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The Cultural Currency of a 'Good' Sense of Humour: British Comedy and New Forms of Distinction

Abstract

Traditionally considered lowbrow art *par excellence*, British comedy has grown steadily in legitimacy since the 'Alternative Comedy Movement' of the early 1980s. Yet while there might be evidence of a transformation in British comic *production*, there is little understanding of how this has been reflected in patterns of *consumption*. Indeed, there is a remarkable absence of studies probing comedy taste in British cultural sociology, most notably in Bennett et al's (2009) recent and otherwise exhaustive mapping of cultural taste and participation. This paper aims to plug this gap in the literature by examining contemporary comedy taste cultures in Britain. Drawing on a large-scale survey and in-depth interviews carried out at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, it argues that comedy now represents an emerging field for the culturally privileged to activate their cultural capital resources. However, unlike previous studies on cultural capital and taste, this research finds that field-specific 'comic cultural capital' is mobilised less through taste for certain legitimate 'objects' of comedy and more through the expression of rarefied and somewhat 'disinterested' *styles* of comic appreciation. In short, it is 'embodied' rather than 'objectified' forms of cultural capital that largely distinguish the privileged in the field of comedy.

Keywords: comedy; cultural capital; distinction; MCA; taste; popular culture

The Cultural Currency of a 'Good' Sense of Humour: British Comedy and New Forms of Distinction

Comedy plays an increasingly central role in British cultural life. Following the recent resurgence of TV stand-up and the continuing growth of the live circuit, comedy has emerged as a 'booming' multi-million pound industry and an important staging point for understanding British cultural tastes and identities (Logan 2010; Medhurst 2007). It also represents one of the few industries to experience significant growth in the recent economic downturn (Salter 2009).

Despite this, sociology – and indeed academia in general – has afforded comedy little scholarly attention. Traditionally considered 'low-brow art *par excellence*' (Kuipers 2006: 374), comedy has largely been considered a discredited art form and relegated to the inferior cultural position of entertainment rather than art (Mills 2004; Double 2007).

However, comedy's position in the British cultural hierarchy has arguably altered significantly since the 'Alternative Comedy Movement' of the early 1980s. Here a number of British comedians attempted to eschew what they saw as the 'lowbrow' output that had previously dominated comedy in the Music Hall, Variety and early television sitcom eras, and instead pioneered a supposedly more 'sophisticated' approach (Wilmut 1989: xiv). Borrowing themes from high art, these 'Alt' comedians expanded the field far beyond the boundaries of pop culture, introducing new forms of critical, intellectual, political and surreal comedy (Stott 2005: 119-20). Such producers also

succeeded in earning comedy new-found legitimacy in the cultural field, with critics, TV producers and other cultural intermediaries recognising the increased 'value' of these new comic styles (Double 2005).

Yet while there might be strong evidence indicating a transformation in the paradigm of British comic *production*, there is little understanding of how this change has been reflected in patterns of *consumption*. Indeed, comedy has largely been omitted from large-scale sociological studies of British cultural consumption (see Goldthorpe and Chan 2005; Skelton 2007). Even in the most comprehensive assessment of British cultural practices, Bennett et al's (2009: 132-51) highly significant *Culture, Class, Distinction*, comedy was either ignored or defined problematically as a 'middlebrow' television sub-genre. Only in the Netherlands has comedy been explored in any depth, with Kuipers (2006) finding that comedy taste continues to be a strong marker of Dutch social class and educational level.

This article aims to plug this gap in the literature by examining contemporary comedy taste cultures in Britain. First, drawing on survey findings analysed using Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA), I demonstrate that the culturally privileged are, to some extent, creating new forms of 'objectified' cultural capital via the careful consumption of 'legitimate' items of British comedy. However, by deepening these survey findings with qualitative interview data I go on to suggest that this notion of 'objectified' cultural capital offers only limited explanatory potential. Instead, in traditionally 'popular' cultural fields like comedy, where cultural objects are unstable status markers

and many consumers appear to display 'omnivoric' consumption repertoires, distinction is being realised more through *embodied* cultural capital. In the case of comedy, this is manifesting in the use of rarefied and embodied *styles of comic appreciation* only available to those with superior resources of cultural capital.

Cultural capital: from resources to realization

Although some have argued (Lamont and Lareau, 1988; Goldthorpe; 2007) that 'theoretical confusion' abounds in the different ways Bourdieu deployed cultural capital, a useful reading of the concept can be mediated through Holt (1997, 1998). Holt argues that cultural capital exists both in a 'single abstracted form' that has only a 'virtual' existence, and also as many 'realised particular forms' when in it is activated in social life (1997: 96).

The virtual form of cultural capital, or what I refer to throughout this article as 'cultural capital resources', primarily concerns what Bourdieu (1984) classifies as the 'structured' conditions of an individual's *habitus*. This begins with the process of cultural socialization, whereby children from the dominant classes (middle and upper-middle class) are inculcated with certain cultural dispositions that orientate them towards a 'natural' and embodied understanding of 'legitimate' art. This involves an introduction not only to consecrated cultural objects but also to what Bourdieu (1984: 28-42) called the 'disinterested aesthetic disposition', a certain way of seeing art that demands one put aside any emotional or moral 'interest' they have in an art work and instead focus critically on its formal characteristics.

