with a researched understanding of the audience would enable the responses of the comedians to be counterbalanced, or corroborated, against the original source material of the audience themselves. Also, such an account of the audience, prior to the comedian interviews, could only enhance the quality of those interviews: first by allowing a greater scope of questioning, and secondly, by consequently being able to extract more information from the interviews by being better placed to understand the significance of a remark the comedian may be unaware of himself.

Furthermore, as the comedians I was to interview were selected because they were successful in the region, it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that they would have a conception of what makes

a successful comedian in the north-east, which is at variance with the regional audience. In other words, a comedian may have a misconception of the regional audience, founded on the reasoning of his own success. For example, if a comedian insisted on the belief that regionalism, via heavy Geordie accent, colloquialism and parochialism, would go down well with audiences in the north-east, this may be substantiated by his own performance success, which in turn could imbue his conception of a Geordie humour for Geordie audiences. However, as has already been indicated, regional audiences do not accept this as a definitive recipe for success. By being aware of this, I therefore have the opportunity to adapt my line of questioning accordingly.

The advantage of having a clear understanding of the audience prior to these interviews with the professional comedians, can thus be summarised as:

- i. Guarding against personalised unfounded arguments, either for or against the question of a viable Geordie humour.
- ii. Facilitating greater extraction and appreciation of content material from those interviews.

### The audience

The most immediate and striking thing to emerge from my talking to members of various audiences, and indeed, from north-easterners in general, was an almost daunting security regional audiences had in themselves as arbiters of taste. Time after time I was told how people 'up here' would not tolerate any act that was not suited to them, no matter who was performing it, and regardless of whatever reputation they may have\*.[Footnote on next page] Again I tried to coax out some detail as to what made a live act 'suitable' to the region's public,

but again this proved to be a particularly exasperating exercise. Initially, this was taken to be the result of a general ignorance of performance mechanics, on the part of the individuals to whom I was speaking. However, there did eventually dawn the embarrassing awareness that it was my own ignorance which hindered any progress in this area.

This rude awakening came as I grew to realise that the refusal of any succinct definitional appraisal of the 'suitability' of performance, came from a genuine open-mindedness towards comic performance, on the part of the audience, which was seen to reject the plausibility of anyone saying that a comedian must do 'this and this and that' to be successful. In other words, it is the variety of comic artiste, which the regional audiences were aware of in terms of content and style of

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\* To sit and listen to people of the north-east say this, is one thing, but to actually see it practiced is quite another. The participatory assurance I have as to the validity of this audience claim, was totally confirmed on one particular occasion, when action was seen to speak louder than words. This occasion was a Miners benefit concert, held at Newcastle City Hall, on the 31st of January 1985. The main attraction was the self-professed Marxist-Leninist comedian: Alexie Sayle, widely known for his television work. There were about 1500 people in the audience that night - mostly striking miners and their families and friends, with an understandable proportion of 'sympathetic' students and politicians. Mike Elliot, a local comedian, opened the show, and concluded his act to unanimously appreciative applause and cheers. Alexie Sayle followed Mike Elliot, and now had the benefit of a 'warmed-up' audience. Sayle's act involved gratuitous obscenity coupled with gesture and posturing (making pelvic thrusts, for example, and shouting: 'a fucking cock fight'.) After about 10 minutes, it became apparent to me that he was losing the audience, but I thought that as he was giving his services free and for their benefit, his act would receive clemency. But no. One man walked to the front of the balcony and stood right next to where I was sitting. He placed his hands on the balcony rail, and with immaculate composure said: 'Get off, you self-indulgent shit'. These Geordie accented words boomed through the theatre, and were greeted with loud cheers from the audience. Alexie Sayle just stood dumbfounded. He had no reply or comic reserve to handle this. Instead he shouted obscenities at the audience and stormed off the stage. A minority section of the audience did try to coax him back - these were the younger student-type members of the audience - but they did not succeed.

performance, which refused the neatly wrapped answer to the question of the type of comedian preferred by Geordie audiences (or inferred Geordie comedian) I was looking for. Not only was the expertise of the audience in relation to their extensive viewing capacity being demonstrated, but so was their wholly undaunted security of critical appreciation towards comic performance artistes.

To explain this properly, it is necessary to show the naivety, or ignorance, of my own line of questioning. I thought it was possible to solicit opinion on desirable performance characteristics which could ingratiate a comedian to north-eastern audiences. When I found I could not draw these winning characteristics from respondents, which would enable me to piece together the model of the successful comedian in relation to north-eastern audiences, I resorted to suggestion. Was the regional preference for 'blue' comedians? Was it for quick-fire gags? Was it for story type jokes? Was it for knockabout or zany comedy? Was it for aggressive attacking comedians, or for smooth polished delivery? If I could just establish a common opinion as to one of these alternatives, then at least I would be some way closer to identifying the type of comedian preferred by Geordie audiences, which in turn, would allow the starting point for analysis of the viability of a particularity of Geordie humour.

However, this self made path to progress was very quickly blocked by an impenetrable wall of well considered non-committal responses, rather than any imperspicuity on the part of the respondents. People simply refused to give as a reply a casually selected option from the range of performance types offered to them. To be honest, there was an observable reluctance to consider such a request seriously, and on more than one occasion I was brought to task on the stupidity of my

action:

'What do you want us to say? If he's 'blue' he's bound to be good, is that it?'

'How the hell can anybody say any one of them is going to be what people up here want, when you've got so many different comedians that go down well up here?'

'Anybody that picks one of them and says that that's what people up here like best, is talking through his arse .... there's Bobby Thompson never told a blue joke in his life, and Chubby Brown who tells nowt else, and they're two of the favourites up here'.

Slowly the penny was beginning to drop regarding the previously mentioned fusion of regional imagery with the audience's critical detachment. But paying the penalty for approaching this particular aspect of the research armed with a preconception of regional audiences as predominantly consumers of a preferred comic style, was proving to be an embarrassing affair. This culminated in my final retreat into what can only be described as a patronising shift onto content. Now I resolved to eliminate certain comic acts on the basis of their content, which, I believed, would not appeal to the north-eastern audiences. So, by offering the proposition of 'alternative' comedians such as Ben Elton, Fry and Laurie or Harry Enfield appearing in the typical setting of the working men's club, I thought this would surely reduce the scope of regional preferences some degree, by knowingly having people of the region reinforce my preconceptions with their rejection of the politically credible non-sexist, non-racist alternative comic content material.

It was the nature of the responses to this last resort line of questioning, aimed to fish out any type of identifiable aspect to the declared Geordie humour, which really hammered home the point that I was floundering on my own debilitating misconception of the regional audience. This is not to say there was a grand uniformity to these



responses which completely shattered my own expectations of what the regional audience opinion would be. It was more a case of a large number of people conforming to them, and sharing the view that such alternative comedy would not go down well in the most common live performance venue in the north-east: the working men's clubs, but a sufficiently large number to cause concern would not commit themselves to this negative confirmation. Again, there was one snatch of conversation which forced my hand to reconsider my own sociological conduct in carrying out this research:

- CB Do you think alternative comedians like Ben Elton would go down well here?
- ANON 'Ben who?'
- CB Ben Elton.
- ANON 'Well, to be honest son, I've never heard of him, but if he gets a booking here I'll come and see him, and see if he's any good'.
- CB Well he's one of these alternative comedians who \_\_\_\_\_
- ANON 'Oh they have all kinds of names now, but if he's good he'll do all right'.
- CB I just thought that with a lot of his stuff being very political that he might not appeal to people \_\_\_\_\_
- ANON Oh no, there's a few of them get on about Thatcher and all that and go down well. I mean, a good comic can go on about anything really, it's how they put it across that matters, and if this Ben Elton can put it across then he'll do all right. Mind you, if he can't he'll die on his arse up here'.

This reply does not exactly refuse the possibility that if the respondent had seen Ben Elton on television, he may well have furnished me with my confirmational negative. But it is the absolute equanimity and assurance of his reply which struck me as being a genuine statement as to the unabashed confidence which infiltrated his, and indeed, the majority of replies regarding the question of humour and the live performance of it in the north-east. The sincerity of the: 'you put

them on stage and we'll see if they're any good' type response, does not immediately encourage a definitive answer to the question of Geordie humour by way of regional audience preference. What it did do, however, was to encourage a recognition of the audience as an integral part of the comic process. A part that audiences themselves saw as vital, insofar as they were aware of comic performance as an integral part of themselves, as part of their lifestyle, their heritage, their identity and their expertise. Hence respondents would not allow themselves to be pushed into flippant or casual replies, with the result that the responses to my questions concerning any of the issues broached under the umbrella of Geordie humour, were very largely carefully considered and thoughtfully addressed. Furthermore, there was not one occasion when I encountered any type of query as to my approaching north-easterners with questions on humour and comedians. The general ambience was that it was only natural for anyone investigating comedy and humour (let alone the possibility of a Geordie humour) to be talking to people in the north-east.

It is from this point of enlightenment towards the regional audience, that this research was prompted to consider a new range of probabilities relating to the proposition of humour being an engine to the construction of regional identity. Because my research showed the downright refusal of members of regional audiences to accept regionalism per se as a determinant to successful comic performance, it became imperative to find out exactly what factors are at work to insinuate success to them. This meant it was now necessary to relax the main strain of analysis, which was initially conceived as being a contextual break down of successful humorous structures and successful performance techniques in terms of their generic location of the Geordie

mythology, so that the audience could be appreciated as a dynamic part in the success of those structures and techniques.

While the initial strain of analysis does remain secure under the aims of this thesis, my contact with the audience did convincingly suggest that this analytical approach would fall short of achieving those aims, if full account of the complete contextual generation of humour was not made. It would be remiss to work from the contextual location of performance content alone, which the conception of audience as passive consumers of familiar humorous structures encourages, as this would compromise any understanding of the actual social practice of successful performance humour, which only the audience can validate with laughter and applause. It is, therefore, deemed necessary to define the complete regional context if there is to be found a Geordie humour which motivates regional image and identity. Hence the institutionalised setting must be considered as part of the complete contextual practice of live performance humour.

### The Setting

Up until now, I have referred to the regional audience with a vagueness that is unbecoming to the analytical requirements of this thesis. So, it is from the need to explain the communicated condition of the audience, that the variable of setting forced its significant bearing, as a vital component, within the complete contextual practice of live performance humour in the north-east. However, at this stage, the aim is to give an outline of the importance of setting in order to explain the recorded outlook of the audience. The full analytical detail of setting, in relation to the issue of a Geordie humour promoting regional identity, will be given in the final chapter.

Although I have previously stated that I had tried to see each artiste perform in different venues so that I could make as comprehensive a note as possible on the performance text itself, it must be said (with the odd exception), that I was mostly restricted to viewing these acts in one particular setting which predominates in the north-east. This is the setting of the working men's club. Of course, one club will differ from another club, but, like one man will differ from another man; there remains the intrinsic similarity:

'You could put me in a club and I wouldn't know if it was Newcastle or Nottingham outside.'

### Brief

The vast majority of social clubs in Britain today are directly affiliated to the C.I.U. - The Working Men's Club and Institute Union Ltd.. The majority of the remaining clubs and organisations have links with the C.I.U. through C.O.R.C.A. - The Committee of Registered Clubs Associations. From this, social clubs are strongly represented in Parliament, with an all-party committee of 152 M.P.'s and 6 peers.

Nationally, the C.I.U. has nearly 4,000 affiliated clubs, with a total membership approaching 4,000,000(3). Approximately 1,000,000 are members of the 505 C.I.U. clubs in the north-east of England(4).

The Union itself, was founded in 1862, by a Unitarian minister, Rev. Henry Solly, to: 'encourage self-improvement and promote temperance among working men.'(5) In a manifesto outlining the Union's aims, Solly wrote:

'This Union is formed for the purpose of helping working men to establish Clubs or Institutes where they can meet for conversation, business and mental improvement, with the means of recreation and

refreshment, free from intoxicating drinks; these clubs, at the same time, constituting Societies for mutual helpfulness in various ways.'(6)

The very slow movement of clubs towards the Union, was seen to be largely due to Solly's insistence on the temperance theme, so, in 1865 a resolution was passed allowing the sale of beer. By May 1919, a group of club members, meeting at Prudhoe Social Club, had agreed to form a co-operative movement, to produce and supply beer to their member clubs, to circumvent the existing high price of beer. A delegate from each of the represented clubs was appointed to the central committee, whose aim was to acquire a brewery in order to supply these and any other clubs they could attract to the federation. The mainstay of support for this venture, at the outset, came from the Northumberland branch of the C.I.U.. The result was the formation of the Northern Clubs Federation Brewery, which produced its first brew in April 1921.

Today the Federation Brewery is based on a 20 acre site at Dunston, Tyne and Wear. It has an annual turnover in excess of £60 million\* It markets direct on a nationwide basis, to clubs, public houses, hotels, off-licences and supermarkets (and the House of Commons bar) as well as exporting its brands to countries such as France, Spain, Denmark, Australia and the United States. Yet, in a commemorative souvenir brochure to mark its 70th anniversary, the Federation Brewery claims to have: 'found a special place in the hearts of the region's sons and daughters.' It sees itself as part of: 'the beloved Geordie homeland', with a traditional role of: 'supplying north-east clubs with high quality, competitively priced beers.'(7)

The imaginative copy of the Ad-men, contained within the

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\* Figures for 1989.

commemorative brochure, makes a clear statement as to the 'correctness' of the brewery being situated in the north-east. It invokes an image of prestige from being a part in place with the traditional hub of club life, - an image which I found north-easterners accepted. In addition to this, I also found the region's public solidly supported the view expressed by George Tremlett, when he wrote:

'In more recent years, with the demise of the music hall, the closure of many cinemas and the decline of religion, clubs have become an even more central part of many communities. In the depressed regions of Britain, where work is hard to find and family life endangered, a thriving working men's club is more than just somewhere to go for a quiet pint of beer. It's the only form of live entertainment left. The concert held on a Friday or Saturday night may be the only chance an unemployed man gets to take his wife out for an evening ....'(8)

The support for these views, of Tremlett and the Brochure, is seen to draw heavily from the accepted imagery of the region. Unanimously, north-easterners attested to the belief that the heart of working men's clubs was in the north-east, and their justification for this lay completely in the familiar imageric structures of regional identity, as outlined in chapter one. The general opinion was that clubs 'belonged' to the north-east. On numerous occasions, I pointed out to respondents that working men's clubs were to be found the length and breadth of Britain; this produced a fairly standard reply, which one club member typified:

'..... they might have more clubs than us down south, I don't know but the difference is; we have the tradition. You see, the clubs are part of our heritage if you like. You ask anybody, and they'll tell you the same; that clubs mean more up here than just somewhere to go for a drink ..... they're part of the Geordie way of life.'

Each club affiliated to the C.I.U. works on a membership system, with yearly subscriptions to be paid by the individual associates. This in itself initiates a tie to the club, which encourages members to be 'regulars' in his or her club. Each club usually has a bar

area, which is still today seen as the male domain; a lounge-bar, where men and women will sit and drink together, and a concert room, where the professional artistes perform. It is not unusual for couples to go to their club on a mid-week evening, and the man disappear into the bar to play darts or pool with his mates, while his spouse goes into the lounge-bar, to play bingo with her mates. Traditionally, it is the week-end which sees the concert room in action; when couples will sit together, with their friends, to watch the act which has been booked, and which they may have had to pay a cover charge to see.

I found the social club to be vehemently defended as a vital part of the lifestyle of its members. The club to which they were registered as a member, was seen as 'their' club - the club belonged to them(9). Quite a number of people described the club as an, 'extension of the home', and it is this common attitude, towards clubs, which is seen to be highly significant in regard to the considerations of this thesis.

The relationship of the member to the club is certainly important. It is seen to provide a setting, which I can best, but inadequately, describe as being of an extra-familiality, into which artistes are 'invited' to perform. This is seen to prescribe a particularism from which audiences can draw a security of tenure as arbiters of taste, which refuses the possibility of their own judgemental fallibility. This is to say, that the setting of the club, like that of the home,

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\* The governing body of each individual club, is a committee of elected members. Some committees have revoked the restriction on female entry into the bar, in a large number of clubs, this restriction is officially enforced. In the clubs where entry is permitted, there is little or no response on the part of women using the bar. Further, the membership of women does not have parity with male membership. Women cannot hold a full associate card, and therefore cannot be elected onto the governing committee(10).

affords a critical confidence which can be directed towards live acts in 'their' club, as easily as criticising a television programme in the privacy of 'their' own home. The familiarity inspired by the ties of membership, to the family or the club, serve to relax the social atmosphere; to allow remarks to be made freely, and without the fears of ego preservation which are heightened in the company of strangers and unfamiliar settings.

Furthermore, because the club clientele see the club as their domain, the onus of entertainment ultimately falls upon them. So, with the high point of entertainment expectations traditionally being the week-end, several entertainment outlets come to be incorporated into making 'a good Saturday night out'. The performance artiste forms only a part of these expectations, albeit a central part, designated by their presence on stage. To this extent, the artiste shoulders the sole responsibility for his professionalism as an entertainer, which must literally win over the audience in open competition with other entertainment possibilities, which the setting of the club installs.

' ..... you've got to prove yourself. You have come to entertain them, they haven't come to be entertained; they've come for bingo, and you just happen to be on incidentally.'(11)

It is usual for clubs to run games of bingo throughout the evening, at each time there is no-one on stage - prior to an act, during intermission or between acts.

'The premium now is on bingo not the acts. It used to be bingo between the acts, now its the acts between the bingo. A lot of the audiences now are bingo addicts. Not only does the bingo have to go on at a certain time, but they come into the concert room selling the tickets during the act. In one club, they sell the tickets right next to the stage, and they form a queue to buy them right in front of the stage, while the act is on. How the hell can you communicate, with a bus queue of people all standing talking in front of the stage? But that's not just Geordie clubs, that is nationwide - the bingo is the most important thing - which is sad really.'(12)



Regardless of whether or not the act is of an acceptable standard, many of the professional comedians expressed the view that the club setting prescribes that an inferior entertainment priority is given to performers, which results in acts being seen as an inconvenient interruption to the bingo.

'One of the benefits I did somewhere, west of Durham, Easington, somewhere like that, the concert chairman came up to me and said, 'the bingo's on at twenty past nine.' I said 'well that's no use, twenty past nine is out.' I said 'we've got a structure here, the bingo is on at nine o'clock and we want it finished at twenty past nine.' 'We always have the bingo on at twenty past nine - always' he says. 'But tonight is a special night; it's a benefit night, we'll change it' I said. But no way. Finally he said the bingo would last 15 minutes, and we settled for that. After 35 minutes of bingo, then a raffle, then the Tote double draw, there is both the 'Country Pickets' and myself left to go on. As it was, I ended up doing 15 minutes, and the Country Pickets 30 minutes. I went up to this bloke, and the committee were there, and I ended up arguing with him, and I said the greatest of all criminal things: I actually said: 'I, as a performer, am more important than the bingo.' And there was silence. How dare this person come up and say he's more important than the bingo! It was heresy. So entertainment is not even icing on the cake. It comes with cheap beer, crack with your mates, bingo and getting out of the house.'(13)

Also in each concert room, there are bar facilities, and the act must sufficiently capture the audience to hold their attention whilst bar activities continue. Above all, members of the club audience sit at tables with friends, and will therefore generate their own conversational entertainment. The performance comedian must subdue this if s/he is to 'win' the audience. Failure to win this attention will result in members of the audience resorting to their own company, and consequently ignore the act.

'..... the audience span of attention was so much used to the bang bang bang bang comic, and still is, you know; 20 seconds: bum bum, 20 seconds: bum bum, all one-liners. Mine were involved stories, you had to listen to the beginning the middle and the end, and it might last eight minutes. I ran the risk of the concert chairman paying me off, because there was gaps when they had to listen.'(14)

'..... you have to dance about a bit; from the one thing to the other; to hold people's attention.'(15)

Ultimately, the failure of an act to impress the club audience, could very likely result in that comedian facing a solid wall of resentful barracking. As has already been stated, this is a practice the setting of the club engenders, rather than dissipates, because members of the audience are not strangers to one another, nor are they in a strange setting(16). To read the mood of dissatisfaction and give voice to this, at the expense of the artiste, is seen as only right and fair.

'Look, the buggers up there get paid enough, and if they're no bloody good; then they deserve all they get.'

However, the converse is a similarly justifiably enforced practice, in that an act, which is seen as worthy, will be given attentive order, and those who do not abide by this and persist in barracking and heckling, will be generally frowned upon as spoiling the act. Indeed, such conduct may be deemed sufficiently out of order to have disciplinary action taken against the perpetrators by the governing committee of the club. They could, for example, be suspended ('barred') from the club for a specified period of time.

To help consolidate the importance of setting, as an influential factor pertaining to the previously recorded rhetoric of the audience, an expedient comparison can be drawn between the two main performance settings in the north-east, i.e. the working men's club compared to the theatre style setting.

'Say you did a summer season on one of the Blackpool piers. Now these people have travelled to Blackpool for a holiday, yes. They've stood in a queue to buy a ticket, they then walk a mile along the pier and stand in a queue to get in. There's no booze, no bingo, they sit there and they want to be entertained. It is so easy to entertain them. Those same people in their own environment: in a working men's club, when you're on their territory, and you're interrupting their privacy and their bingo - you've got to prove

yourself ..... To get the attention and respect that a comedian needs, is a lot more difficult.'(17)

Unlike the club concert room, the geography of the theatre setting is designed to precipitate attentive viewing. The arrangement of the seating into fixed rows facing the stage, contrasts markedly with the club concert room, where seating is situated around tables, randomly located throughout the room. Normally, these are four-seater tables, which can easily be moved or pushed together to unite groups of friends. Consequently, an artiste can appear on stage to find a sizable proportion of the audience sitting with their backs towards him. So, unlike the theatre, there is no physical assurance of the audience's attention being given from the seating plan of the club concert room.

'In a workmen's club, the seats face everyway, the last thing [considered] is the stage.'(18)

Further, the setting of the theatre enhances a disparate audience outlook to that of the general ethos of the club. Whereas the club falls within the day to day routine of the concert room audience, the theatre setting does not. It will be a special occasion for most of the members of the theatre audience, in that they have journeyed outside of the routine for the specific purpose of seeing the particular artiste appearing at that venue. Hence the theatre audience has the characteristic of a gathering of strangers with a common purpose, which is to see an artiste they enjoy sufficiently, to attract them to pay the higher admission fees of the theatre. This contrasts with the club concert room, where the audience will be fragmented into divergent entertainment possibilities, such as: bingo, lottery draws, leek shows, game handicaps, dancing, drinking, meeting friends, or watching the acts.

'You see, if people paid 50p or a pound, to come into a club and watch an act, and play bingo, and drink pints, they'd watch it and appreciate it, but that's only part of their night to them, and it's

in their mind. There will be a darts match in the bar, so when their lass is playing bingo, they'll pop in [to the bar] and what it is - they're not really committed to entertainment in clubs, there's too many other distractions. But when they come out to a theatre; like the 'Dixielanders', or what we're doing now, they were coming out to be entertained, and not for anything else, and they were psychologically geared up for that. Also, at a time when the average cover charge was 10 or 20p, they were paying £2, so they were going to have their two quids' worth.'(19)

Another difference between these two settings is the situation of drinking alcohol. In the theatre, the bar facilities are separate from the performance area. Drinks may only be consumed prior to the act, or during any intermission the show permits. Whereas in the club concert room, there are bar services continually available to the audience, which means the performers must face the inevitability of members of their club audience moving around to order drinks, during the course of their act. This obviously creates a climate of distraction, which the theatre artiste would not encounter, but which the artiste in the club must overcome if s/he is to succeed. I found the comedians were keen to substantiate this. They generally agreed that it was the drinking activity of the club audience that was the most potentially damaging to their acts. Alan Fox, a professional comedian living and working in the north-east, recalled with a grimace, how the whole build-up to a punch line in the act could be ruined by one man standing at the bar and shouting across the audience to his pal; if he would like a packet of crisps! All of the comedians made some mention of the noisy interference created by the bar element. They spoke of 'tills ringing', 'glasses chinking', 'orders being shouted', and people 'walking in front of the stage to go to the bar' (while the artiste was performing).

The social club can thus be seen to be a particular institutional setting for comic performance. Yet, this particularity must be

considered in terms of the institution, and not the region, as working men's clubs (and other forms of social club) pervade all areas of the British Isles\*, and the setting they prescribe for the performance artiste varies little geographically\*\*

'I've found that when I've done gigs in Jersey, say, or the Isle of Man, or the Middle-East even; where a lot of the audiences are people who go to the workmen's clubs here - out there, they're great audiences. I mean, I did a gig in Jersey, and I was booked immediately. There were about forty people from the B.I.C.C. club; across in Liverpool - a big club. They saw the show [in Jersey] and loved it. They came three nights because I'd changed the routines a lot, and they pushed me: 'will you do a gig? Will you do a gig?' I said I would, and when I got back it was a big thing - the funniest bloke they'd ever seen. There was the [B.I.C.C.] club packed, and on I came, and nothing. There they all were: talking, talking, talking. Twenty minutes on, I gave it up and left. So what changed them forty people, it wasn't me, I was working in the middle of a tour and I was working high; it was the club'.(20)

However, there is a regional significance to this setting, insofar as the north-east of England has the highest concentration of social clubs, compared to any other geographical area of Britain. For example, there are 505 C.I.U. affiliated clubs in the north-east, which is almost double the number for South Wales with 261. The Durham area of the C.I.U. alone, has a higher number of clubs than South Wales, or the West Midlands, or the whole of the combination of Manchester and Greater Manchester: Durham has 305 clubs, compared to 261, 239, and 282 respectively(21). This physical evidence, coupled with the firm belief north-easterners hold as to the north-east being the 'heart of clubland', obviously suggests the predominant setting for

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\* The social clubs in Great Britain form the largest single consumer grouping in Europe(22).

\*\* All of the comedians I interviewed, had worked in clubs in many different areas of the country. Combined, they have experience of social clubs in regions throughout Britain, and each of them agreed that the social club setting is largely consistent, regardless of geographical region.

comic performance in the region. This in turn, dictates the necessary consideration of the setting of the social club as a vital part of the total contextual frame, for the analytical purposes of this research.

'..... [I] was to come out, not even touch the workmen's clubs; because they were closed minds - not that the people were closed minds generally - I mean, people are people, it's just the ethos of the workmen's club. Somehow the club seemed to close their minds as soon as they came in. Their minds seemed to atrophy the moment they set foot through the door'.(23)

'If you go to a working men's club, and the microphone's bad, and the lights are bad, and they're not listening, you don't die because you never begin to live'.(24)

## Part II

This part of the chapter will be directed towards a presentation of the varied and contrasting views expounded by the professional comedians I have interviewed. These views will be documented in strict accordance to the reasoning applied by the comedians themselves, as the aim is to allow an introduction to the key issues involved in the hypothesis of a Geordie humour promoting regional identity, to be made by those who are expertly qualified, on a practical level, to do so.

### The Professionals

When I interviewed the professional comedians who regularly worked in the north-east, I found myself listening to some very detailed appraisals of the work they do. Each of them had a definite and thoroughly considered contribution to make to my research, which they had obviously formulated from their own experiences of their trade, a long time prior to my approach. Hence, for the most part, the questions that were put to the comedians were met with recognisably well established thinking, which showed in the fluency and eloquence of their replies. This certainly provided me with a great deal of valuable information and substantial research material, yet, once again, it served primarily to confuse, rather than enlighten.

As it transpired, the reasoning of the comedians was seen to spiral into an orbit of individual variation and complexity, because of their common tendency to identify content alone as the fundamental definitional criterion for a Geordie humour. With this rigid application of content as a definitional yardstick, each of the comedians unequivocally rejected the view that a particular Geordie

humour existed. Having done this, they each proceeded to give energetic variations of reasoning to accommodate recognisably regional traits involved in the successful practice of humour in the north-east. For example, some of the comedians would go on to argue that there was a 'dialect humour', or an 'accent humour', or a 'type of humour that appealed to Geordies', or make a pointed note of the things a performer could or could not do to a Geordie audience for comic acceptance. They spoke of some comedians in the region utilising image structures of regional identity in their act, and about adapting material for non-Geordie audiences, and about how the uniqueness of the Geordie dialect prevented Geordie comedians from making it to the top in television entertainment. But they insisted there wasn't a Geordie humour.

The black and white certainty contained within their common rejection of a plausible Geordie humour, purely on the tenability of a universality of content meaning to a joke, produced a ranging gray area of obscurity; from the reasoning of the comedians being skilfully woven in between stylistic determinants to successful humour in the north-east, and their dogged refusal to knit them together into a definitional criterion for a Geordie humour equivalent to that of content. This has left an untidy veil of uncertainty hanging over the question of Geordie humour, which the comedians themselves are seen to have fashioned from cutting their cloth to fit only the aspect of content at the expense of style. Consequently, the question of Geordie humour is deepened because the individual comedians called on their professional experience to support their gauge of content, while reasoning around stylistic concerns relating to successful performance humour in the north-east. In order to proceed with this research, it



is, therefore, necessary to delineate the thinking of the professional comedians, so that the relevant detail may be presented to aid the analytical objectives of this thesis.

For the purpose of presentation, two general headings will be used: 'performance' and 'audience/setting'. Although there is a certain amount of overlap between these two headings, which is unavoidable from the point of their recognised interrelation, this is not seen to detract from the intended advantage of using the headings to organise the detail of the research material drawn from the interviews with the professional comedians. With this data located under the component headings, it will be more accessible for the comparative references to be made for the purposes outlined on page 62, i.e. for example, the reasoning of the audience on the audience will act as a balancing counterpoint to the reasoning of the professional comedians on the audience. The material assigned under the heading of performance, will however, be used comparatively on two levels. First, the contrasting views of the comedians themselves will be brought into comparative debate on the subject of a Geordie humour. Secondly, there will be an objective analysis of their content, form, style, etc., which will be addressed in the final chapter of the thesis by comparative reference being made to the performance of the one unanimously regionally accredited archetypal Geordie comedian: Bobby Thompson.

### Performance

This section is concerned with the mechanics of humour, as operated by the professional comedians in the north-east, in their evidently successful execution of their trade. Numerous important

performance considerations were applied to the question of a Geordie humour, by the comedians during their interviews, as it was this 'on-stage' activity which was seen to be the direct line of approach to the question. Hence, those comedians who believed there was a Geordie humour inasmuch as it pertained to regional dialect or regional imagery, sought immediate justification from performance, while those who flatly rejected the notion sought immediate vindication from performance. Their respective reasoning, and its constant search for legitimacy from substantive example, ensured that a thorough examination was made of performance, in relation to the evocation of humour in the north-east. From this, due consideration was given, by the comedians, to the performance essentials of content, style, technique, and 'working' the audience, as well as their informed appraisal of acts utilising these qualities in performance. Assessment of this detail supplied by the comedian interviews made it clear that in the field of successful performance humour in the north-east, no stone was left unturned. For example, 'content' acted as an umbrella term, covering factors such as: temporal/nostalgic and geographical references, the 'pitch' of material and the use of idiom, while 'style' covered points such as: delivery, characterisation, visual effects and stage-craft.

For the most part, it was the topic of regional content which provoked a definite stance to be taken, by the professional comedians, on the matter of a Geordie humour. Those who rejected the idea of a definitive regional particularism of content material, did so by skillfully dissecting a supposed Geordie joke into its universal elements. This produced the consensus amongst the comedians, that there were no Geordie jokes as defined by a regionally particular content meaning, there were only jokes with a superficial regional gloss painted over

a basic universal content meaning. This gloss was seen to take the idiomatic form of regional dialect, colloquialism and parlance, coupled with a contrived parochialism. The comedians argued that this north-east regional gloss could be removed or modified to allow any joke, that was considered to be a Geordie joke, to 'travel' to any region of the country without any loss of its humorous qualities.

'Let me tell you there is no such thing as regional humour, the only thing that is regional is dialect. A funny joke is a funny joke anywhere, but you let them think it is their sense of humour and that is all'.(1)

'The only way that humour becomes localised is through dialect, using dialect words. For instance, a Geordie joke: "Geordie goes to join the navy, and the officer says 'Can you swim?' and Geordie says 'What's the matter - have ya got nee ships!'" Now that is funny because of the dialect: 'got nee ships''.(2)

The use of dialect words such as 'got nee ships', is seen to be part of the comic technique, and is highly valued by the comedians who have this facility open to them when they work in the north-east. This is because dialect supplements the stock pile of jokes in the comedian's repertoire, insofar as the addition of dialect words (or the regional label of 'Geordie' they promote) can be exploited to gain laughs from north-eastern audiences.

'.... there is another example: "A man went to Seaburn to join the life-guards and the fellow says 'Can you swim?' and Geordie says 'No, but I can plodge a long way oot'". That makes it funny because of the Geordie word 'plodge'. So I can do fifteen minutes on that style of purely Geordie humour, but it's only because of dialect words'.(3)

'.... you can take a joke from any other area, as I occasionally do, and twist it and bring it out as a Geordie joke. You do this with most Irish jokes. There's one which I heard years ago, which was the negro in the First World War who was being interviewed. The officer says 'We're gonna put you in the cavalry'. The negro replies: 'No sir. I ain't goin to no cavalry boss: when we's retreatin' I don't wanna be hindered by no hoss'. Now that wouldn't go here. Now if you were to change the negro character to a Geordie; that would work. I've used such examples in talks I've given, and it does work. However, the other one [using the negro] doesn't, the audience does not equate with it'.(4)

Also, the use of dialect was valued by the comedians because it was seen to signal to the audience that the comedian 'belonged' to the region, and should, therefore, be accepted as one of them.

'Geordie comics always accentuate the Geordie when they're in their own area .... when I'm on stage I really thicken the Geordie dialect on'.(5)

From this signalled 'belonging', some of the comedians claimed that they were able to do certain things on stage, which the audience would not accept from entertainers who they did not see as 'belonging' to the region. Yet, having made this claim, they steadfastly refused to acknowledge that this in any way implied there was a particular Geordie humour, as again, they enforced the criterion of content as the definitional measure, to which the appraised regional value of dialect was argued not to comply.

'I think the humour Billy and I do is applicable right throughout the country. All the areas of Britain went through the same period of time, from the East-End of London to the Welsh mining valleys. The audience accept it from us because we talk in a Geordie accent, but it would be no good for anyone telling it to the north-east people in a Yorkshire accent. But, I bet a Yorkshire comedian could tell exactly the same sort of humour down in Yorkshire, with his Yorkshire accent, and they would accept it. But you have to convince them you're one of them. It would be no good me going down to Yorkshire and trying to talk Yorkshire - the public will not accept that - it has to be done naturally otherwise you cannot do it. You cannot falsify an accent'.(6)

This obviously raises questions as to the viability of content alone being used as the primary selective mechanism to either accept or reject a Geordie humour; questions that will be addressed in due course. At this stage, however, it is important to remember that the reasoning of the professional comedians is being documented, not analysed.