While this primary source of virtual cultural capital is first transmitted via socialisation, it is further amassed via the education system. Here Bourdieu argued teachers 'misinterpret' the disinterested disposition of culturally privileged students as a sign of 'natural' intelligence and earmark them as worthy of cultivation (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 127). In turn, these students are also likely to gain admission to elite higher education institutions, which act as gatekeeping institutions for the best occupational opportunities (Bourdieu 1977). In contrast, working class children who do not possess this virtual capital and can never achieve such a natural 'familiarity' with culture are subsequently caught in a spiral of negative cultural capital formation (Skeggs 1997). Savage et al. (2005: 44) refer to this cumulative and reinforcing process as the 'circuit of cultural capital'.

However, although the culturally privileged may accumulate cultural capital resources, this does not necessarily yield 'profits' unless it is directly activated in the social world. In order to reap the benefits of this accumulation, then, Holt (1997) argues elites must articulate their cultural resources in particular social fields.

Objectified cultural capital

In *Distinction* (1984: 260-95), Bourdieu explains that the main way the privileged activate their cultural resources is by converting them into tastes for the 'high' arts. As these cultural forms are institutionalised by the state and consecrated by 'cultural intermediaries', Bourdieu argues they are

'misrecognized' as superior and imbued with an important symbolic power. Moreover, as Figure I illustrates, they are also coded so that one must have appropriate resources of knowledge and a disinterested lens to fully enjoy their consumption. Thus elites activate what Bourdieu (1986) termed 'objectified' cultural capital through the consumption of cultural objects that require high 'virtual' cultural capital to consume successfully.
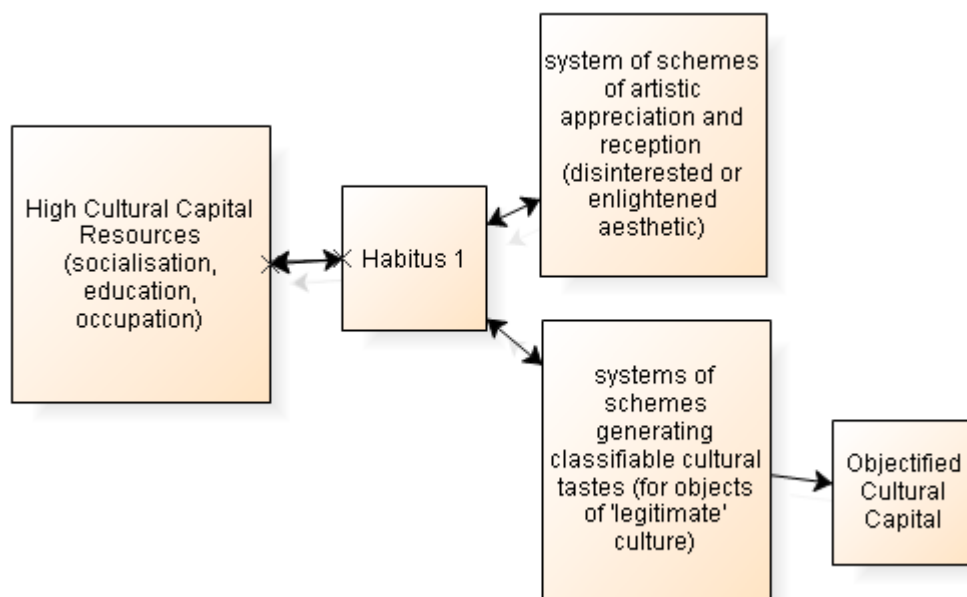
Figure I: *Activation of objectified cultural capital (adapted from Bourdieu, 1984: 171)*

It is significant to note that since the publication of *Distinction* (Bourdieu 1984), nearly all subsequent studies concerning taste have focused their attention on this 'objectified' form of cultural capital (Bennett et al. 2009). However, in recent decades many commentators have noted that these goods have become much weaker status markers (DiMaggio 2004). In particular, the reach of the contemporary 'culture industries' has arguably broken down traditional hierarchies of value by opening up 'high' cultural

products and marketing them to popular audiences (Collins 2002). Furthermore, while legitimate objects have been increasingly 'massified', many popular objects such as jazz, film and rock music have been simultaneously 'aestheticized' (Regev 1994; Bauman 2001; Lopes 2000).

Connected to these debates it is also important to add Peterson and Kern's (1996) influential notion of the 'cultural omnivore', recently corroborated in the UK context by Bennett et al. (2009). These authors argue that contemporary 'elites' no longer consume only legitimate culture but are better characterised as open minded 'omnivores', happy to incorporate both high *and* low cultural forms into their consumption repertoires. This thesis has obvious implications for objectified cultural capital. If 'high' cultural objects have lost their signifying power, it would follow that it is now increasingly difficult for the culturally privileged to 'cash in' their cultural capital resources.