As the comedians continued with their keenly invoked partition of universal content from the acknowledged value of a regionally specific dialect, they were seen never to stray from the section of

content when seeking to justify their disqualification of a particular Geordie humour. It has already been mentioned that the most heavily ploughed furrow of justification was that offering a high yield of substantive examples in the form of jokes claiming Geordie status on the 'superficial' basis of dialect. Yet, while such examples were given by each comedian to illustrate the argument of 'regional gloss' being applied to a universal joke, there surfaced a number of anomalies, embedded in these examples, which were challenging to the content/dialect partition imposed by the comedians. As these loopholes to the general stand on content as the defining feature of regional humour were broached with the comedians, they were seen to provide the opportunity for divergent opinions to be pursued. In some cases, this was to cause the comedian to falter, as the categorical weight of their initial dismissal of a particular Geordie humour became the more difficult to support the more they thought about the anomalies. This strongly suggests that these anomalies should be carefully considered as they carry a significance sufficient to jar conceptions out of their established confirmation.

The two most debilitating anomalies to the straightforward rejection of a Geordie humour, both relate to dialect. They are regarded as anomalies and not as distinct stylistic concerns, because they each have the peculiarity of dialect directly determining the appreciation of the content to a joke told in the north-east. In order to illustrate the importance of these anomalies to the central theme of Geordie humour, each will be exemplified, and the comedians' handling of their challenge to the declared universality of content will be documented.

First, there is the realisation that some of the Geordie dialect

jokes given by the comedians to reaffirm their insistence on a universality of content, contained within them content material which extracted humour because of the regionally specific word play in the dialect itself. For example:

'The mayor of Newcastle trying to get into a working men's club, is stopped by a doorman. He tells the doorman he's the mayor: the doorman says he's been told there's 'nee mare to gan in'. You can't do that south of Darlington'.(7)

Although the comedian who gave this example attached to it a clear statement as to the regional specificity of the joke, he maintained throughout his interview that such specificity came from accent and not content. However, when the joke is inspected closely, it shows that the content substance is entirely derivative of the Geordie dialect words. Hence, this joke has its content built upon the regional dialect, rather than the converse, where dialect is seen only to be a superficial regional gloss. As such, the content becomes completely localised to the north-east of England, which is wholly inconsistent with the general line of reasoning applied by the professional comedians. In the example, the Geordie word 'mare' translates into the word 'more' ('no more to go in') but the regional pronunciation of the word has the phonetic similarity to the word 'mayor' which provides the humorous play on meaning: 'nee mare/no mayor to go in', which is the content of the joke. This is to say that the joke could have no meaning to anyone who was not conversant with the Geordie dialect, nor would it be possible to retain the essence of the joke if the dialect words were in any way altered to accommodate those unacquainted with the dialect. This in turn throws a spanner in the works as far as the comedian's general adherence to the regional gloss argument is concerned, because their mainstay support to this argument is their claim that the content of the joke

will hold fast when 'glossy' regional dialect words are modified or changed to allow the joke to 'travel'.

In short, the 'mayor' joke is an example of an anomalous flaw to the content/dialect partition the comedians imposed to selectively reject a Geordie humour on the basis of content. The example illustrates the existence of a regionally particular point where dialect can bridge the partition to determine content, and thus formulate a Geordie joke capable of being validated by the very criterion of content which the comedians applied to disqualify them. While it is accepted that most of the examples of 'Geordie jokes' did fit with the reasoning of the professional comedians - for instance, the joke given earlier on page 84. containing the dialect word 'plodge', could easily have that word substituted for the Oxford English dictionary word 'paddle' without any loss of meaning or humorous impact - the comparatively small number of examples highlighting the anomaly, must be given equal consideration if there is to be a complete analysis of Geordie humour.

The second and equally significant anomaly relates to the use of regional dialect, by the comedians working in the north-east, for the purpose of 'winning' the audience. Although this may appear to re-state the previously mentioned value of dialect to signal 'belonging', the anomaly refers to content in that it is the exploitation of dialect which is seen to convince the regional audience that universal content material is particular to them and to the region.

CB So is it something more? I mean, if you stripped a joke down and found you could tell it anywhere if you took away the Geordie words and dialect, is there still more to it as regards a Geordie humour?

AS 'Oh yes, yes. I mean, you can change words and places and get away with it, but up here you've got to hit the Geordie'.(8)

The desired effect of local comedians 'hitting the Geordie', is that they will be allowed to install themselves by pandering to the image structures of the region, which are inveterate in the regional audience. They do this by using dialect to show the audience that they are qualified to do certain things, or use certain content. From this, the acknowledged universality of content, such as the domestic/nostalgic material which is included in the in performances of acts like the 'Dixielanders', or Alan Snell, or Bobby Thompson, or Lambert and Ross, or Little Billy Fane, who all work regularly in the north-east, becomes regionally particularised by dialect words framing the universal domestic working class themes of hardship, poverty and debt, into the regional imagery of the north-east.

There are a great many examples of this anomaly of dialect framing universal content structures into the particular imagery of the north-east. One of them is a sketch performed by Alan Snell, which I, and about 300 other people at Consett Victoria Working Men's Club, thoroughly enjoyed. The humorous structures he used in this sketch were funny simply because of the comic imagery and intonation, which would undoubtedly travel to any region of the country. Yet, his transposition of dialect words into the content of the sketch, was seen by both artiste and audience alike to engage the audience and assure them that the sketch was ostensibly the humour of their region. So instead of Alan Snell telling, in his act, how he used to have to go to an outside toilet, and then struggle to sit balanced on the edge of it so that he could keep the door shut with his foot - and the door opened outwards! - he uses the dialect word 'nettie' instead of the accepted English word 'toilet'. This regionalising technique of dialect was maintained by reference being consistently made to what



Alan Snell calls: 'Geordieisms'. So, in his act, again as a little boy in a poor family, his mother would throw the 'Geordieism' of a 'clippie mat' over his bed to keep him warm, and the well received punch line is; if he'd behaved himself, she would take it out of the frames\*.

During the evening of this performance by Alan Snell, I had taken the opportunity to speak to members of the audience, for the purpose of the research. The moment Alan Snell left the stage, a man I had spoken to earlier, walked across to me and said defiantly:

'You'll have a hard job on trying to say that's not Geordie humour'.

Both of these anomalies seemed to surface naturally within the conversational scope of the interviews with the comedians, but neither was unanimously respected as significant. Some of the comedians reasoned around them by showing, with comparable examples from other regions, how they merely form part of comic technique. Some of the comedians dismissively bulldozed their reasoning over the anomalies, seeing them as being devoid of any right to make them change their opinions. Some of the comedians, however, did make concession to their preferred line of thinking to incorporate these anomalies, and tentatively acknowledged a specific 'dialect humour' of the north-east.

Paradoxically, the examples that were used to illustrate the anomalies that gave rise to the divergence of opinions, were roundly rejected by all of the comedians. Examples such as the 'mayor' joke

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\* If the reader does not 'get' this joke, then there is something important to consider regarding Geordie humour, as people in audiences throughout the north-east do 'get' it without need of an explanation that 'clippie mats' were traditionally made floor coverings from odds and ends of fabric, and that the pattern was held between wooden frames during the making - a process which resembles tapestry work rather than weaving.

were not accepted as content specific, on a level that would sustain a claim to a distinctive Geordie humour, because it was seen as erroneous to use dialect peculiarities, which any other region could exploit, as a realistic standard to gauge the viability of a specific regional humour.

'Yes, that's what I mean by a Geordie gag: an accent. It's the same in Sheffield; gags are the same with accent words changed. Like up here you have the German rent collector: 'Karl Bach'(call back), in Sheffield he's Chinese: 'Shin Tin'(she is not at home)'.(9)

The second of the two recorded anomalies; which dealt with dialect regionalising content, was found to be a more awkward proposition to those comedians who wished to stick to their commitment that a particular Geordie humour did not exist. The degree of awkwardness experienced by the comedian, was determined by the depths to which the comedian was prepared to consider the anomaly seriously. Indeed, it was the comedians who thought to maintain their rejection of a particular Geordie humour that dug deepest into the issue, whereas those who conceded a strain of regionally specific humour settled at that level and ceased digging. Ultimately, however, the resolve of those plumbing the depths of reasoning behind this anomaly, was to be rewarded by the challenging awkwardness it presented being successfully turned into substantive support for their denunciation of a Geordie humour. They accomplished this by seeing the bottom of the anomaly as a consideration of the extent to which regionally specific content from dialect words and references, equates with the claim to a regionally specific humour, and then concluding that there was no intrinsic relationship to allow this equation. The favoured line of reasoning to reach this conclusion, was to accept that dialect and local references did constitute a regionalising of content material, but that such endeavour on the part of a comedian was insufficient to

warrant the claim to a distinctive regional humour. There was seen to be an inbuilt frailty to the assumption that a comedian's regionally relevant content material signified evidence of a regionally particular humour.

'You do put local references in, like; I'm going to Hong Kong: there's my file on Hong Kong [points]. I'm going to fit all my material - to take that street out and put this street in - but I'm not a Hong Kong comedian just because I'm talking about Hong Kong. Even if I lived in Hong Kong I could never be a Hong Kong comedian. Maybe in Hong Kong there is a Chinese comedian who does nothing but Chinese audiences, and kills them talking about this or that street. Whereas I would go to Hong Kong and find a lot of fun in saying, 'I had a meal in the Fuk Yu restaurant in Fuk Yu street', which is in Hong Kong, now he might be cracking jokes about Nutsford Terrace in Hong Kong. It just comes down to personality makes a comedian'.(10)

This argument that regional content does not necessarily correlate with regional comedians performing regional humour, is seen to prefer an acceptance of comic ability to judge and to play to an audience, rather than accept an unalienable right of some comedians to succeed with an audience because they are party to something which is uniquely intelligible to that geographical area.

' .... when he [Billy Connolly] talks about Glasgow, and gets on about the rough area, people know what he's on about because they've got rough areas in the places where they live. When he's on about the flash housing estates, they've got them as well, you know, but it's just a question of interpreting to your audience. It's just a question of selling the audience that and saying: 'look, you must have this, you know, you must have a similar sort of thing, but from where I come from it's like this'. You can do it that way, or you can do it by research of the area that you're working in, and changing place names and changing situations, you know, using the local industry there, the rough pub, the new housing estate and the joggers and the posers and anybody who springs into mind as a group, an identifiable group of people or an identifiable situation, something which in some way has relevance to your audience, then you just build it all up and knock it all down again'.(11)

The comedians who followed this line of argument tended to ignore suggestions of regional particularism, even when regional particularities emerged in their own arguments.

'If you're good enough you can alter a word. I mean to say, I can

do the Geordie Bible story, I've done it in San Francisco, New York, the Middle East, in London, in Cornwall, and I've always got the laughs, and there's things in there as obtuse as 'follow the Blue Star', which to anybody not from the north-east, who knows nothing about Brown Ale, was lost. But, either during or before the routine, I can do a little bit about Brown Ale and the Blue Star, and therefore cover all those areas I need to cover. Also, I can do a thing about the dialect itself, such as pronunciation of vowels, leading to a comic breakdown of words which gets laughs. So it's the structure, and that's called the ability of creative comedy art: that's the way you do your business'.(12)

All in all, the comedian interviews did not provide a guiding light, from their consideration of performance, which could be followed towards a decisive confirmation of a prevalent Geordie humour in the north-east of England. Yet, nor was there seen to be a sound basis for a complete rejection of Geordie humour, as essential detail on dialect, and its regionalising influence on performances in the north-east, was seen to be significantly involved to demand serious consideration. Even those comedians who did not accept this regionalising influence of dialect as being significant enough to delineate a strain of particular regional humour, did accept that dialect did have certain regional ramifications, but none sufficient to support a comprehensive claim to a Geordie humour.

There was a consensus amongst the comedians that the Geordie dialect was the one regional dialect that did not 'travel' very well to other parts of the country (or the English speaking world). Several of the comedians explained this by reference to historical constituents:

'Mind, I would never like to see the Geordie accent lost, because I think it is a language on its own, which it undoubtedly is. I mean, if you look at the history of the Geordie language, there is; Viking; Danish; German; and Anglo-Saxon in it.'(13)

Some of the comedians explained it by showing how its idiosyncratic intricacy defeated the most 'polished' performer impressionists, who readily admit their failure to master the Geordie dialect, as a result of the supreme difficulty it presents.

'.... it's just an accent that is difficult. You ask any impersonators and they always say that the Geordie accent is the worst one to get off. It's the most difficult because it's mixed with German, Norwegian, and all sorts of countries'.(14)

'Janet Brown, the impressionist, has always said there is only one dialect she cannot do, and that is the Geordie dialect. She is a very very polished performer, and she can't do it'.(15)

Also, some of the comedians explained the inability of the dialect to 'travel', because of the high degree of unintelligibility it carried to non native north-easterners.

'.... because the Geordie dialect is .... er, well there's no full stops or commas, it's all one word: 'Gisabottlabroon'\* what does that mean to anybody? There are no pauses in it'.(16)

'Well there are certain dialect words I can use up here and get a laugh, which they wouldn't understand down south. You've got to talk English to the English'.(17)

'.... for all they're talking Cockney, you can understand every word they say. It's the same with Manchester, Liverpool, but not with a Geordie. The faster you talk; the worse it becomes. One fellow in Leeds, a long time ago, didn't know whether I was telling gags or trying to sing. It's a real business is comedy'.(18)

From whatever angle the regional dialect was accorded its relevant inclusion to the question of regional humour, there was a consensus recognition amongst the comedians, that the ramifications of dialect appertained to comic style, rather than to a particular form of regional humour. This was evident in each of the interviews, as the comedians after having acknowledged the demonstrably heavily idiomatic language of the region, would then go on to deny any prescriptive impact it may have regarding a Geordie humour; on the grounds that dialect could easily be 'levelled off' to allow comedians from the north-east to 'travel' with their act. This 'levelling off' process was seen to be a simple task, involving mostly stylistic matters such as slowing down the speed of delivery of content material.

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\* Give me a bottle of Newcastle Brown Ale.

'.... well if you only do north-east humour, then you do the north-east with a really broad accent - you can only work the north-east - see I'm not doing it. In March we did a trade show at Beverly's, and people were coming from all over: not just the north-east. Now if you had just north-east humour you couldn't do it; they wouldn't be able to understand you, all you've got to do is slow down'.(19)

However, there emerged the inevitable loophole to let the cat amongst the pigeons. At first, this loophole of dialect restricting the successful 'travelling' of a comedian from the north-east, was to lend substance to the stylistic regulation of dialect, insofar as all of the comedians interviewed had worked extensively throughout the country, and some had worked successfully in other countries. But, the question of the recognised absence of a successful national television comedian from the north-east, was seen to provide fertile ground for the critical examination which is to be conducted in the final chapter.

To briefly state this fertile ground: there is the acceptance that the working class has produced many of the most famous national comedians; from music hall to television. Yet, with rare exception, none of those comedians has worked their way up from the north-east of England. Today, comedians can work to a national audience with broad regional accents. For example, the following comedians became household names from their television exposure, and each of them used their regional accent, rather than make any attempt to disguise it: Stan Boardman (Liverpool), Charlie Williams (Yorkshire), Bernard Manning (Manchester), Frank Carson (Northern Ireland), Jasper Carrot (Birmingham), Jim Davidson (London), and Billy Connolly (Glasgow). The comedian from the north-east, with a Geordie accent, is conspicuous by his absence, and this alone directly informs a necessary course of analytical enquiry.

'.... a Geordie accent is a definite drawback. I mean, a Manchester comedian can get right to the top and maintain his accent, a Liverpool

comedian the same, a Cockney comedian the same, even a Scottish comedian: Billy Connolly for instance. A Geordie comedian must change his accent; I mean, who've we had? Wee Georgie Wood who spoke frightfully so, when he made the top. He must have had elocution lessons down there in London, and Albert Burton are about the two biggest we ever had, but they had to lose their accents before they got anywhere'.(20)

Although this documentation of the comedians' thinking on the question of Geordie humour may be seen to add confusion rather than clarity, the comedians have made it clear that it is a question which involves a complex range of relevant concerns, and that these must be taken into account by any project which aims to address the question correctly. As such, the involved material extracted from these interviews concerning the thinking behind performance indicators to the existence, or non existence, of a Geordie humour, has produced a healthy harvest of valuable information which must be gathered in to the final analysis in chapter 3.

Besides this, the variety of reasoning applied by the comedians to tackle the issues raised by their own imposition of the content/style dichotomy, opened the gates into the field of audience and setting of humour to search for support to their reasoning. This was mostly a natural course to the interviews, with the comedian taking the initiative. But, it was more a case of the comedian being drawn to this consideration of audience and setting, because of weaknesses surfacing in some of their performance rejections of a particular Geordie humour, either on the basis of content, or from the relegation of dialect to a non determining stylistic regionalism, which could easily be 'levelled off' to allow a north-eastern act to 'travel'.

Ironically, this move to audience/setting proved to stress the existing weakness of arguments flatly rejecting Geordie humour, rather than heal them. Often it was seen to be more a case of out of the

frying pan and into the fire, for those comedians who wished to maintain a negative Geordie humour argument: for example, the ease of overcoming the regional dialect handicap, and make reference to the audience/setting at the same time.

'You see, I can work other places: I've even worked for the Yanks in Germany. You do have to slow down and pronounce your I's and G's, and say 'my' instead of 'me', but in doing that you lose a bit of the comedy value. I'm much more comfortable working to my own countrymen: Geordies, but I can work away'.(21)

However, for the comparative purposes of this research, (as outlined at the beginning of Part II of this chapter) every effort was made to introduce the comedian to the area of audience/setting if they were reluctant to move that way themselves, so that as much information as possible could be gleaned from these interviews, with regard to the complete perception of live performance humour in the north-east, from those who practise the art.

Fortunately, as I mentioned earlier, these efforts to induce the comedians to consider audience and setting, were never needed to be more than suggestion. This is better for the research as open interviews of this type are qualitatively more productive when respondents feel they are volunteering information, instead of feeling they are being pressed for a reply. There was, however, one particularly helpful route which led the comedians directly into the involvement of audience/setting in their arguments. This route was not a minor road which could easily be bypassed, moreso, it was one of the lanes on the main road of content, which the comedians used so frequently to reach their rejection of a particular Geordie humour. Because of the importance they attached to content as holding the key to reject a Geordie humour on the grounds of universality, the comedians were obliged to accept that the failure of a competent comic act in the region, was not due to a failure of



the comedian to use particular Geordie content, it was instead due to a failure of the comedian to use the correct content 'pitch', which is ultimately determined by the audience and setting.

'There is not such a thing as a northern sense of humour, a southern sense of humour, or a Yorkshire sense of humour. I'll tell you what is: there is a different humour style, depending on the type of audience. For instance, if you go into a working men's club tonight and do something about Margaret Thatcher, you might get a little laugh. If you do a Sunday night at the London Palladium and do it, you'll get a thunderous round of applause. You see you're working to a concert audience as opposed to a working men's club audience. A variety audience; you do topical stuff, you get laughs and applause: working men's club you might get a laugh .... In other words, you can do topical stuff to - I hate to use the word, 'intelligent' audience - that's not what it is really, it's rather a concert audience; in other words, it's one that's not sitting there with a pint. The theatre audience wants to hear topical stuff and the club audience wants to hear funny stuff, not clever stuff'.(22)

#### Audience/Setting

With reference to Part I of this chapter, there is a clear statement made by the regional audience as to their own generally acknowledged status of being critically demanding of comic performers. Also in Part I account was made of the setting of the working men's club, and how that predominant setting for live performance humour in the north-east is instrumental in formulating such a generally perceived status of critical detachment. These confirmed impressions of the regional audience about the regional audience, projected a self-image of high esteem which is founded on the belief that they are able to judge the quality of comic performance on its merits, and not on any advantage the comedian could call upon simply from being a north-easterner. Hence, it is the aim of this section of the chapter to present the thinking of the professional comedians, who perform regularly to regional audiences in working men's clubs, in order that comparative analysis may be made of the views given from both sides of the stage.

Significantly, each of the comedians interviewed fully acknowledged, and reiterated, the critical and demanding nature of the regional audience. They also attested to the certain influence of the institutional setting of the working men's club, actively supporting these easily identifiable traits of the regional audience. However, the reasoning behind these conclusions made by the comedians, was seen to differ markedly from that of the audience. The point of divergence was that the performers did not see the power of audience to demand an 'acceptable standard', was the same thing as the audience having an open-mindedness to judge the merits, or quality, of an act. In other words, the comedians accepted the claim that the regional audience was recognisably critical, but that the criticism was not detached from preconceived comic preferences and expectations to allow the objective meritocratic assessment which is implicit in the responses of the audience. The comedians, who were all veterans of playing to working men's club audiences in the north-east, unanimously agreed that the club audience was not open-minded, and would not tolerate any form of comedy which did not cater to their rigid expectations. It was this common observation which was seen to translate into the comedians' rejection of the audience's ability to judge comic performance on merit.

So, to begin the comparative analysis, the first step is to document the level of concordance between the comedians and the audience, as to the extent to which the regional audience is a critically demanding (if not an open-minded) audience. This will facilitate the analytical requirement of determining how far the audience has this characteristic as a result of regional peculiarities, or as the result of institutional/setting particularities. This will supply an obviously significant weight of support to either the affirmation or the rejection of the

assertion that a particular Geordie humour carries the colours of a north-eastern regional identity, given that the setting of the working men's club is not particular to the north-east.

First, all of the comedians made it clear that they had no grounds of contention to the audience's claim to critical severity, as far as 'unsuitable' performances were concerned. Before going into detail on the variant definitions of 'unsuitable', it is important to note that the comedians did concede to Geordie audiences having a blanket reputation for being 'hard' audiences.

'George Roper, a working class Liverpool comic, once said: 'you could lay a trail of £10 notes from his front door to a north-east workmen's club, and he would not pick it up'.'(23)

'There are one or two comics that do well up here, but not many, but a lot of it, mind you, is implanted in their minds before they come up here, because they've been told by people who've died on their backsides, and then they're beaten before they go on stage .... But they are hard, they are. You see, a lot of the clubs have been over-entertained up here through the 60's and 70's - vastly over-entertained'.(24)

Some of the comedians went on to vouch for the validity of that 'hard' reputation, from their own working experience allowing them to make direct comparisons between club audiences in the north-east, and club audiences of other areas of Britain. This is seen to warrant consideration, as the implication is that a native north-eastern professional comedian can find it more difficult playing to his 'home' audience.

'The problem is: up here they've seen it all'.(25)

Coincidentally, this suggests a further parallel of audience and comedian, insofar as the record of the audience makes it clear that no critical concession is made to a performer, because they are native to the region. However, as the comedians continued with their insight into this aspect of the audience, there did emerge a definite strand

of experientially based observation, which weakened this further parallel. This will be fully explained when the subject of the 'pitch' of content material is considered, as it is on this subject that the comedians saw the advantage of their regionalism allowing them to do certain material, which the regional audience would not accept from non north-eastern comedians.

'Let me tell you something. I can work in front of a Geordie audience, and Bobby [Pattinson] can, and we can talk about Geordies being pissed and what-have-you, and get away with it, but they won't allow southerners to come up and do that. We can take the 'mickey' out of ourselves, but they're [the audience are] very protective there'.(26)

But, to return to the matter of the critical characteristics of the audience being determined by region or setting, there was found to be no uniformity amongst the comedians to tip the scales firmly in favour of one or the other. Although there was seen to be a clear division between those comedians who argued for regional rather than setting construction of this characteristic, the setting of the working men's club was seen to figure in both of the arguments. At first, this was taken as support for the setting argument, but the folly of this came to light when the detail of the comedian's views on performers and performances in the region became known. It was from this information that the comedians revealed the premium they placed on either region or setting, as some used setting to indicate no more than an institutional arena for humour, into which the regionally determined characteristics of the audience are brought, and expressed. The assumption is that these identified critical characteristics would be given similar vent in any setting, so long as it was the predominant setting for live performance humour in the north-east.

'In my experience, the north-east is the biggest butcher's slab for comedians; in the whole world.'(27)



CB Most of the comedians we've talked to started off in this area, but you started off in the Barrow area. Is there any difference?

SR 'Yes. I was very fortunate, because working [in working men's clubs] on the west coast of England, the audiences are certainly easier over there than in the north-east, and I think, basically, if I'd have started in the north-east I may not have got off the ground'.

CB Why are they easier?

SR 'Well, who knows? They're more critical in the north-east. We're talking about a time now when clubland was booming in the north-east. Now then they were getting television stars, they were getting top acts in the north-east every week. In those days [mid-seventies] there would be up to a hundred acts coming into the north-east every week to work. To go back to your question, 'why were they harder', they were so used to the top artistes in the clubs up here, that if you were not up to that standard, you know, they were very critical. Whereas over on the west coast they didn't get that class of entertainment over there. The audiences were very kind to me over there when gags didn't flow as they should and such'.(28)

In so far as this specifically regional foundation to audience temperament was argued by the professional performers, very little credibility was given to the setting of the working men's club being anything other than a venue to 'over-entertain' the region's public. From this position, the setting is not regarded as being the primary influence in forming the recognised traits of the audience, rather it is the regional demand for quality entertainment which has led to the proliferation of working men's clubs in the north-east, in an attempt to supply that demand. As such, the setting is reduced to the less significant level of simply affording a place for artistes to perform.

The suggestion that the setting of the working men's club was itself the major conditioning agent to the audience's reception of comic performers, was questioned by the comedians who argued that club audiences were most certainly not predictable. The idea that a comedian could walk on stage in a working men's club and, on the basis of his reputation in the north-east, simply go through the motions of his act

and thereby satisfy the 'atrofied' club audience, is strongly contested.

'I mean, I can go to a club three times a year, and go down a bomb [be extremely well received] the first two times, and for no known reason, go the third time and die on my backside .... you're just as good as you are on that night: no better'.(29)

This acceptance of the audience as a wakeful and perceptive grouping of people, irrespective of the institutional setting, corresponds closely to the views of the regional audience itself. Where the performers concurred totally with the audience in forwarding this view, was the degree to which they both acknowledged the complete rejection of performance reputation, as in any way significant to the reception of humour in the north-east. Those comedians who believed the setting to be peripheral to the regionally inspired factors which generate the character of the north-eastern audience, reasoned that the disregard for comic reputation showed that the club audience could make up its own mind as to what is good or bad comedy, and not simply follow the fashion of liking performers, which obviously installed the reputation in the first place.

'I've seen some go the journey though, O aye, big names - they've come out with shellshock when they've come off'.(30)

This shared recognition that regional audiences showed little regard for a comedian's reputation, was seen to challenge the reasoning of those other comedians who argued that the regional audience had its minds closed to a single comic standard, by the setting of the working men's club, and that criticism only ensued if this narrow-minded standard was not supplied by the comedian.

'It didn't matter who came on and told jokes, regardless of format, so long as it had big boobs, two Pakistanis and a puff they were laughing. The audience hadn't the patience to sit and listen to some story that you know would make them laugh. They won't listen to funny songs unless there's tits, bums or puffs in the first line almost. Yet the same people would sit at home and watch Jasper Carrot on the telly, and say how brilliant he is, but they wouldn't know how to respond if he were on stage in their club'.(31)

From my own research on the audience, I can say with confidence that this is a generalisation which has very little foundation as a definitive statement. It wholly ignores the fact that the most popular comedians in the region do not resort to that type of 'tits and bums' material. Indeed, of all of the comedians I interviewed, not one of them was seen to conform to that performance description, and each of them had attained a high measure of comic success in the region.

'I couldn't do it - I won't do stags for that reason - well, I will do stags so long as they don't want filth. I won't go out and do filth .... I go on smart and I'll tell gags, stories or one-liners, then I'll tell a routine about myself on New Year's Eve or whatever, at least try to find something that will please everybody. It is a science, it is a thing you've got to go up there and do'.(32)

To further challenge this argument that the regional audience in working men's clubs had its critical appreciation reduced to 'big boobs, two Pakistanis and a puff', there was both audience and comedian responses to affirm the perceptivity of the regional club audience, which heavily outweighed the suggestion of their comedy bigotry.

'Like I said before, you sell yourself, contact is very important. If you walk on stage and they don't like you, you could be the best performer in the world and you'll fail. I'll give you a situation: I used to live in Wakefield, and I was in the Batley variety club once and there was a kid comparing: it was Stu Francis, and there was a Yorkshire comic came on all rave and ding ding ding. And you see, there is this thing called presence and presence is being totally in command without looking flashy and cocky. Now this kid came on and started telling a joke, and there was a couple of fellows on the table in front of me, now he'd been on about five or six minutes, and he hadn't done a thing, and he started to tell a joke and one of these fellows in front of me, I heard him say: 'Jesus Christ, what a load of crap this is'. And he was making further comments against the kid and when the kid started telling the joke, this fellow started telling his mate how old this joke was, and he was talking over the comedian; telling his friend the same joke and how useless it was. When the comedian cracked it he didn't get much of a laugh and this fellow said 'See what I mean, a load of rubbish'. Now when he went off, Stu came on and they liked him, and when he started telling a joke the same fellow had heard it as well, but instead of pulling it apart, he was telling his mate to listen to this one because it's a good one and he'll like it, and it was he himself who laughed the loudest when Stu cracked it. The thing here is his contact and presence, they like him'.(33)

Also, from the audience, support was given to the rejection of the 'tits and bums' argument, as I found myself listening to members of regional audiences who had walked out of club concert rooms because they'd no wish to listen to 'filth and Bile'. Of course, there remains the possibility that these people were more sensitive than the norm of club goers, and this is not contested. The point that is being made here, is that as these people were regular members of club audiences for more than 25 years, they would surely have become accustomed to the 'tits and bums' material, if that was the usual content recipe for success, and they would be sufficiently hardened to it, not to be easily offended. Indeed, this was what was found to be the crux of their argument: that it wasn't the actual content per se which they objected to, it was the performance of it in a totally unfunny act. They told me that the reason they had walked out during performances was because of the embarrassment of listening to a comedian who thinks he can entertain by being offensive. I pointed out that some of the comedians, who enjoyed popularity in the region, did use 'offensive' material. 'But', they replied, 'those comedians were funny with it'.

There is to be drawn from this, the realisation that there is no simple line of content that will guarantee the success of a comedian. To say that a basic standard of 'tits and bums' material is sufficient to satisfy the narrow-minded critical demands of the club audience, is to completely ignore the existence of the primary demand: that the comedian must be funny. The idea that anyone could walk on stage and tell jokes, and 'regardless of format', would be successful so long as the jokes referred to big boobs, Pakistanis and puffs, is, therefore, to be rejected as an unsubstantiated personalised statement, which grossly overestimates the effect of the setting of the working men's



club to construct the audience's narrow horizons of comic appreciation, and grossly underestimates the perceptibility of the regional audience to demand a format, and demand a standard of humour.

It should be stated clearly at this point, that the issue of the explanation of the identifiable regional audience characteristics, is not concerned to establish a rejection of the setting of the working men's club as a significant factor, rather it is more a case of establishing the extent to which the club is influential. There is an undoubted significance of this predominant setting regarding the matters of community, familiarity of audience members, and the particularities of entertainment organisation and expectations, as constructed by the club, which are detailed in Part I of this chapter. But, as has been argued in this Part of the chapter, the setting of the club must not be elevated beyond the reasoning of audience members and performers alike, to provide a more convenient rather than substantial explanation of the critical assurance of the regional audience. To try to ensure this does not occur, account has already been made of regional variations in club audiences, which obviously suggests there are outside regional factors at work to inform these variations. If it is possible to develop sufficient detail to explain these regional variations in club audiences, then this must temper any claim to the club setting being a totally prescriptive force on the critical character of the regional audience. Quite simply, if it is a case of the club setting alone which dictates the personality of the audience, then all club audiences would have largely the same behavioural spots irrespective of region. This was not seen to be the case.

'You walk on stage up here....[and] if they don't know you you've got to go in there and demand their attention. Now I'm not a singer, I don't sing songs, so I've got to walk on and straight in with the

gags. Comedians from out of the area, such as Birmingham, are used to walking on and people sitting there nice and quiet, ready to see a show - up here they've had entertainment rammed down their throats from the year dot'.(34)

To search for the informants behind such variations in the club setting is, therefore, both necessary and legitimate. Perhaps not surprisingly, regional imagery was found to be the key informant to these variations.

All of the professional comedians, in their interviews, acknowledged the involvement of regional imagery in the performances of some of the region's top comedians. Some of the comedians went on to argue that this imagery operated on two levels. First it was seen to influence the regional audience to accept performers who were able to successfully exploit the image structures of the region. The second level was seen to be one of direct interaction of audience and imagery: fused together in the context of the social practice of live performance humour in the north-east.

On the first level, the imagery of the region was seen to have an undoubted effect upon the type of content material the audience would accept from performers. This is to argue the opposite of the 'just give them tits and bums and they're happy' opinion of the club audience, because each of the comedians recognised that the regional audience would not tolerate certain material being used by 'flashy or cocky' comics. Most notably, the comedians referred to material which based its humour on the hard time of unemployment, poverty and debt. This they saw as being the mainstay of content to several of the region's most popular comedians, yet they were quick to point out that it was very rarely accepted by the regional audience from any comedian, other than a northern comedian.

'I have done about every working men's club up here, and I find one man's working class background is not another's. In fact, my idea of poverty and the fact that I talk about people being poor: people in the north-east really resent that because I'm a southerner. It's really quite sad that they can't see that anyone else but them was poor'.(35)

This is an extremely significant observation from a professional comedian who has worked in the clubs in the north-east, but who is himself not a north-easterner. That the club audience should reject this type of 'hard times' material from him, yet accept it with open arms from obviously north-eastern comedians, strongly suggests an element of regional defiance, on the level of imagery, which is perceptively maintained by the club audience. Hence, it is not without foundation to argue that the club audience has a critical vigilance regarding the imagery of the region, which they protect with acute awareness of the performance on the stage. It does not, therefore, seem reasonable to argue that the setting of the working men's club has an inordinate amount of power to quash the critical perception of the audience.