Embodied cultural capital and enlightened eclecticism

However, while recent literature makes a strong case for the weakening hold of objectified capital, this does not necessarily mean that cultural resources do not still possess social stratificatory power. Indeed, what many studies predicated on large-scale surveys tend to miss is that the pursuit of distinction is not just a matter of *what* objects are consumed, but the *way* they are consumed and the *aims* pursued in doing so (Holt 1997; Coulangeon 2005).

As Figure II demonstrates, the culturally privileged have the capacity to maintain their rarity simply by consuming culture in a way that is inaccessible

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to those with less cultural capital resources. By utilizing the scarcity of their 'legitimate' aesthetic disposition, they activate what Bourdieu (1986) terms 'embodied' cultural capital.

Significantly, the notion that the culturally privileged possess embodied resources also opens up the possibility that popular culture like comedy may be being used in the pursuit of distinction. As Coulangeon (2005) notes, the new culturally privileged consumers of pop-culture may be best characterized not as 'cultural omnivores' but as 'enlightened eclectics', employing a distinctly 'enlightened' aesthetic lens to all cultural consumption. These consumers may appear in surveys as inclusive omnivores, but a qualitative inspection of their consumption practice may reveal a more discriminating comic appreciation.
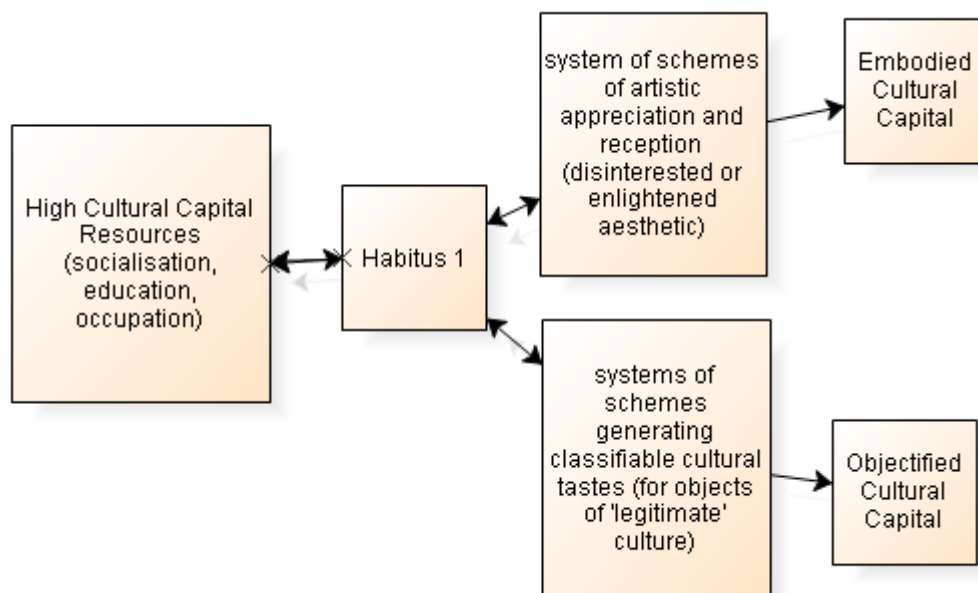
Figure II: *Activation of embodied cultural capital (adapted from Bourdieu, 1984: 171)*

However, although Bourdieu himself coined the phrase embodied cultural capital, he rarely referred to it in the context of popular cultural consumption. This, then, is arguably the point where the theoretical grounding of this article departs from the boundaries of Bourdieu's social theory. Bourdieu was sceptical about paradigm change in relations between the sub-fields of 'restricted' and 'mass' production and failed to acknowledge that popular culture like comedy may be incorporated into distinction strategies. Following Prior (2005: 135), 'We therefore need to find satisfactory ways of updating and warping Bourdieu's ideas to account for inflections in the cultural landscape'. Developing the notion of embodied cultural capital may provide one such 'way' forward.

Outline of the research

I draw upon data from a mixed methods study of the contemporary British comedy field. The study consisted of a survey (n = 901) and 24 follow up interviews. The survey aimed to measure people's 'comedy taste', with respondents asked to indicate their preferences across 16 stand-up comedians and 16 TV comedy shows.[1] The survey also asked a number of demographic questions in order to construct variables for gender, age and notably – 'cultural capital resources'. This latter variable was made up of equally weighted measures for social origin (parental occupation and education), education and occupation.[2]

The survey was carried out at the 2009 Edinburgh Festival Fringe, the largest arts festival in the world and the focal point of the British comedy industry. In

terms of sampling, the true 'population' of comedy consumers at the festival was impossible to document, as audiences are too transient. However, in order to sample with the most realistic concern for randomization, the survey used the sampling frame of the Fringe programme and took a systematic random sample of every twentieth comedy show. The survey was then distributed at each of the chosen shows (n = 34). The response rate was very high at approximately 90 per cent. It is important to note, however, that previous research has indicated that Edinburgh Fringe audiences tend to be disproportionately drawn from middle-class backgrounds rich in cultural capital (Scottish Arts Council 2007). Such a sampling skew appears to be somewhat confirmed in my sample – 31 per cent of respondents were from 'low cultural capital' (LCC) backgrounds, 30 per cent from 'mixed cultural capital' (MCC) backgrounds and 39 per cent from 'high cultural capital' (HCC) backgrounds.[3] Although this skew is smaller than I expected, it none the less differs strongly from the probability sample of British occupational class recently reported by Bennett et al. (2009: 55). These authors find Britain still dominated by a working-class population twice the size of a privileged 'professional-executive' class. It's important to consider that the survey used in this study may therefore under-represent British comedy consumers with less cultural capital resources. Furthermore, the fact that all respondents were sampled at an arts festival indicates that the entire sample may disproportionately represent the 'culturally engaged'.