'Same with the boots, I'll just stand like that and the boot will bend over, and of course the people see it. I don't point at it: they see every little thing from the top of your head to the tip of your toe'.(36)

On the second level, the comedians generally acknowledged the regional imagery behind the purported critical enlightenment of the north-eastern club audience, and to varying degrees, they attributed a portion of this imagery to be included in the comprehensive account of character of that audience. For example, some comedians would accept without reservation the regional imagery of 'work hard: play hard' being the cause of the critically demanding nature of the north-eastern audience, while others were more guarded, but accepted the association of a 'hard' region producing 'hard' audiences. However,

this was seen to give little indication of the extent to which imagery could be considered to carry more impact than the setting of the working men's club. Quite simply, the fit between that imagery and the working men's club was such that the comedians found it almost impossible, and certainly impracticable, to distinguish one from the other in their attempts to explain the nature of the regional audience. For example, those comedians who were the strongest advocates of the club setting being the key factor in shaping the outlook of the regional audience, made regular concessions to the intervention of regional imagery influencing the audience's reception of comic performers and performances. One such comedian fervently maintained that the club had a 'stultifying influence' on the critical faculties of the audience, but then went on to record regional image structures which were instrumental in the formation of audience preferences in terms of performers and performance content.

'You identify with him [Bobby Thompson] because it was an area and he was famous and every area likes one of their own to be famous, and I mean to say, the north-east really backs them. I mean, Billy Connolly got famous in Glasgow and they started sticking the knives in him straight away, and I don't think they do that in the north-east. But, when Bobby Thompson blew up for himself with the drink and the late turn up, they dropped him. Also people became more sophisticated during the late sixties, there wasn't a need for Bobby Thompson, in fact he was an anathema, they didn't want Bobby Thompson: the last thing they wanted was to be reminded of debt and things like that. And then we pick it up during the second half of the seventies - this was his biggest renaissance: the last ten years - he was re-discovered and probably as a marketing exercise more than anything else. It wasn't somebody saying lets put the Geordie comic back that's not making any money. And people love, they love the second coming. I'm sure it's part of the north-east character, that they get so much crap tossed on us, that anything that seems to come twice - my God! And they give him so much support'.(37)

Implicit in this statement is a recognition of the interaction of regional imagery with the actions of the regional audience. That an audience can be benevolent towards a performer who performs an act that

is loaded with the hard working class imagery of the north-east, when at the same time rejecting that material from 'southern' comedians, does suggest that a practical expression of regional imagery should be considered when looking at the conduct of the regional audience.

As mentioned earlier, the fit between the imagery of the north-east and the working men's club is seen to be highly significant, as it provides a point of harmony which renders the identity traits of the regional audience remain so accessible. This led some of the comedians to use regional identity to explain the actions of the club audience. One comedian spoke of how 'fiercely proud' the Geordie audience was of its regional identity, and how this enabled them to demand a standard of credibility from its comedians. Also, this transportation of imagery into the setting of the working men's club was argued to be the reason for club audiences being so dismissive of comic reputation. The club was seen, in this light, to simply facilitate the expression of regional identity, by offering the opportunity to ordinary working class north-easterners to take the position of power, which is denied them in other everyday aspects of life. Hence the widely shared image of the audience is that of a severe and hard audience, which the audience itself is keen to forward for the purpose of prestige. As such, the setting of the club serves to focus this image based regional characteristic onto a practical outlet, it does not provide the basis for the determination of the characteristic.

'You see, they get this thing that it only takes someone on television to say, like Little and Large to say that they went to some club in Newcastle or Sunderland or Gateshead and they died, and Oh what a hard audience, and it only takes them to mention the club and that's it, and the next poor act that comes on is crippled you see, he hasn't got a chance. They'll sit and it's 'make me laugh', and that's it, finished. They're fiercely proud you see, Oh very very proud'.(38)

To add to the substance of this line of reasoning, I have witnessed members of regional audiences being outspoken and critical of comic artistes in settings in the north-east, other than the working men's club. These alternative settings have each structured the audience's attention onto the performer by having reduced entertainment outlets to distract the audience, thus providing a marked contrast to the setting of the club (as detailed in Part I of this chapter). Apart from the previously mentioned example of Alexie Sayle's appearance at the Newcastle City Hall (p.63), I have also seen comedians doing cabaret in night clubs and theatre style settings receive little compassion from audience members that were not part of the working men's club clientele.

While this support for the influence of regional imagery does have an implied premium as an explanation of the recognised features of the regional audience, it is not put forward as the victor in a battle. The intention is to show the integrant nature of regional imagery, as put forward by members of the regional audience, and corroborated by professional performers, in sustaining the critical stamp of the region's audience, which the outlined reasoning on the setting of the club in Part I serves to mitigate. That is, the detail of the setting of the club does undoubtedly have a hand in the maintenance of the critical brief of the north-eastern audience, and therefore, the setting must be given due consideration. But, the setting of the club should properly be considered in a secondary or supportive role, as its significance is that it enables the regional audience to enact the characteristics of its regionally prescribed personality. For example, if the audience does not like an act, it has open to it a range of divergent entertainment possibilities to allow that dislike

to be registered. The club audience is not required to sit and endure a sub-standard act, in the way a theatre audience is. Apart from the obvious of the club giving ample opportunity to audience members to turn away from the performance if it is not to their liking, there is also the security of the audience, which the club affords from its routine centrality to the lives of its members, to make known their impressions of the performance.

The consideration of setting, is, therefore, to be tempered from its over-representation as the prime determinant of the audience's appreciation of live performance comedy. Working men's clubs span the length and breadth of Britain, and the professional comedians themselves state there is little variation in that setting, irrespective of region. Yet, those same comedians did make known that they were aware of regional differences in audience appreciation of their act. It follows from this that there is more to understanding the critical reputation of the north-eastern audience, than simply allocating the setting of the working men's club as the causal component.

Furthermore, as an institution, the setting of the social club will invariably reflect the flavour of its membership, and as the comedians were at pains to point out, there is a wide range of audiences in social clubs in the north-east.

'Some clubs you just don't want to go back to, but you've got to go; it's your job. I know a few people it has got to and they couldn't stick it any more. It hasn't got to me yet like that, and I don't think it will now, but there are some rough clubs I just won't go to'.(39)

The variation from club to club is seen to depend on the extent to which the 'rough element gets in', rather than it being rough on the basis of heightened critical standards. I questioned one comedian on this point to find out if a 'good' club meant that the audience was

less demanding of the comic standard of the comedians appearing there. I was told in no uncertain terms that the 'good' clubs were good because they would book the best acts to perform, and the audience would expect a high standard from the acts. While they were good in the sense that the audience would give you a fair hearing, they were not any less demanding as an audience, and again, they would let their disapproval be known. So, the variety of 'good' and 'rough' clubs does not support the view that the club shapes audience, it suggests that there is a regional trait of critical audiences, which is grossly abused by some members for extraneous reasons, and results in the tone of the club being lowered to a standard that is unacceptable to performance artistes in the region.

One final example of the impact of imagery on the setting of the social club may be given, to show how the snug fit between them frames audience attitudes to the reception of comedians in the north-east. This example does not show any critical tendency of the regional audience towards performers, it shows how the imagery of the north-east is tied into the working men's club to give a national impression of the 'thick, cloth cap and whippet Geordie', sitting in his working men's club listening to his 'tits and bums comic'. And, it is very important that these images are not accepted as substantial to the arguments either for the setting of the club, or the prevalence of regional imagery, as being the sole determinant or recognised feature of the regional audience. However, what it does show is that the comedians who argued against the priority of regional imagery to form the outlook of the regional audience, were quick to acknowledge the effect of regional imagery relating to their status as 'club comedians' in the north-east, as damaging their career opportunities on a very real level.



'Ten years ago I was one of the top attractions in cabaret, and one of the things that always bugged me, and Ken Dodd also, - two things: one was 'club comedian' and the other was 'northern comedian'. If someone is called a northern comedian, the inference is they can only work in the north. If you're a club comic you can only work in clubs. So, we've always been looked upon as club comics, but now all the top comedians were club comics, as were called club comics: Cannon and Ball were club comics, Russ Abbot was a club comic, Jim Davidson was a club comic, Paul Daniels was a club comic; you're talking about your giants now you know, and they were all club comics. And it gives me great pleasure to say that myself, Ronnie Dukes, Derek Dean, Norman Collier, the Grumbleweeds, were the top names in cabaret right throughout Britain, and it just proves that if we weren't branded 'club comics' fifteen years ago, we would have been standing up alongside your Max Bygraves'.(40)

To conclude, the documentation of the responses of the professional comedians I interviewed, were seen largely to reflect the responses of the audience members themselves: namely that the regional audience did have a recognisably critical reputation. The comedians did not, however, see this as being synonymous with the open-mindedness that the research on the audience produced regarding the appraisal of comic performance. The comedians brought to light a great deal of information concerning the influence of the setting of the working men's club, by way of explaining their refusal of the suggestion that the regional club audience was as critically detached as they [the audience] maintained. The role of regional imagery within the generally accepted view of the regional audience being a demanding audience, was more implicit than expressed in most of the responses from both comedians and audience members. Nevertheless, the influence of imagery could easily be drawn to the surface to effectively counteract the runaway assumption of the setting of the working men's club being the prime determinant to comic performance in the north-east of England. The result is that the issues addressed in this chapter, have introduced a central seam of core components to be incorporated into the final analysis of the question of whether there is an existent Geordie humour functioning to maintain a readily acknowledged regional identity. It is to this final analysis that this research now moves.

### Chapter Three: The Geordie Act

It is the aim of this chapter to draw together the various strains of research findings, so that a final analysis of the relationship of humour to regional identity can be made. To help accomplish this, there is one comedian in the north-east who can be used as a comparative control, to ensure the central themes of the debate are brought into analytical focus. His name is Bobby Thompson, and to north-easterners he is seen to be the 'personification of Geordie humour'. Throughout the region he is emphatically accredited as being a purely 'Geordie comedian', and to a large extent, this assertion is qualified by the common understanding that Bobby Thompson's success has remained confined to the north-east of England. Because of this heightened regional affirmation of his Geordie comic status, Thompson provides the necessary counterpoint to prevent any ill-formed theoretical conclusion being put forward on the shortcomings of a strictly content analytical assessment of live performance humour in the north-east. This is to say, that Bobby Thompson, as a comedian in the north-east, rises above any arbitrary disqualification as a Geordie comic performing Geordie humour on the basis of the argued universal content of his act, because he carries the conviction of the region's public that he is their Geordie comic; and theirs alone: 'Wor Bobby'. Therefore, consideration of Bobby Thompson as the regional comic phenomenon, is deemed essential in regard to the realisation of both the theoretical and methodological objectives of this research. Consequently, the first job is to make account of this comic phenomenon.

### The Little Waster

For more than fifty years Bobby Thompson has worked as a professional comedian in the north-east of England. His comic career has fluctuated from extremes of popularity to lean years of booze instead of bookings. Following a long hard struggle with unemployment during the late twenties and early thirties, Thompson joined a concert party. In 1934 he made his first radio broadcast as the resident comedian with 'Billy Bankhead's Mouth Organ Band', who were featuring on a programme called 'Pit People', which was produced by the B.B.C. at their Newcastle studios. It was not until after the war, and his service as a conscript in the Border Regiment, that the first real breakthrough into the big-time came his way. He was offered £5 to fill a five minute spot on the long running north-east radio show 'Wot Cheor Geordie', and from his instant success on the show he was launched into fame and fortune, with lucrative offers from clubs to pantomime in constant supply.

By 1959 the collapse of Bobby Thompson was already underway. It was seen to stem from his involvement in a television situation comedy, released by Tyne Tees, the regional independent station. The series was recognised to be a disastrous flop, and Thompson allowed himself to slide away from the bright lights of success on the backwash of its failure. He turned increasingly to drink, and began a period of self destruction by committing the ultimate sin of not fulfilling bookings.

'.... he was really down and out - you could have bought Bobby Thompson for £2 a night'.(1)

His renaissance came when a north-eastern based entertainment agency called 'Beverley's', picked up Thompson on his 65th birthday and promoted him as having had fifty years in showbusiness. As a

result, the rekindled comic career of Bobby Thompson since the mid-seventies, has enamoured the region's public to accept him with great affection and admiration. His name is guaranteed to fill any concert hall in the region, as his appeal is seen to transcend the traditional working men's club core of fans and supporters. The sales of his Long Playing record in 1977 were seen to be evidence of his wide regional popularity, because in the first year of its release it sold over 120,000 copies to be the best selling record of the year in the north-east, beating the chart topping musical L.P. of the film: 'Grease'.(2)

The first thing to strike home about Bobby Thompson as a comedian, is the content of his act, namely that it is based almost entirely on two sketches: 'Private Thompson' and 'The Little Waster'. Indeed, they compose each side of his L.P., the content of his video release, and the substance of his stage act for the greater part of his whole career.

'.... well, Bobby Thompson has done the same act for forty years. Forty years you know! And he's the only one that will get away with it'.(3)

'If he puts his army hat on, it's all army, if he puts his cloth cap on it's all debt, he dresses for the gags he's going to do: he only has the two half hour routines to do them in.... I don't think he's changed a joke in the last umpteen years - he doesn't need to'.(4)

Consequently, there must be recognised the success of a comedian who performs the same material to the same regionally prescribed audience. This must be explained in terms of affinity to the artiste, but where does such affinity develop to allow the comic value of his material to increase rather than diminish each time it is aired in public?

'Now Bobby Thompson has never had to leave the north-east. He works Geordie all the time because the man is a phenomenon. At seventy years old his timing is still impeccable, delivery faultless, and the man is funny. Now I know all his jokes and he still makes me laugh. For a comic to make another comic laugh once is an achievement, but to make him laugh every time is ridiculously clever. The man is funny'.(5)

'I mean he's a cult figure around here in the north-east, you must admit, and he still gets the laughs. I mean, he can go down any of the clubs and you know what's coming, you know the gist of what's coming, and you laugh, you can't help it'.(6)

The answer to this question of audience affinity with Thompson, lies beyond the humorous denotation of his material being funny in terms of the jokes per se, if this were so then people of the north-east would surely tire of hearing the monotonous repetition of the selfsame jokes. As it is, however, the broad social spectrum of people from the region, who have elevated Thompson to his 'cult figure' comic status, are able to recite the jokes of the two sketches of his which they pay to watch or listen to, and still find his humour fresh and entertaining, as though it were inviolable.

'Alan Price raves about him, as does Jack Charlton. Lawrie McMenemy plays Bobby Thompson tapes in his car, and can tell you Bobby Thompson stories in his own authentic Geordie accent by the hour'.(7)

The affinity Thompson has, is, therefore, seen to come from a broader referent than the internal structural dynamics of his jokes. My argument is that it comes from an authenticated association of his comic material with the common images of north-eastern regional identity, with Thompson himself serving as mediator between material and mythic realities. It should be made clear from the start, that this is not an argument which runs along the lines directly connecting comedy to regional identity. If this were so, the implication would be that any competent professional comedian from the region would only have to exploit, in comic form, the familiar image structures of the region (as Bobby Thompson does) in order to become highly successful. But, as has been seen in chapter two, the regional audience can and do reject this type of material from some performers, while those that are accepted on board the same Geordie gravy train, have not been

allowed to ride as far as Bobby Thompson.

To explain my argument it is necessary to consider the persona as well as the stage performance of Thompson. On stage his comic material is framed into one of the two previously mentioned sketches. They are each about half an hour in duration, and each has a corresponding costume which is deliberately comical in appearance. In his 'Private Thompson' sketch he wears an exaggeratedly ill-fitting uniform of a British army private in the second world war, and for his 'little waster' sketch, he changes into wearing a cloth cap, an oversized raggy woolly jumper, and a pair of baggy britchers. As the 'little waster', the content of the act revolves around the central themes of material hardship - poverty, dole and debt, and the domestic entanglements such as lifestyle creates - the constant battle of wits with his overbearing wife, nose neighbours and interfering mother-in-law. When Thompson walks on for the second half of the show dressed in his army garb, the audience recognises that it is the same 'little waster' character with the same world view, only in a conscripted army predicament. This is extremely significant to the comic essence of the sketch, as it is the familiarity with the character which enables the structural mechanics of the jokes to work. For example, the incongruity of structures of meaning, which is a common technique for the production of humour, is given added impact, so that when 'Private Thompson' phones Neville Chamberlain to get the 'low down' on the nation's affairs with Germany, a whole range of effective significations are involved. The familiarity with the wily little workshy 'little waster', who always manages to get his own way despite all odds, is the first level of humour when pictured going to phone the prime minister, next when he makes it clear that he is already on

friendly terms with Neville and his wife 'Bertha', and again when he reverses expectations and shows the Chamberlain's to have a lifestyle more akin to the 'little waster's', rather than a privileged upper class existence. The sequence is supplemented with finely observed detail adding to the vitality of the imagery which feeds the humour. The scenario is told by Thompson using his own name throughout the routine, yet he is able to reject any limitations this may impose as far as the form of reminiscence may construct parameters of credibility. As such, he begins this material on Chamberlain by telling how he had just gone down to the chip shop for a bag of scramptions\*, when he happened to bump into Adolf Hitler waiting in the queue. They exchange the pleasantries of two long-time acquaintances, and it is from this encounter that he decides to telephone Chamberlain 'to find out what's what':

'So a gives Neville a ring and his missus, Bertha, answers [Thompson puts on his posh voice to do an impersonation of Bertha putting on her posh voice] "Hellooo, wha's speaking?" "It's little Bobby Thompson". [Bertha immediately drops her posh voice] "Oh hello Bob, could you just hang on a minute; I've got a pan of chips on". She comes back on the phone and says: "What can I do for ya Bobby?" "Is Neville in?" "Oh he's just doon gettin the coal in...."

And so it goes on, with great humorous effect on the audience. Indeed, the same format is used repeatedly throughout the sketch. There is, for example, the scene when 'Private Thompson' travels to

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\* A scrambling is the Geordie word for the fried remnants in a chip shop - small cuttings of potato, pieces of batter that have been dredged from the fryer - waste basically. These would be given in return for old newspapers by many chip shops, or otherwise sold at reduced cost.

London to be met by Field-Marshal Montgomery, who takes him to the Palace to see George. There is a classical Thompson one-liner involved in this scene, which north-easterners quote whenever their comic hero is mentioned. It comes from the point of the sketch where Montgomery is walking alongside Thompson as they cross the courtyard of Buckingham Palace:

'Lizzy was on the balcony - she was hanging the washing out - and a could see her looking at us to see who was coming in, and a heard her say: "Who's that with little Bobby?"'

As previously mentioned, all of this humorous incongruity from the tearing down of social barriers, is firmly established by the knowledge the audience has of the character Thompson portrays. However, Thompson does not leave anything to chance, so he clearly demonstrates the 'little waster' characteristics at the beginning of the 'Private Thompson' routine. Not only does he refer directly to the 'little waster's' domestic life prior to his 'letter from His Majesty', but he also uses every opportunity to reaffirm this identity within the context of the humour of the sketch. For example, he phoned Chamberlain as a member of his local street committee:

'I was chairman; I wanted to be treasurer, but they all knew me'.

It is also extremely important to recognise that Thompson does not change his name for either of the two sketches. This obviously aids the desired continuity insofar as the humorous mechanics of the performance is concerned, but the real value of him using his real name is seen to reach a far deeper level of importance to the comedy enigma of Bobby Thompson. This is because his name is seen to introduce a realism to his comic form, which sharpens the connotative efficiency of the narrative discourse of his act. It does so by activating



narrative codes which place the audience in a position to produce a realistic effect, by building a characterisation upon their existing knowledge of the imagery of the region. But, because his characterisations use his real name identity, they are particularly effective in utilising what Roland Barthes calls 'cultural' and 'symbolic' codes(8), because part of the existing stock of knowledge of his audience is that they know how Thompson in real life has lived through the hard times he talks about.

'He can get away with it because he's one of us - he knows what he's talking about - it's not pretend with him'.

The audience know how Thompson had worked as a coal miner, and how his being 'finished at the pit' had led to a life of dole and debt, just like any other working class Geordie who had live through the pre and post war economic depressions and recessions of the region. They know he has appeared in court for non-payment of debts, and that he has been 'down and out with the beer'. They know he has the lived experience of the hard working class Geordie lifestyle he characterises in his act. The fact of this personal reality of Bobby Thompson, is, therefore, interwoven into his stage act (which the use of his real name ensures) to authenticate the narrative discourse of the act, by positioning the audience to see the content material in terms of their knowledge of the character (*vis à vis* regional imagery) and so take up the meanings which generate the humour of his act. As such, his sketches take an autobiographical form, with Thompson as a raconteur of his own experiences. Consequently, his act is perfectly placed to practice the five codes of realism outlined by Linda Nochlin(9), and compound the common structures of regional imagery, which his reality characterises, by cementing certain conceptions of the north-east into the everyday

familiarity of the regional public. From this, Thompson is able to:

'.... play with meanings, turn them about and inside out, twist them and contrast them with opposite meanings, rendering them meaningless and absurd. And in doing so, the existing meanings, which tend to grow stale and routine, are refreshed, intensified and consolidated. In this sense, humour is an exercise in meaningfulness and a confirmation of reality'.(10)

However, it should be emphasised that the realism of Thompson is forwarded in terms of the construction of his sketches to connect with the common knowledge of the imagery of the north-east, which the regional audience consume. It is not forwarded as any type of statement as to Thompson representing an objective material reality. It is a realism of representation insofar as the expectations of the audience are met, thus enabling them to successfully decode the humorous structures of meaning. It is a realism which unites audience and performer in the production of humour, as the audience, through the institutionalised setting of the club, are active in the perpetuation of the regional imagery Bobby Thompson plugs into\*.

Apart from the narrative codes, Thompson employs various other codes of signification, which are seen to be essential to his heightened regional popularity. This refers to Thompson fulfilling two of the sign functions which Jonathan Culler lists in his 'typology of signs'(11) as 'icon' and 'conventionalised index'.

To say that Thompson functions as a regional icon means that he looks and acts the part of the culturally determined concepts ascribed to the image of the feckless working class Geordie character. He signifies these concepts in his conventionalised physical appearance on stage as the 'little waster', who looks raggy and dishevelled, and

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\* For detail on the audience in the setting of the working men's club, see Part I of chapter two.

has the added fixtures of the cloth cap and the permanently smouldering Woodbine. Although the iconic relationship between the signified concept and the signifier image may be arbitrary or 'unmotivated'(12), the regionalism of the iconic sign of Thompson is sealed by the working of what Culler calls the 'conventionalised index' sign function, which operates:

'Once the causal or indexical relationship between a signifier and a signified is recognised by a culture, the particular signifier becomes associated with its signified and can be used to evoke that meaning even in cases where the causal relation is absent'.(13)

Taken against the institutionalised setting of the working men's club, and the realism of Thompson's persona, the conventionalised dimension of Thompson is mostly disguised, yet it is seen to predominate in conveying meaning to the regional audience. For example, many people have referred to Bobby Thompson's 'little waster' as an animated Andy Capp, and they do so because they see Andy Capp in conventionalised Geordie image concepts. Reg Smythe, the author of Andy Capp, maintains he always saw his creation as 'very much a man from the north-east of England'. He admits he didn't think the character would be able to make the move from the northern edition of the Daily Mirror, to 'go' in the south(14). Indeed, some people have suggested that Andy Capp may well have been based on Bobby Thompson's work!

'It [Andy Capp] began what I would have said was the archetypal Geordie (or West Hartlepuddlian as it happens, as Reg Smythe comes from Hartlepool) based on a character he obviously knew. It might have been based on Bobby Thompson - it could very well have been'.(15)

Standing against this north-east regionalism of Capp/Thompson, is the fact that Andy Capp is syndicated to 1,000 papers in the United States, and 1,700 papers worldwide; that Andy Capp goes to 51 countries outside the U.K., is translated into 14 languages, and read by about 250 million people a day(16).

My argument is that it is the combined working of sign functions which imbue this 'archetypal Geordie' concept. They do so in highly conventionalised terms, because the characteristics they convey are neither specific to the north-east, nor were they ever typical within the north-east.

'You laugh at him and what he says is true: he's a little waster, he was a little waster, and you still laugh at him. I mean, I know from years ago, blokes who'd never worked a day in their life. We used to say that their National Health Service stamp was worth more than a Penny Black - never worked a day in their lives. But, you see, you only got so many of those characters, you didn't get a lot because in those days you had to work'.(17)

'The Andy Capp [image] is totally wrong. I'm not saying that there isn't people in the region like that, but the majority's not - no way, no'.(18)

But, given the common understanding of the archetypal Geordie concept, Thompson can be accredited his iconic status, both directly from the fit of his real name personal history into the signified Geordie concepts, and indirectly from his physical association with Andy Capp: they are small and slight in build, wear cloth caps and smoke continually.

'I want them to realise I'm a person up there, not a little character. I mean, Bobby goes on as a character. Have you seen him do his dinner suit spot? He is immaculate, and he can tell gags - he's still his Geordie character mind, inside he's still his Geordie character'.(19)

This may explain how Thompson is successful in playing to his regional audience, by tapping in to the conventional imagery of the north-east, but it does not explain why north-easterners should have any affinity to the 'little waster' or Andy Capp as 'archetypal Geordie characters'.

'Yes indeed, it's love for the man, for the character, yes.... If you are going to try and go deeper into that and ask why the majority of north-easterners love and enjoy the Andy Capp character, well then I don't know'.(20)

Any level of content analysis conducted on this character, no

matter how elementary, will reveal characteristics which are essentially unpleasant and distasteful to the populace of the Protestant work ethic morality of modern capitalist society.

'No, of course you wouldn't like to have a next door neighbour like Andy Capp or the 'little waster' character. Up here they're called 'scroungers' and 'scivers' - they'd never done a days work in their life'.(21)

'I mean, Andy Capp is a two dimensional character, and he's a nasty, evil, drunken male chauvinistic pig, that's what Andy Capp is'.(22)

'We both laugh at Bobby Thompson, and the character he's depicting is a nasty person'.(23)

To account for this regional affinity to the content analytically uncovered 'nasty' reality of the 'little waster'/Andy Capp character, respondents unanimously turned to the explicit humour the characters inculcate. They did so by adhering to what is seen to be a predominantly Freudian conception of humour, in that the pleasure of laughter diffuses the pain of the reality principle(24).

'.... you certainly wouldn't want an Andy Capp with pigeons and ferrets in your street, but the best defence against the representation given through the act is to laugh at it'.(25)

'But why Andy Capp is read and laughed at in forty three countries around the world, is because every strip cartoon ends with a joke - that's what makes them laugh - but if it didn't have that joke at the end of the strip cartoon, people would read it and say, 'Oh what a nasty bastard that man is''.(26)

The pleasure of laughter, according to Freud, stems from the release of aggressive psychic energy following the 'lifting of the inhibitory cathexis'(27). Richard Boston argues that Freud's view of the function of humour is that:

'Humour is aggressive, it comes from a feeling of superiority to the object of the laughter, and is a socially permissible means of release from tensions and inhibitions'.(28)

However, the use of humour in this way, as an explanation of the acceptance of these fundamentally unpleasant characters, is seen to

be wholly unsatisfactory in making account of the regional affinity they are seen to inspire. This is because the conception of humour this type of reasoning is based upon, lays emphasis on the individual and psychological aspects of humour as a response, or mechanical reaction, to a humorous stimulus.

'Joking and its concomitant laughter are never in fact a rather superficial play-with-meanings, or a gay banter with the taken-for-granted meaning structures of reality .... Without denying the existence of an aggressive element in the human personality, such anthropological reductionism can hardly be adequate to a sociological analysis of humour and laughter'.(29)

The shortcomings of such an individualistic emphasis are seen to stem from the failure to explain the interactive dynamics involved in the production of humour. This comes from the basic separation of the audience from any form of participation in the construction of the joke, save only the successful decoding of the joke within the same ideological structures of meaning in which it was encoded. Hence there is the assumption of a mechanism of decoding which is both psychological and cognitive, and this in turn raises desperate problems of showing what must happen should happen to individuals in terms of laughing at a joke. Paul Hartmann has argued that the audience will not necessarily decode events reported in the mass media within the same ideological structures as those in which they have been encoded, because material circumstances, class experiences and sub-cultural oppositional values will influence the 'selective perception' of the audience(30). Thus the individual/psychological/cognitive audience has the inherent characteristic of being the consumer of structures of meaning which they apparently do not encode. Therefore, there is no assurance of the success of Bobby Thompson playing to different working men's club audiences in the north-east, as he may be seen as an anathema by some consumers. This is certainly not the record of Thompson in the north-

east. It is to avoid such a problematic that emphasis is being given to the working of ritual. This is because it is the public nature of symbolism which forms the ritual, whereby human thought is held to be a public and not a private, individual, cognitive activity. The symbolic form is based upon cultural and social experiences of people who participate not as an audience of passive consumers of meaning, but as an (inter) active agency of producers of meaning(31). As such, the concept of the ritual is forwarded as an analytical device to help explain not only the regional affinity to the 'little waster'/Andy Capp character, but also to locate the functional role of humour within that established affinity.

The use of the ritual in this way will be set to realise these aims by the way it works to institute conventionalised symbolic forms on a practical level. It does so by prescribing the agreed frame of reference against which the forms of humour will be accepted as pleasurable fun by the audience, and not as an embarrassing, or threatening, statement as to the private individual realities of the audience members.

'When Andy Capp [the stage play] went into London and they had Tom Courtney playing him, who's a brilliant actor, and John Burton playing Chalkie - they're not comedy actors you see. Now they did quite a good job on it but they could not inject enough comedy; they weren't funny characters. Now unless you inject comedy into Andy Capp it's a very uneasy evening, as the Guardian said: 'One comes out after having spent a very uneasy evening'. Now it was a different kettle of fish with ours, and here in the north-east we had to be more guarded than them because we were playing to a Geordie audience and there was no way we could say through the play: 'This is you'. So this was why we were given licence a bit to come out and show the joke and say, 'This is not really us in the north-east, we're only having a bit of fun'. It was from this I was able to direct my own interpretation of the role of Chalkie in the play, to heighten the comedy content of the part. And Andy Capp worked, it would still be running now, because people laughed, where they didn't in London. Tim Healy, who played Andy Capp, and is a brilliant dramatic actor, went sufficiently over-the-top to make him a cartoon character rather than a believable person'.(32)

The ritual of humour is built on a common agreement to the performance as a 'bit of fun' or playful convention, which derives from the 'intersubjectivity' of the symbolism of the comic form.

'This intersubjectivity is culturally determined, and is one of the ways in which cultural influences affect the individuals in any culture, and through which cultural membership is expressed'.(33)

As such, the symbolism of the comic form promotes membership and allegiance from the consensualist agreement to define the situation as humorous, which in turn refuses the potential for audience members to individually determine the content of the form as disturbing (this can only happen when there is a failure of humorous structures). To this extent, the concept of ritual delineates the regional affinity to the 'little waster' character, by showing the mechanics which frame the consensualist agreement to the conventions of the humorous form, which are drawn from the public nature of the symbolism which the audience are part of: as producers of the meaning they define and decode.

' .... the intention to be funny, on the part of someone who tells a joke, is actually quite irrelevant to the humorous quality of his spoken words. Crucially important, however, is the willingness of his audience to define a given situation, or a certain event, or some spoken words, as being humorous, funny or comic. Again, this willingness depends very much on the circumstances of the moment and the definitions that prevail - variables, in other words, which have nothing to do with humour'.(34)

Furthermore, Zijderveld argues:

' .... the fact that much humour and laughter is indeed tied to the social world and its conventions, yet transcends this world in playful merriment and joyfulness, liberating people from what ought to be thought, felt, said and done'.(35)

This is taken within the scope of the ritual as a statement on the function of humour to float on the conventions of reality, and thereby, at least, not threaten the structures of meaning upon which social order, membership, (regional) identity and intersubjectivity are based. A comparative example may be used to illustrate this point of the



ritualistic properties of humour framing conventions, to prescribe a reality of identity and membership which is fixed and irrefutable, yet which has always a rationalist adversary. Take, for example, the ritual of Sunday church attendance in England. The people who follow the conventions of this ritual will be acknowledged as decent, upright and proper citizens, and will thus be accepted within the community. The symbolism of this ritual is expressly public, so a person can say they have knelt down and spoken to God, and be applauded as a respected member of normality - this is the reality of the ritual. But, if one of those churchgoers ever turned to his neighbour and said that God had spoken to him, and that they often had a little chat, and that just the other day God was telling him not to buy a new Ford Sierra because, in his opinion, it would be a mistake to overlook the new Skoda turbo, then that churchgoer would cease to be a decent and respected member of the community and would become a socially unacceptable schizophrenic, or simply a 'nutter'. The public nature of the symbolism of the ritual does not allow private or individual thought which could, as exemplified, entertain the rationalist opposition reality - namely, if man talks to God then God exists, therefore, God can talk to man.

Participants in the ritual of Saturday night, like Sunday morning, congregations, are subjects within the same conventionalised, inter-subjective constraints which promote membership and allegiance. The Saturday night church is a working men's club, which is a setting which actively promotes the ordered structures of the ritual reality\*. The acceptance of the humorous message of the comedian is within the same social practice of the audience as that of the acceptance of the

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\* See Part I of chapter two.

religious message of the clergyman by the church audience, as the reality is within the practice of the humorous/religious performance, and not outside of it. In other words, the comedian who is wayward in either the content or the style of his humour, will be critically admonished by his audience, in the same way as the cleric who is wayward in the delivery of his religion (a point the Bishop of Durham: David Jenkins might agree with).

'Well if Bobby Thompson ever came out and aggressively said: 'I hate women - the fuckers', he wouldn't be booked back, that would be the end of Bobby Thompson. If he was ever to show the reality behind the 'little waster' - you know: 'Bye I hate women. I came in last night and gave wor lass a good kicking', he would lose all the sympathy immediately'.(36)

Equally, the audience, as producers, are constrained to the structures of successful performance, so that there is no real opportunity to scrutinise the performance content analytically, or semiologically, and denounce those structures as 'unreal', or 'damaging', or 'offensive'. Any individual who does is roundly castigated for not entering into the 'spirit of the thing'.

Having used the concept of ritual to account for the function of humour in the removal of the negative characteristics from the 'archetypal Geordie' which Thompson is seen to portray on stage, there is the corollary of how humour works to inspire affinity to the 'little waster'. That conventionalised structures of meaning can be 'playfully' exploited to induce pleasure, is undoubtedly a major factor in the explanation of the liking and affinity people have for a master exponent of the humour derivative of those structures.