Considering these methodological limitations, it is important to stress that this article does not seek to make sweeping statements about comedy taste that

claim to stand good over time, or across different cultures. Instead, statistical generalisations made here should be understood as fundamentally 'moderate' (Payne and Williams 2005) and subject to confirmation or refutation by further enquiry.

Mindful of the inability of survey data to explore the *way* people consume comedy, 24 respondents were also interviewed about their aesthetic orientation to comedy. Sampling for the interviews was based on a theoretically defined sub-sample of the original survey respondents. Approximately 30 per cent (n = 280) indicated on the questionnaire that they were happy to be interviewed and from this I selected a final list of 24. These respondents were chosen primarily to reflect the demographic distribution of the survey sample. Thus there were 9 interviewees with high cultural capital resources, 8 with mixed resources and 7 with low resources. I also tried to reflect the gender, age and location proportions from the survey.

In order to achieve a synthetic analysis of comedy taste, I followed the example of Bourdieu (1984) and more recently Bennett et al. (2009) in using Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA). In MCA, individual responses to questions are categorized as modalities and then using geometric analysis the relationship between the different modalities is assessed and axes are identified that separate the modalities relationally in the form of a visual map. This allowed me to compare one respondent's pattern of comedy taste in relation to every other respondent, and therefore plot the symbolic distance between each modality in the map. In short, this meant that if everyone who

liked Eddie Izzard also liked Bernard Manning then these modalities would occupy the same position in the map.

MCA therefore provided a useful visual tool for understanding which items of respondents' comedy taste were clustered together. MCA is also attractive because it allows for social demographic variables to be superimposed onto initial taste axes (without affecting their coordinates) to establish whether they are associated with taste (Bennett et al. 2009). This meant that 'supplementary variables' such as cultural capital resources, age and gender, could be overlaid onto the comedy map (For an exhaustive explanation of MCA see Le Roux and Rouanet 2004).

British comedy and objectified cultural capital

Number	Eigenvalue	Variance rates	Modified Cumulative Variance
Axis 1	0.2139	3.334	61.0
Axis 2	0.1377	1.134	81.1
Axis 3	0.0922	0.371	87.8

Table I: *Eigen values and rates of cumulative variance*

Carrying out MCA on the survey data, I retained all 32 comedy taste variables, generating 115 'active' comedy taste modalities. Thirteen rare modalities (i.e. frequencies less than five per cent of the sample) were excluded from the analysis (Bennett et al. 2009). From these parameters, three principal axes were identified (see Table I) that best characterized the

field of comedy taste.[4] Of these, Axis 1 (contributing 61 per cent of variance) was particularly important and Axis 2 (contributing 20 per cent) was relatively important. For reasons of space, it is these axes I concentrate on here.