'I remember one occasion when I was asked to do four 1½ minute spots on the Tyne-Tees 'Northern Life' programme from Monday to Thursday. On the Friday I was asked to analyse the humour. The subject was to be jokes about women. Well, unknown to me, on the Friday I was faced by a collection of feminists, and a few battered wives. This was a total surprise to me and they were saying things like, 'How dare you call

wives fat?' I was left aghast, but fortunately for me, some of them went over-the-top and spoiled their argument - they criticised Bobby Thompson! - Saying that he wasn't funny! - All this was live remember!'(37)

The ritual does not involve the kind of instrumentalist debate which seeks to establish a reality beyond the humorous presentation of dominant structures of meaning. To do so would be to engage the problematics I mentioned earlier, which rely on individual definitions of what is real and what is ideological. In such a perspective humour becomes part of the 'offensive reality' debate, which is instituted into reductionist Marxist arguments about the popular media, or which, for example, decides the reality of religion is its opiate quality to keep the masses ignorant of their true exploited reality; it is not really the good thing churchgoers believe it is. Trying to show the 'reality' of the images and the structures of meaning attached to Thompson's act as being damaging or offensive, is to completely miss the point of what this thesis is attempting to show - that the social practice of humour demands consent for it to work, and as such, to experience the pleasure of mirth the audience must submit to the ritualistic form of humour. It is not, therefore, the intention of this thesis to entertain the currently more fashionable debate on humour, which is inspired by the rise of 'alternative' comedians, and which spirals around the central themes of mainstream humour carrying a reality which degrades sections of society, such as women and ethnic groups. To follow this line would necessarily lead to the theoretical quandary of whether or not 'alternative' humour could redress the dominant ideological bias of mainstream humour; and effectively promote a more socialist message. This is because this debate involves a conception of humour which sees the audience in receipt of a reality behind the joke. So, if the audience can be instructed in the ways of

bourgeois patriarchal reality through the jokes of Bernard Manning and Jim Davidson, then the logic is that they can be instructed in the alternative ways of socialist enlightenment through the jokes of Ben Elton and Alexie Sayle. To discuss the potential of humour to carry a message to affect consciousness, pays very little attention to the equally unexplored area of the potentiality of the play and pleasure characteristics of humour working to disperse any such encoded political message. To address these issues would constitute a separate thesis to the objectives of this one, as this research is built upon the acceptance of the only statement on reality being the reality of humour as a pleasurable social activity. The premium is on the practice of humour itself, because if it fails then there is no affinity to any comic performance, irrespective of whatever the 'reality' of the act is cognitively perceived to be. Again I refer to the failure of Alexie Sayle to be accepted by an audience in the north-east, who were well aware of his personal political sympathies, and the fact that he was performing free of charge for their benefit\*.

It is from this perspective on the social functioning of humour that Bobby Thompson, as a master practitioner of humour, is seen to insinuate himself into the hearts of the region's public, and not be shunned as an embarrassing totem of the north-east.

With this perspective on humour, it is deemed both legitimate and expedient to carry out a semiological investigation to uncover the structures of meaning that give rise to humour, without intimating they delineate a reality beyond that which is involved in the pleasurable experience of the institutionalised social practice of

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\* See page 63.

comic performance in the north-east of England. And, the concept of the ritual will ensure that the semiologically uncovered structures of meaning are viable because of their acceptance into the humorous form.

Thompson et al

As has been shown in chapter two, the bulk of the comic content performed in the north-east is argued to be of a universal quality which is regionalised through dialect. Chapter two also shows how this recognition of the universality of content provided the foundation for arguments rejecting the existence of a particular Geordie humour. Such arguments were made by the professional comedians who practise humour in the north-east, and indeed, from the content analytical method they employed to determine whether a joke was intelligible only to north-easterners, or whether it could be understood by a wider national audience, there could be little doubt that such a rejection of a Geordie humour is perfectly admissible. However, this kind of rejection of a Geordie humour is to be itself rejected, because it is seen to do no more than illustrate the previously outlined problematics of content analysis which force a complete misconception of the working of humour. The consequence of this is that other significant research material, disclosed in chapter two, must be ignored because it cannot be fitted into the conceptual scheme: for example, the widely held view of audience members and the regional public that there is a Geordie humour, or the activity of the audience as participants in the production of humour to an extent that shoulders an image of critical self-esteem. Nor can this kind of rejection account for the anomalies of content, outlined in Part II of

chapter two, which recognise the signficatory importance of dialect, and even the existence of regionally specific jokes\*.

It is to avoid these shortcomings and include the body of the research findings, that this final chapter aims to conclude this thesis. To achieve this, it is, therefore, essential to acknowledge the audience as effective producers by virtue of the interactive dynamics involved in the particular social practice of live performance humour. This will not only enable common structures of meaning to be uncovered according to the 'success' of established humorous performers in the north-east, but it will also allow for the potentiality of those structures being invested with particular regional connotations. This is to say, that a joke may well be universally intelligible, but that this provides no legitimate grounds for the disqualification of that joke having a significant regional meaning to north-easterners. Indeed, from a semiological analysis of Thompson and the other successful 'Geordie comedians', I found a strong association between forms of comic performance in the north-east, in terms of both content and style, and the imagery of the region. The argument to be developed in light of this, is the extent to which a Geordie humour exists as a social practice within the complete contextual regional location, afforded by the working men's club, rather than the extent to which it can be flatly rejected, by content analytically sweeping the regional audience (and other disregarded research findings) under the same national carpet; to feel the same significant weight of each universally intelligible joke a successful live performance

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\* See the 'mayor' joke and the 'clippie mat' joke in Part II of chapter two.

comedian decides to tell.

The first point to develop within this argument, is the interworking of regional imagery with comic performance. By showing how some comedians utilise these image structures in their stage acts, there will emerge an indication of the amount of regional investment a skilful exponent of those structures can employ to underpin his comic success in the north-east. As no such semiological investigation could be made without a clear understanding of the imagery of the north-east, chapter one is designed to expound the distinctiveness and security of the region's image structures, which may be assimilated into comic performances in the region.

To begin, there are acknowledged variations in the extent to which the professional comedians, featured in this research, extracted performance value from the regional imagery. Some acts rested heavily on it, while others still benefitted from it, but to a lesser degree. To help explain this, it is useful to draw a simple divide between the comic styles of the comedians I interviewed. This would place what I will call the 'stand-ups' on one side, and what I will call the 'characters' on the other. As a simple division for analytical purposes only, 'stand-ups' refers broadly to those comedians who are able to be funny because they have good technical ability to tell jokes. 'Characters' is the term used to refer to those comedians who play the part of a character to augment the jokes they tell. Often the 'characters' will dress for their act to obviously indicate the type of characterisation being made, while the 'stand-ups' are recognised for their three piece suits with collar and tie. This division was voiced by a 'stand-up', who compared himself with a 'character':

' .... the difference is: I'm not an essentially funny man - I just

tell funny stories and tell them well. Bobby Thompson is funny without opening his mouth; you're laughing before he starts, he's like little Bobby Ball and Eric Morecambe'.(38)

It was those comedians eligible for the label of 'character', which were seen to make the most of the region's imagery in their acts. They did so by adopting a central theme of material hardship to be a constant reference point within the content of their act. This would be supported by the more stylistic features of regional dialect and visual appearance. Unfortunately, there is not the space in this thesis to develop detail on each of the individual 'characters' working in the north-east, in order to illustrate the subtleties of performer variations on the theme. There is, however, the detail of the 'characters' I have watched and interviewed, to assure me of the uniformity, or general applicability, of the observations and analysis to be recorded.

The first of these observations is that the central content theme, of impoverished working class lifestyles, is presented through one of two performance techniques: nostalgic remembrance or contemporary personalisation. Often the two are interwoven, as in the stage acts of Bobby Thompson, but the most common of the two techniques was seen to be that of nostalgia. There are several reasons to account for this preference, ranging from the 'safety' of the act not to risk losing the audience by wandering onto a topical pitch\*, to the prestige of regional self-image such an act affords by its signalled association\*\*. Again, there is a common thread running through this range of reasoning, insofar as the 'character' must remain within the 'safety' of the secured and familiar structures of meaning attached to the imagery of

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\* All of the comedians acknowledged the inapplicability of 'topical' material to regional club audiences.

\*\* See chapter one for the positive effects of regional imagery.



the north-east, if the characterisation is to work and win the identification of the regional audience. The 'character' comedians I interviewed, were candid in their remarks about the use of nostalgia to present the audience with a winning routine. They explained how the nostalgia kept the humour to a 'domestic' pitch, and this meant that the audience did not feel threatened by something which they did not know about.

CB Do you think, that you being from the region, that there's a style of crack or a style of patter, that you as a comedian, benefit from?

AS ' .... I've never changed my act - its the same idea, you know, my daft old patter, and I don't change or try to be clever. Once I try to be clever I'm knackered.'

CB When you say clever, you know, if they get a comic that tries to be clever ....

AS 'Go above their heads and they can sense it straight away and they just don't want to know, they do not want to know. That's why I said domestic humour, you see, you keep it on their level.'

The working of nostalgia, or personalisation, by the 'character' comedians was seen by all of the professional comedians, to owe its success to the guaranteed assurances of 'pitch' it gave to the audience. So, armed with the understanding of the central themes these techniques 'pitch' to certain audience ingestion, there is an acceptance of the existence of distinctive regional factors involved in the discourse of humour in the north-east. This does not mean there is a rejection of universal intelligibility of the content of the 'character' comedians, rather, it means there is a regional root to the assurance of the pitch of content, which these comedians successfully exploit in their performances.

To explain this claim to regionalism in comic performances in the north-east, it must first be made clear that the 'character' comedians

were recognised to have gained popularity, because the audience could identify with them. The techniques of nostalgia and personalisation, were seen to aid this basic audience identification with the character. My argument is that the character is identified with, by north-easterners, because it is an 'asserted metaphor'(39) of the north-east. This is to say that this type of comic act serves to relay the reality of the regional imagery through the representation of the character. They do this by using the stylistic elements of the act as the first order of signification, whereby the iconic or denotative functions of the visuals and dialect of the act, are reconstructed to comic excess. Bobby Thompson and Alan Snell, for example, are noted for their comic appearance. They are both raggy icons of the Geordie, in the same way as the car sticker shown in chapter one. Little Billy Fane, as one of the 'characters' I interviewed, told me that his on stage appearance in a collarless shirt, waistcoat and pronounced facial whiskers, was not consciously designed to represent anything in particular, yet he was committed to the view that his humour, like Bobby Thompson's, was drawn 'from north-eastern identity'.

However, it is to a second order of signification that the 'characters' can be shown to operate most effectively as regional metaphors, as it is on this level that the equivalence between the reality of regional imagery, and their representation of it, is constructed and connotative, not denotative(40). According to Barthes, this means that the codes of signification (here in the 'character' comic act) become invested with cultural meaning by the 'readers' of the (comic) text. It is from this secondary signification that 'characters' such as Thompson's 'little waster' have been accused of perpetuating regional myths. Although there is the recognition of the ascription of shared cultural meaning being accepted as part of the concept of myth, the usage of the term to

criticise Thompson in this way, is seen to be incorrect. Such a usage of the concept of myth, assumes that a negative regional image is transmitted to the audience, through the comic performances of 'characters' like Thompson. Apart from the acknowledgement of the existent reality of regional imagery, these critics misuse the concept of myth because they work it into a fundamental misconception of the social practice of humour. Rather, the location of myth as an analytical device to illustrate the relationship between image signifiers, as they are signified in the 'character' acts, should be moved to the position of focus on the relation between readers (audience) and text (act), as this is the correct position to appreciate the role of humour. This is because it is humour which uniquely displaces the common structures of meaning, in a way that must be seen to relate accurately to the correctly corresponding myths to perceived regional imagery, otherwise the reading of the text would fail, resulting in the failure of the 'character' act. To put it simply, who would laugh at these 'character' acts, if they were seen to show the derogatory images pertaining to the audience, which the afore mentioned critics accuse Thompson of perpetuating?

To use the concept of myth in relation to humour, it is necessary to accept the need for the audience to be fastened and secure in their reading of the text. As seen in chapter two, the setting of the working men's club, as part of the complete contextual location of the practice of humour, contributes to the security of the audience on a material level of interpersonal familiarity, and on a cultural level of reaffirming the structures of meaning familiar to the region's public. Only by accepting the security of the audience as subjects within these structures of meaning, can the functioning of humour be correctly semiologically appraised. For example, account must be made

of the common perception of the regionalism of the 'character' acts, when faced with the objective location of class as the universal determinant of their performance content.

There is no dispute with the insistence on the importance of class as the primary referent system for the common structures of meaning underpinning the 'character' acts in the north-east. Indeed, this would explain the universal intelligibility of such comic performances (accepting a neutrality of speech patterns in terms of dialect and idiom). But this simply brings us back to the Andy Capp debate, of a regional attribution to an undoubtedly universal caricature. The need, therefore, is for a sound analytical explanation of the regional framing of universal class structures. This will not be forthcoming from a misconceived semiological analysis of regional myths, or images, be they presented in humour or any other form, as the conclusion will ultimately rest on the class structures as the fundamental signifier. It will not produce a conclusion which recognises the ability of the regional imagery itself to be a signifier within the institutionalised context of a social practice. The research findings of this thesis, on the social practice of humour, are such that they can only be fully incorporated into a conclusion that is founded on such a recognition.

The semiology of my analysis is of that post-structuralist variety which sees the relation between audience and act as the key to understanding the subject's reality. This is to say, that the well voiced opinion of the region's public as to the existence of a Geordie humour, is to be accepted as an indication of the interpellative reality of the image structures of the north-east. As such they must be treated as signifiers of a reality of regional imagery, and must be

amenable to a semiological investigation of their contextualised working in ritualised social practices. Such a practice is that of live performance humour in the typical institutionalised regional setting of the working men's club, and it is, therefore, deemed legitimate to explain regional myths in terms of their contribution to the successful practice of humour, not because they bring a universal class reality into line with the cultural needs of the audience, but because they bring a regional reality of imagery into line with the cultural needs of the regional audience.

Approaching the analysis of comic performances in the north-east from this position, it is possible to appreciate the working of the techniques of humour, in light of their contribution to the perpetuation of regional imagery. For example, the findings of a 'thick description' of the cultural investment of the symbols involved in the practice of humour, may conclude that the 'character' acts represent a victim inasmuch as the 'cock' in a Balinese cockfight represents heightened masculinity from:

' .... the deep psychological identification of Balinese men with their cocks(41)\* .... [as] cocks are viewed as detachable, self-operating penises, ambulant genitals with a life of their own'.(42)

This type of anthropology applied to the detailing and documenting of the 'character' acts, would show how each of the 'characters' were at pains to depict themselves as vulnerable. This could be done by their raggy appearance showing they have been on the receiving end, or by a 'little-boy-lost' act, to show how they could easily be exploited. The physical stature of the 'character' comedians referred to in this

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\* Geertz emphasises the intention of the pun by showing how this kind of joking itself plays a part in the identification process.

thesis, could also be seen to add to this projection of vulnerability, as they were little in height and build and prefix.

'.... they all know you're a scruffy little bugger - you're a toe-rag really, but you're not a nasty one, you're just a daft little bugger'.(43)

However, these characteristics are themselves highly exploitable in comic form, so to fully explain the popularity of this type of 'character' act in the north-east, there is the need to be on guard against the more anthropological temptation to dig up a deep association of the audience to the 'character' act. Say, for example, to use the victim theme of the act to symbolise the north-eastern identity. All this will do, is lead into the circular debate on the extent to which the 'character' is a victim, and whether or not that explains the popularity of the act in terms of regional audience identification with the 'character'. To avoid this, there must be an acceptance of humour as the premium requisite of the 'character's' act, as this will push the awareness of the theme of the victim into the realm of the working of regional mythology in the context of comic performance. This is to say, that the victim theme is within the common structures of meaning which can be humorously exploited, but that there is no basis to explain the popularity of a comic act because the audience identify with that theme.

'I know I do this bewildered thing, and again, I think that's just a bit of stage trickery, where you're doing this sort of, you know - 'where am I, I'm bewildered, I'm lost'. I think one of the greatest rules of comedy is to slam the audience with what they're not expecting .... it's like the old peasant who's worldly wise, who just sits there, apparently uninterested in what's going on all around him, and then drops in some sort of philosophical bombshell'.(44)

This is to show that the audience's liking for the 'character' acts in the north-east may not be from the signalled theme of the victimisation of the region, but rather from the humorous incongruity

woven into the act, which the audience enjoy. Again, this could be taken into the depths of an explanation, which sees the enjoyment of the audience coming from the pleasure of seeing their regional alter-ego gratified by 'getting one over' on the elements which have victimised. But, this must also be checked as the basis to a conclusion on the popularity of 'character' acts in the north-east, because once again there is a refusal to recognise the function of humour. There is no account of the social, or ritual aspect of humour, rather it is assumed to be open to freely deliver tub-thumping dictums on regional resistance to the structures of social superiority. On this level, there awaits the theoretical quagmire of trying to show that humour can deliver such a message. For example, is the 'little waster' laughed at because he is seen to be championing the regional audience in challenging the authority structures of bourgeois hegemony when he always has the last laugh: 'The dole is my shepherd, I shall not want', or is he being laughed at because of the reasons Hobbes gives, that the feeling of superiority (the audience over the 'little waster') causes laughter(45)? By taking the form of humour as an interactive process, in the fashion of the ritual, there is no need to address this problematic. There is the acceptance of the practice of humour to reaffirm common structures of meaning in the quest for humour, there is no claim being made as to the political connotations of humour to construct strains of consciousness by implanting a message into the minds of the regional audience - reactionary, revolutionary, or otherwise.

It is for the purpose of humour, therefore, that the 'character' acts portray a 'little victim', as this encourages identification from an unthreatening security afforded to the audience. The word

used by many people in the north-east to sum up their thoughts on the success of the 'character' acts, was 'sympathy'. They told of how they felt sorry for them, because they appeared (in some cases more than others) to be pathetic.

CB When you said Bobby Thompson was pathetic, what did you mean by that?