Figure III displays the coordinates of the 41 (of 155) comedy taste modalities that contributed significantly[5] to Axis 1 (displayed from top to bottom). Where a taste symbol has a plus sign that indicates it is liked, a minus sign that it is disliked, an equals sign that it is neither liked nor disliked and a question mark that it is unknown. At the top of Axis 1 are a cluster of preferences for comedians such as Stewart Lee and Mark Thomas and TV comedy shows *Brass Eye* and *The Thick Of It*. There are also a cluster of dislikes for comedians such as Roy 'Chubby' Brown, Bernard Manning, Jim Davidson and Karen Dunbar. In contrast, at the bottom of Axis 1, although there is no cluster of dislikes, there is a clear group of preferences for comedians Bernard Manning, Benny Hill, Roy 'Chubby' Brown and Jim Davidson. There is also a cluster of unknown comedians.
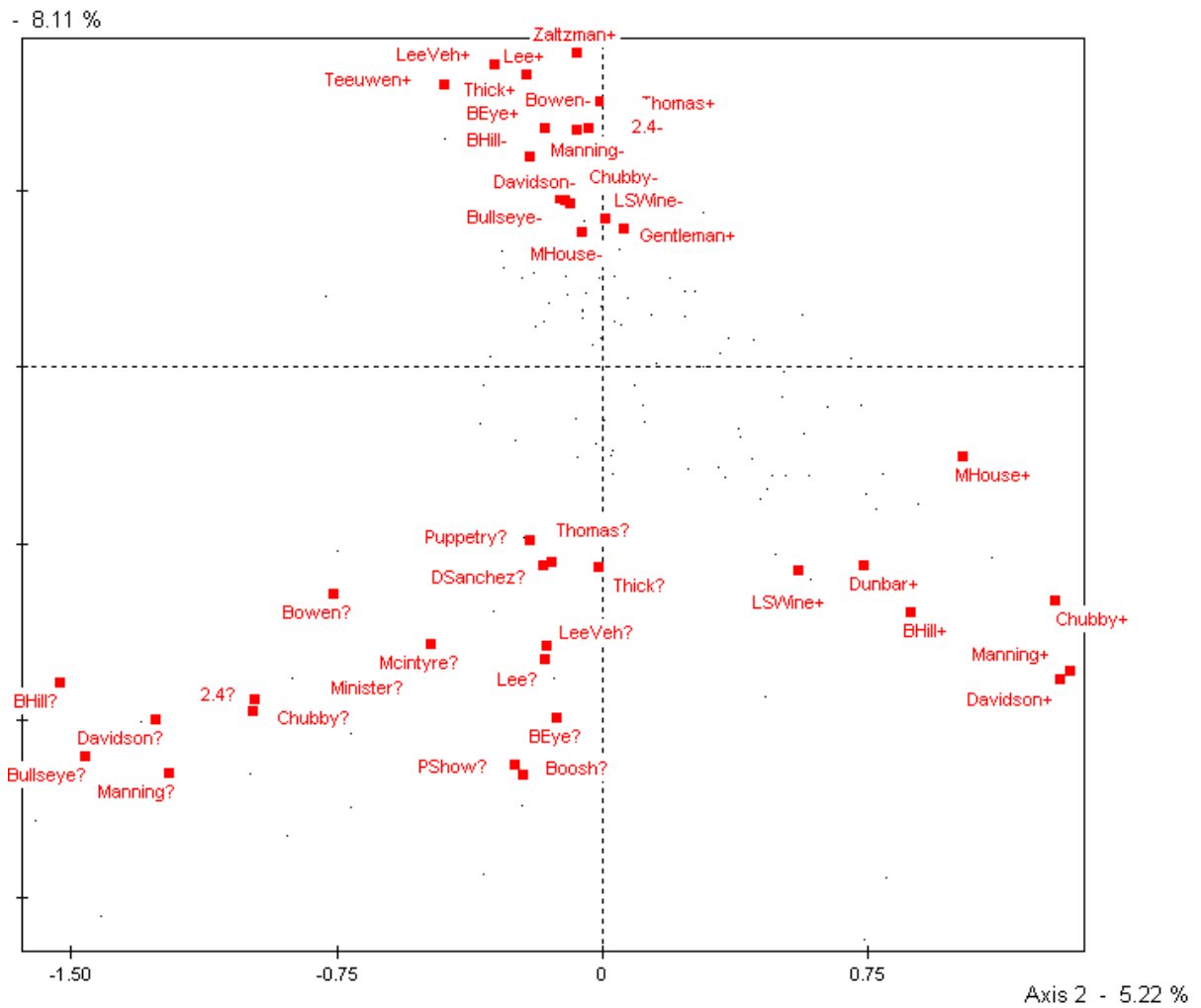
Figure III: *Axis 1 and 2, indicating modalities contributing to Axis 1*

Thus, the comedy taste division in Axis 1 appears to separate what is widely considered 'highbrow' comedy taste at the top from 'lowbrow' comedy taste on the bottom. Comedy items at the top can be characterized as 'highbrow' because each has been extensively consecrated by comedy critics. Critics are not only key gatekeepers in the communication of comedy to the public but they are also bestowed with the 'authority to *assess* artistic works' (Bourdieu 1993: 229). Through the deployment of influential reviews and awards, they are therefore able to endow certain comedians with a widely recognized legitimacy (Bauman 2001). It is also worth noting that some comedy items at

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the top of Axis 1, such as Stewart Lee and *Brass Eye*, have also been consecrated by academics (Stott 2005; Mills 2004). In contrast, the comedians preferred at the bottom of the axis have received little consecration. My concern here is not to address whether this high-low division is normatively just, but simply to note that it is *perceived* to exist and historically has held considerable social power (Featherstone 2007).

Figure IV displays the coordinates of the 27 (of 155) comedy taste modalities that contribute significantly to Axis 2 (displayed from left to right). On the left of the axis are a cluster of comedians that are unknown and on the right hand side are a set of preferences for lowbrow comedians. Axis 2 therefore appears to counterpose those who are generally uninformed about all types of comedy and those who generally like lowbrow comedy.
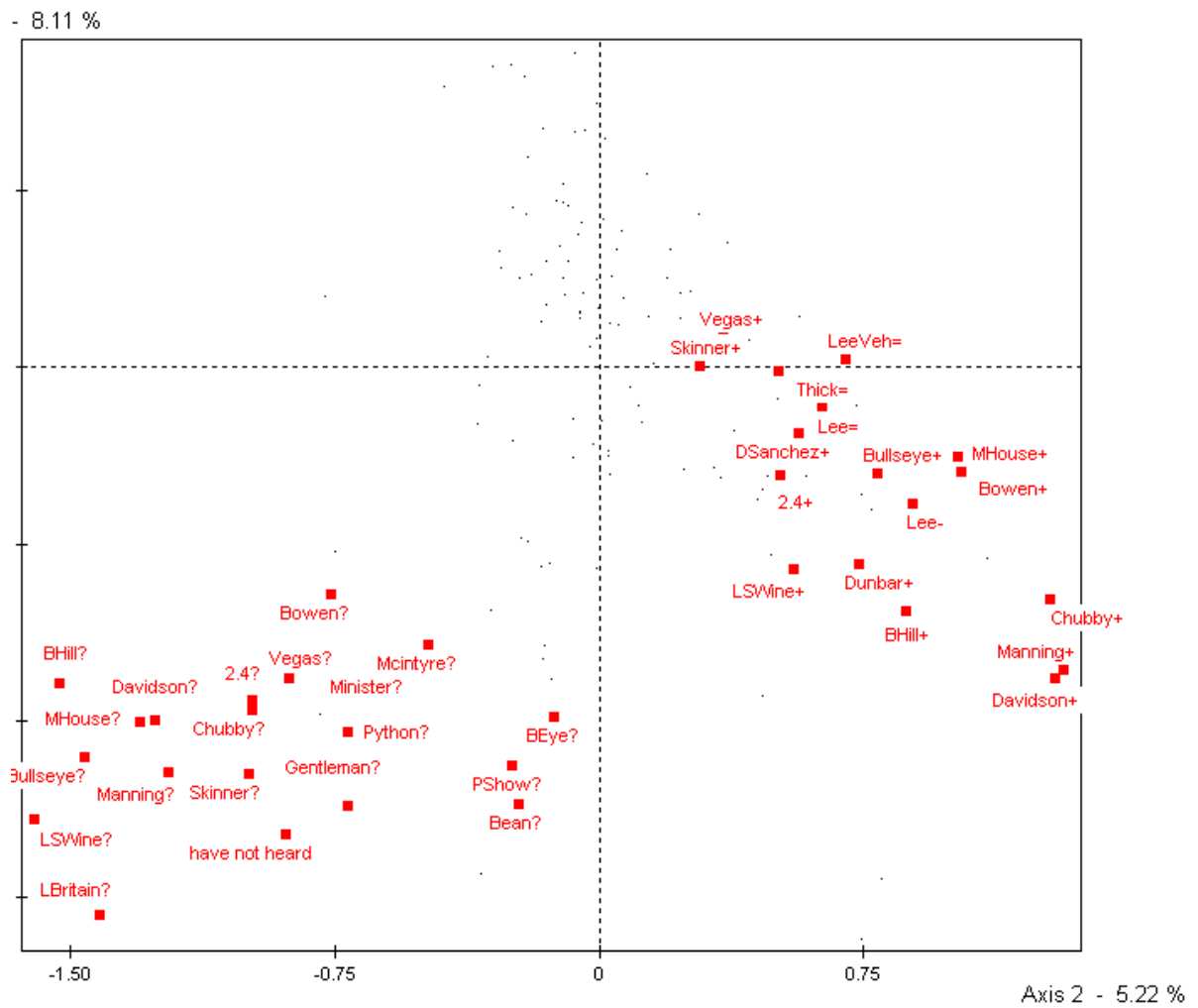
Figure IV: *Axis 1 and 2, indicating modalities contributing to Axis 2*

It is important to reiterate here that although Axis 1 and 2 are constructed entirely from the relative positioning of different items of comedy taste, it is possible to superimpose 'supplementary' socio-demographic variables onto these axes. Deviations in the coordinates of two supplementary modalities greater than 1 is considered large and deviations less than 0.5 small (Bennett et al. 2009).

In Figure V, gender, age and cultural capital are overlaid onto the factorial plane for Axis 1 and 2. Notably, the deviation between sexes is small on both Axes 1 and 2. However, the deviation in cultural capital resources ordered along the first axis is very large (d = 1.23). This indicates that high cultural capital resources seem to be strongly associated with 'highbrow' comedy taste and low resources with 'lowbrow' taste.