MEM 'Well, like a little boy pathetic - you know what I mean - the instinct comes out, you want to mother him for all he's old'.(46)

The first level of association to the 'character' acts, can thus be argued to come from the superiority they afford the audience in terms of their position within the practice to receive the comic text. Once this association is made, the audience are able to relax in anticipation of the humour of the text. This is very important, as Trevor Pateman argues:

'.... most or all human activities, has an anticipatory character in the sense that it has expected future components, and having the expectation of those components is part of what it means to be engaged in that activity'.(47)

The onus, therefore, falls upon the 'character' act to be within these expectations, which the audience vindicate by their laughing approbation. The result of this is a process of confirmation of common structures of meaning, which are understood to be images of the north-east. Humour, as a social practice in the north-east, can, therefore, be seen to perpetuate regional imagery through the comic techniques employed by some of the top comedians working in the north-east.

This is seen to introduce a second level of identification to the 'character' acts. This is an identification to the regional mythology, through the actual practice of live performance humour. The levels of signification in the 'character' acts are not to be



interpreted as meaning this, or meaning that, rather they are able to be exercised in the activity of laughter. Non-'character' acts or 'stand-ups' who fail to arouse laughter, can also be used to reaffirm regional identification, by the activity of the audience to enact the imagery of Geordies being hard audiences\*. Of course, other regions may have identical comic preferences and behaviour patterns, but north-easterners have the nationally reinforced image structures\*\* which are being exercised in their working men's clubs, in the 'Geordie land'.

Ultimately, there is the recognition of the regional framing of universal (class) structures of meaning, into the image structures of the north-east of England. This is accomplished through the social practice of humour in the institutionalised setting of the working men's club. In order to reach the conclusion that a Geordie humour does exist, it is necessary to fully appreciate the working of humour as an interactive process which assumes a ritualistic form. Outside of this scheme, the idea of a Geordie humour can easily be rejected by assuming the universality of jokes negates a regional particularism, and must, therefore, negate a Geordie humour. It is hoped that this thesis has shown the simplistic nature of this type of rejection, and illustrated the sociological value of the study of humour, insofar as it is capable of pointing to the realities of social life.

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\*See chapter two.

\*\*See chapter one.

## Conclusion

As a case study designed to illustrate the sociological significance of humour, this focus on the north-east has served to illustrate the role of humour in the discourse of cultural meaning, vis à vis regional identity. By the specific and unique qualities of humour, there is seen to be a definite import to the identity of the north-east. That is, humour has the attraction of anticipated pleasure, which must be fulfilled at all costs by a professional comedian. Some comedians working in the north-east have put together a winning routine of humour, which is secured on the perceived myths of the north-east. The underlying structures of meaning attached to these regional myths are reaffirmed by the conformity to comic/pleasurable expectations the comedian must undertake. This can be seen most clearly in the 'character' acts, but also in the 'stand-up' performances as the content must be to a 'pitch' that is acceptable to the regional audience.

To explain how humour makes this import to regional identity, it is necessary to show how it reaffirms the structures of meaning upon which the imagery of the region is based. My argument, is that it does so from the basic mechanics of the workings of a joke, which Mary Douglas argues, is to:

' .... confront one relevant structure by another less clearly relevant, one well-differentiated view by a less coherent one, a system of control by another independent one to which it does not apply'.(48)

This is to say, that humour will derive from the incongruity of structures of meaning. My argument is that this incongruity, as the characteristic of the joke, forms into a dialectical process of affirmation and reaffirmation of the typical image structures of the region's identity. It does so by first setting the idea, which is

taken from the regional imagery, for example, the 'little waster' character. It is the technical dynamics of the joke which necessarily propose the antithesis in the incongruous structure, and the synthesis is the punchline of the joke, which allows the resolution of the challenging incongruity to produce the pleasurable relief in laughter. The result is the reaffirmation of the common structures which are amenable to such exploitation because of their familiarity. For example, there is the component of material hardship embodied into the imagery of the north-east\*, and the 'little waster' and the other 'character' acts exploit this common knowledge by making explicit their own hardship. With this idea firmly established in the minds of the audience, all manner of challenging incongruous structures can be introduced: a favourite is to employ signals of affluence, such as an over-the-top 'posh' accent, which can be upturned to provide the punchline. The effect of this is to cause relief laughter, as the audience are reassured from having seen the joke, and this reaffirms the structures of meaning which are being played with for the purpose of humour. There are actually too many examples to chose from, to do justice to the point being made by picking out one as if it were something special, but, one that can be used to illustrate the argument by showing two levels of displacement of regional imagery, is a joke told by Alan Snell, a 'character' act. His appearance on stage is comically scruffy, and his broad Geordie accent compounds his characterisation on the familiar hardship themes. He then says his daughter came home and asked for a jacuzzi a) - here is the incongruity from affluent accoutrements challenging the hardship reality of the

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\*Chapter one

'character' - his reply is that she most certainly cannot have a motorbike! b) - here is the resolving punchline which allows the audience to laugh because they see the mistake, and that it is legitimate for that 'character' to have made it, because of his exclusion from the knowledge of what jacuzzis are. This joke would not have the same comic effect if it were told by Bob Hope.

Working from this view of the mechanics of humour, my argument is that comedians are able to engage the common structures of meaning attached to regional imagery, and turn them to comic effect, simply by being assured that the regional audience will 'get the joke'. This is to say there is a regional investment in the completed text of comic performance in the north-east. The universality of a joke is not seen to exclude the existence of a Geordie humour, because the location of the text in the north-east is seen to be sufficient to engage north-easterners in a practice which they are secure in the knowledge of, to the point that they can dictate standards of acceptability. This recognition forced each of the professional comedians I interviewed, to remark on the club audience's ability to determine the 'pitch' of content material. They agreed that regional audiences flatly rejected 'clever' (topical) material.

'I've attempted to do clever material, and people have come up to me and said: 'By that's clever, not funny, but clever''.(49)

'You have the case of Ted Rodgers, who played the London Palladium using clever material, which works in a cosmopolitan place like London. When he came up here, he did the same stuff and didn't raise a smile - the audience couldn't identify with it'.(50)

The interworking of image structures relating to the regional audience, can be seen to be active in the institutionalised setting of the working men's club, to encroach into the practice of performance and ensure the 'pitch' of the text for their reading. Hence a Geordie

humour refers to the activities of the audience as part of the performance, and not purely to the ability of the audience to decode jokes that may convey regional imagery.

The interactive characteristics of humour ensures that there is some common ground for the dialectic of the joke to work. The sign functioning of regional mythology through comic performances in the north-east, establishes that common ground as the contextual referent for the acceptance of regional imagery. For example, in an interview with Little Billy Fane, a professional comedian based in the north-east, he told me how he was asked to do an act for members of an international conference:

'[It was] At the Holiday Inn at Seaton Burn, and they wanted something to portray the north-east of England to these people. Well, the hall was decorated as a coal mine using black plastic bags. It was like working in a very high seam. They had safety lamps on the tables and that sort of thing, and the stage was on hydraulic props with chocks on the top. And I did the thing. I started off with songs and I was explaining them to them, and then I went on to humour, telling them what I was on about: sort of - 'so down the pit you had this situation where a bloke would come from home and he'd go down the pit, and he'd do this and do that, and he'd come across this situation', and you're into the gag. And all you've done is paint the background, but up here people are already familiar with it. Up here there's not the explanation needed - you don't have to paint a backcloth because they're living in it'.

Although this does not suggest a contextual referent in the same manner of comic efficiency as that of 'Irish', or 'Jewish', it does indicate the existence of regional imagery as a referent. It is this which supports the 'character' act techniques of nostalgia and personalisation, as both of these techniques essentially present the imagery of the north-east, in a way which defies any analysis showing it to be offensive to north-easterners. First, as chapter one shows, the imagery of the region carries positive elements to imbue a regional pride, which can be projected onto master exponents of the techniques which signify that imagery. This may account for the 'living legend'

status of Bobby Thompson, who has had a regionally appreciative audience for many years, yet they appreciate the same act time after time. Secondly, nostalgia affords the security of the past to allow the audience to relax. In this way nostalgia works to induce a temporal suspension of any type of offensive reality that an individual may wish to read into the imagery portrayed. It is noticeable that in the 'little waster' routine, Thompson personalises the central imagery referenced theme of material hardship, yet he keeps a strain of nostalgia by using grossly understated references to the value of money: 'I found a pound under the mattress so I got ready to go out', and uses quaint old money terms such as 'shillings' and 'bobs'.

The one thing which must be recognised in the confines of this thesis, is that the practice of humour in the institutionalised setting of the working men's club is an activity of confirmation. The public nature of the symbolism attached to the practice, signals anticipated expectations of pleasure to be fulfilled. To realise this pleasure facility and produce laughter, there must be a solid shared agreement to the acceptance of common structures of meaning, which can then be distorted into comic form. It is the conclusion of this thesis to argue that in the north-east, there is a regional frame drawn around universal class themes. This frame is itself drawn from the imagery of the region, and it is applied by the regional audience to comic performances in the north-east, especially those performances which can call upon codes of (regional) signification, such as dialect, or 'character' content. The complete contextual location of humour in the north-east in terms of the setting, and the vitality of the image structures of the region, and the actual mechanics of the joking form, serves to reaffirm the common structures of meaning north-easterners

acknowledge.

The confirmational characteristic of the comic practice is seen to displace a reality of regional imagery from the way in which sign functions operate. Namely, the mythology of the 'character' acts is seen in terms of its regional connotation, rather than a universal class connotation. This is to be explained by the acceptance of the concept of genre, as outlined in chapter one, as it is the characteristic of genre to locate a discourse of signalled expectation on the recognition of the genre itself(51). I accept the application of the concept of genre to frame patterns of expectation into regional imagery, in just the same way as it frames patterns of expectation into other forms of communication. This is to say that the genre of 'Geordie', dictates the acceptance of certain image structures and not others. There is a prescriptive force to the genre, and as such, it develops a confirmational acceptance of the regional imagery, by providing the paradigm of regionalism. This means that images portrayed in comic performance, such as Thompson's 'little waster', are confirmed as regionally particular to the north-east because they are not associated with any other region, and so are seen to be in context.

I accept that this is bending the usage of genre, and that this may be open to criticism, but it should be borne in mind that it is used here in a heuristic application, and that it can serve as an explained concept to illustrate the constructed certainty of the discourse stemming from the cultural loading of the north-east's Geordie.

To accept the confirmational aspects of the social practice of humour, there is, therefore, the corresponding acceptance of the reality of the regional imagery to frame universal jokes into north-eastern

image structures. From this position, there has been the need to explain the function of humour to present those images without raising alarm or distaste, or else the practice would fail and cause disquiet. Given the severe social penalties, such as embarrassment, or rebuke, for a joke that doesn't work, the professional comedian must be aware of his audience if s/he is going to succeed (accepting they have the technical ability to perform well). This research has shown that it is anything but a foregone conclusion that a professional comedian will succeed in the north-east: 'the biggest butchers slab in the world for comedians', with 'undoubtedly the hardest audiences to please'.(52)

Having found some of the most successful acts in the north-east to have recourse to some form of regional signal to the audience, be it the content of the 'character' acts, or the stylistic mode of spoken address (dialect, patter) of the 'stand-up' performances, there is seen to be sufficient to invite the regional audience to participate. As the regional audience is extremely capable of refusing this invitation, owing to the setting and the opportunity it affords the audience to enact its esteemed critical image, there is the conclusion that comic performance in the north-east does perpetuate the imagery of the north-east. The extent to which it can be argued there is a Geordie humour, will depend on the extent to which humour is accepted as a completely interactive social practice, and not as a separated performance: whereby a comedian who can work in other regions of the country is disqualified from being a Geordie comedian, or, when a joke that can be understood by other British people is refused any regional investment by the audience.

As this research has tried to document and analyse the complete contextual location of humour in the north-east, the conclusion as to



the existence of a distinctive Geordie humour is that there is a distinctive Geordie humour, by virtue of its location within the most pronounced structures of regional imagery to be found to correspond to the preferred content themes of some of the region's most successful and endearing comedians.

As to the extent to which regional identity is inspired by successful performance humour in the north-east, there is seen to be a prerequisite level of identification with the 'character' acts. However, this identification is to the joke above all else, and to the pleasure of the social practice. Very few people would want to identify with the 'characters' portrayed in their favourite acts. But, there is a level of identification to the regional imagery, which is equally potent because of the practice of humour in the north-east, and that is as an audience within that practice taking place in their club.

It is without reservation, that this research concludes by stating the definite contribution of live performance humour in the working men's clubs of the north-east of England, to the perpetuation of the imagery and identity of the region. Geordie has the last laugh.

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- (42) ibid., p.167.
- (43) ibid., p.168.
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- (45) ibid., p.23.
- (46) Zijderveld, op. cit., pp.6-9.
- (47) Fiske and Hartley, op. cit., p.23.
- (48) ibid., p.46.
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Chapter Two - Part I

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- (2) Primary Source Material: Interview with Alan Snell (professional comedian.)
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- (4) Figures courtesy of Jack Amos, Durham county secretary of the Club and Institute Union (C.I.U.) figs from summer 1989.
- (5) Tremlett, op. cit., publisher's abstract.
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- (7) The Official Commemorative Journal of the Federation Brewery, 70 Glorious Years (1989)
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- (9) In a MORI report entitled: 'Public attitudes Towards Clubs' - submitted to the C.I.U. in 1986 - it was found that 58% of members who went to their club more than once a week, took a personal interest in the running of the club. (cited in Tremlett, op. cit., p.259.)
- (10) See C.I.U.-The Union: 125 Years, video produced by Jamie Doran. Rapide Productions (1987)
- (11) P.S.M. Interview with Alan Fox, professional comedian.
- (12) ibid.
- (13) P.S.M. Interview with Mike Elliot, professional comedian.
- (14) ibid.
- (15) P.S.M. Interview with Little Billy Fane, professional comedian.
- (16) A MORI report cited in Tremlett, op. cit., showed 74% of those surveyed agreed that there was a good community feeling in clubs, and in the case of Union clubs; 26% of members had been members for 20 years or more. p.260.
- (17) P.S.M. Alan Fox.
- (18) P.S.M. Mike Elliot.
- (19) P.S.M. Interview with Bobby Hooper of the comedy duo: 'The Dixie-landers'.

- (20) P.S.M. Mike Elliot.
  - (21) Figures courtesy of Jack Amos, op. cit., (Summer 1989)
  - (22) Jamie Doran, (Video) op. cit.,
  - (23) P.S.M. Mike Elliot.
  - (24) P.S.M. Interview with Bobby Pattinson (professional comedian)
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## Part II

- (1) P.S.M. Bobby Pattinson.
- (2) ibid.
- (3) ibid.
- (4) P.S.M. Interview with Joe Ging, (comedian/historian)
- (5) P.S.M. Alan Snell.
- (6) P.S.M. Bobby Hooper.
- (7) P.S.M. Alan Fox.
- (8) P.S.M. Alan Snell.
- (9) P.S.M. Alan Fox.
- (10) P.S.M. Mike Elliot.
- (11) P.S.M. Little Billy Fane.
- (12) P.S.M. Mike Elliot.
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- (14) P.S.M. Alan Fox.
- (15) P.S.M. Alan Snell.
- (16) ibid.
- (17) P.S.M. Mike Elliot.
- (18) P.S.M. Alan Fox.

- (19) P.S.M. Interview with Bob Ritchie, (professional comedian)
- (20) P.S.M. Alan Fox.
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- (24) P.S.M. Alan Snell.
- (25) P.S.M. Bob Ritchie.
- (26) P.S.M. Interview with Spike Rawlins, (professional comedian)
- (27) P.S.M. Comment made by Shep Woolly, a professional comedian, during the interview with Mike Elliot.
- (28) P.S.M. Spike Rawlins.
- (29) P.S.M. Alan Snell.
- (30) ibid.
- (31) P.S.M. Shep Woolly.
- (32) P.S.M. Alan Fox.
- (33) P.S.M. Bobby Pattinson.
- (34) P.S.M. Bob Ritchie.
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- (37) P.S.M. Mike Elliot.
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- (39) P.S.M. Alan Fox.
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- (20) ibid.
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- (22) P.S.M. Bobby Pattinson.
- (23) P.S.M. Joe Ging.



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- (26) P.S.M. Bobby Pattinson.
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- (37) P.S.M. Spike Rawlins.
- (38) P.S.M. Alan Fox.
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Tape recorded interviews were conducted with the following professional comedians:

ELLIOT. Mike

FANE. 'Little' Billy

FOX. Alan

GING. Joe

HOOPER. Bobby

PATTINSON. Bobby

RAWLINS. Spike

RITCHIE. Bob

SNELL. Alan

Some comments were made and recorded on the taped interview with Mike Elliot by his mother and professional comedian, Shep Woolly.

Specific interviews, which were not tape recorded, were conducted with:

AMOS. Jack Secretary of the Durham branch of the C.I.U., and columnist with the Sunday Sun newspaper.

ANGUS. John Marketing manager with the Federation Brewery.

HEALY. Tim Professional actor, star of Central Television's 'Auf Wiedersehen Pet'.

Notes were made on conversations with:

Club Concert Chairmen.

Club Stewards.

Audience members and general public.

Notes were made on the stage act of those comedians I interviewed,

and also on the acts of those comedians I was not able to interview,  
such as:

Roy 'Chubby' Brown.

Walter Gee.

Lambert and Ross.

Scarlet O'Hara.

Bobby Thompson.

Rudi West.

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