Furthermore, on Axis 2 the deviation between ages is also relatively large (d = 0.76), particularly in the bottom two quadrants of the factorial plane. This indicates that among those with low cultural capital resources, there is a clear division between those who are younger and tend to have less knowledge about comedy and those who are older and tend to prefer a small set of lowbrow comedians.
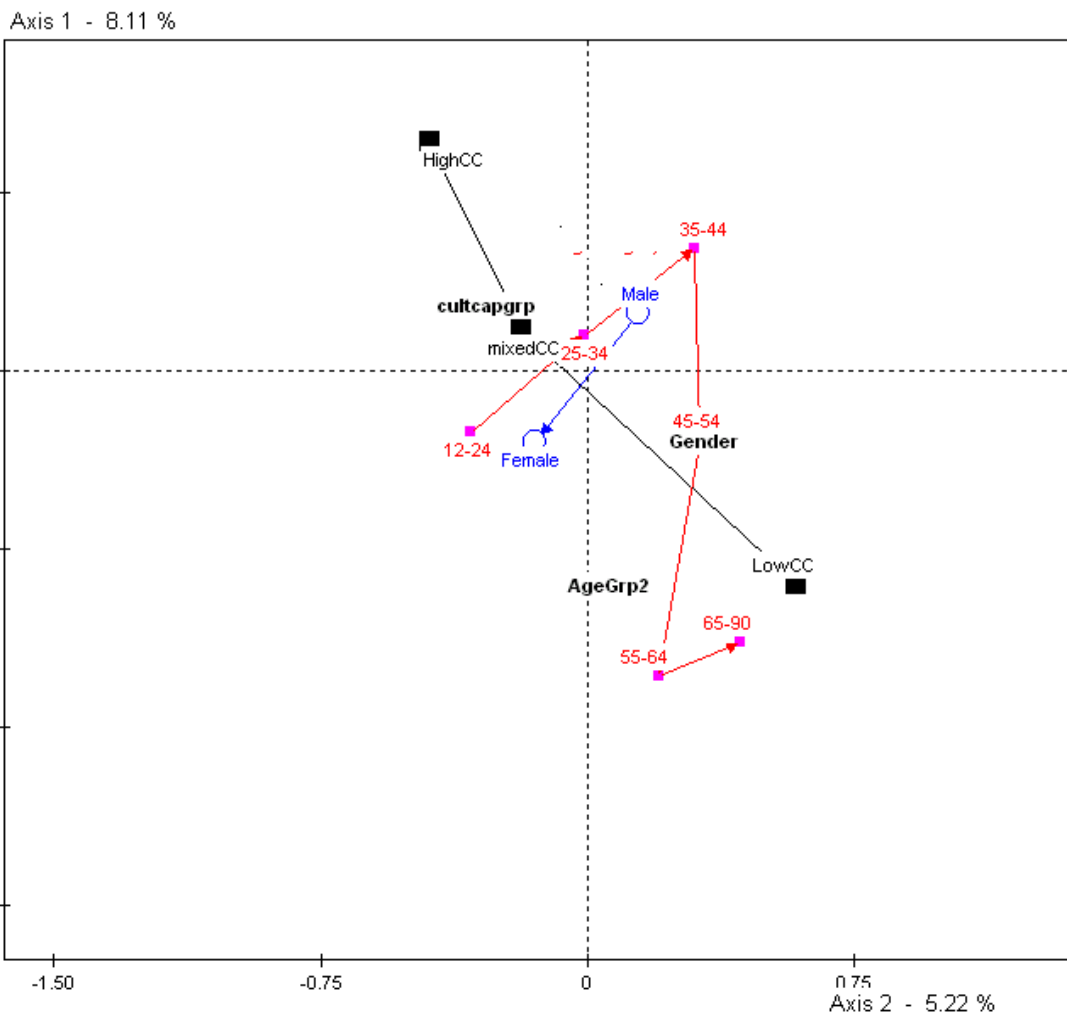
Figure V: *Gender, age and distribution of cultural capital, Axes 1-2*

Together these findings are important as they suggest that while HCC respondents tend to have homogenous comedy taste focused around highbrow comedians, LCC taste is characterized by either a lack of knowledge or a taste for lowbrow comedy. Although the non-probability sample impedes robust generalizations, this data does therefore suggest that to some extent the culturally privileged are activating their cultural capital resources through the careful consumption and rejection of certain British comedy. Moreover, the association between cultural capital and highbrow taste also indicates that certain highbrow items are becoming imbued with a

powerful sense of rarity – an 'objectified cultural capital'. For the culturally privileged, then, liking and disliking the 'right' comedy *does* appear to act as a status marker.

However, although such findings are significant – particularly considering comedy's historically discredited position – it is important not to overemphasize the activation of objectified cultural capital through comedy. As Bennett et al. (2009: 34) note there are serious limitations of thinking of social space in purely geometrical terms, as MCA implies. There is a danger, for instance, that separating comedy tastes geometrically can artificially polarize oppositions between different respondents. In examining Table II, for example, it is important to note that while there are some comedy items associated with certain cultural capital groups, there are also many who are not. For example, preferences for comedians such as Michael McIntyre and comedy shows such as *Monty Python* appear to be relatively evenly distributed among those with high and low cultural capital resources. These 'crossover' items appear to be free from what Bennett et al. (2009: 51) call 'symbolic baggage'.

Comedy Item	Low Cultural Capital	Mixed Cultural Capital	High Cultural Capital
Like Stewart Lee	15%	45%	77%
Like Bernard Manning	31%	5%	2%
Like Eddie Izzard	58%	72%	77%
Like Russell Brand	44%	46%	41%

Like Monty Python	*75%*	*83%*	*85%*
Like Mr Bean	*52%*	*35%*	*44%*
Like Frank Skinner	*56%*	*48%*	*43%*
Like Michael McIntyre	*64%*	*59%*	*58%*

Table II: *Selected comedy preferences by cultural capital resources*

However, while many British comedians do not hold intrinsic rarity, this does not necessarily mean that they are not being used in the activation of cultural capital resources. As Bourdieu (1984: 503-19) notes, most cultural capital is not activated in the act of consumption, but through the multiple interactions people engage in concerning taste. In these interactions it is not the objects of consumption that are important, but arguably the manner in which consumption is expressed – 'the modality of practice'.

In order to tap this notion of consumption *practice*, I attempted to deepen my survey data by conducting in-depth interviews. Data describing preferences for Eddie Izzard illustrated the utility of this methodological eclecticism. In the survey, Izzard was shown to be not only the most popular comedian, but he was also liked by the majority of respondents from across the cultural capital spectrum. However in interviews, when respondents were asked to explain why they liked Izzard, their reasons were often very different. His comedy was a polysemic resource, open to multiple readings. For instance, among LCC respondents the main appeal of Izzard was his 'energy' or his 'silliness'. Fraser, a tree surgeon, recalled:

I remember when I went to see him and he was talking about (imitates Izzard's voice) 'What do spiders actually do?'. And then he starts talking about chutney and chutney manufacturers. Absolutely mental! It's not all about real life. It's more silliness.

In contrast, HCC respondents tended to emphasise the more 'surreal', 'whimsical' or 'challenging' elements of Izzard's comedy:

He`s something pretty much unique in comedy. I mean he does a lot of cuddlier stuff, but it's still clever. When you talk about cats and dogs, it's a bit of hackneyed comedy thing, but he talks about a cat drilling for food behind the couch, that's brilliant, it's a beautiful flight of fancy. (Tom, TV writer)

I like the way he can make links with things that other people miss. And I do think he tries to make you think, although he covers it all up with a lot of stuff about fruit and that. (George, photographer)

These HCC descriptions of Izzard offer completely different readings to those posited by LCC respondents. Although Tom and George seemed to be aware that Izzard's comedy was open to other readings, phrases such as 'cuddlier stuff' and 'covering it up' demonstrated their belief that such decodings were less sophisticated and missed out on Izzard's full comic potential. Instead, they saw what Tom described as a 'whole other level' in Izzard's comedy that

was not only higher in the hierarchy of possible readings but closer to the authentic intentionality of Izzard himself.

The case of Eddie Izzard therefore underlines an important distinction in the relationship between cultural capital resources and comedy. Although in some cases a taste for certain 'objects' of comedy was sufficient to communicate distinction, this was not always the case. In the case of Izzard and other comedians such as Simon Amstell and Jimmy Carr, the object itself did not hold any rarity and therefore distinction had to come from an embodied style of appreciation (Holt 1997). Consumers with high cultural capital thus preserved their rarity by employing a more rarefied reading that drew upon their superior embodied resources. The remainder of this article examines whether this embodied capital was detected further in broader *styles* of comic appreciation. In particular, it examines whether those with different cultural capital resources resemble 'interpretative communities' which share a common aesthetic style in their reading of comedy (Fish 1980).

HCC styles of appreciation

Clever, ambiguous, experimental: the shadow of 'disinterestedness'

Above all, HCC respondents characterized the comedy they liked in terms of sophistication. Favourite comedians were 'intelligent', 'complex', 'intellectual' and most of all 'clever'. In particular, 'clever comedy' was defined in terms of resonance. HCC respondents wanted comedy to be memorable, something 'you can remember months on, that you can keep drawing from in the future'

(Katherine, environmental consultant). Fred, a senior arts professional, elucidated this notion of resonance:

> One idea is sustainability. That you haven't just had a moment of cheap pleasure. But that in hundred years, or even in your tenth viewing, you will still be finding it funny or good.

What appeared to unite accounts concerning 'clever' comedy, however, was the notion of 'difficulty'. As Fred illustrated, HCC respondents were looking for more than 'cheap pleasure', comedy that was not *just* funny. Indeed, the desire for comic 'difficulty' often seemed to be bound up with the knowledge that this style of appreciation set HCC respondents apart from other comedy consumers. David, a journalist, explained why he liked Stewart Lee:

> To be perfectly honest he makes me feel like I'm in an in-crowd of comedy nerds. It is almost like sitting an exam. You go in and you know you're going to be challenged, you know a few people in the audience won't get him. Overall it makes you feel a bit smug, and it's an awful thing to say, but you look down on the people who don't get him.

HCC respondents also sought to distinguish their comic style by separating their appreciation from the common sense notion that comedy must be pleasurable. Instead, most saw the function of humour as much more ambiguous. 'Good' comedy provoked a wide range of emotions, and many respondents expressed preferences for 'dark' or 'black' comedy where

disturbing subjects are probed for humorous effect. These respondents argued that by invoking negative as well as positive emotions, the comedian was better placed 'to challenge' them intellectually. Alex, an IT Consultant, recollected an uncomfortable experience at the 2008 Edinburgh Fringe, where he saw controversial Australian stand-up Brendon Burns:

> He [Burns] plants some lady in the audience and gets into an argument with her, but in the audience you don't know what's going on. You just think, this is going completely off the rails, this is really uncomfortable. But afterwards, when it's over, you think holy shit that was so well crafted, really brilliantly done.

Significantly, HCC respondents also differentiated their comic style by what they disliked. For example, many implied that an inability to appreciate 'darker' humour usually indicated a less critical and nuanced comic appreciation. One example of this which was mentioned repeatedly was the 'paedophilia' episode of *Brass Eye*, which large amounts of the population 'simply couldn't handle' (Scott, postgraduate student). Fred noted:

> If you sat a *Daily Mail* reader or a *Sun* reader in front of Brass Eye…well certainly I think there's something in people that is so scared of the badness that they can't come on the journey of, ok, there is a terrible, hideous thing called paedophilia but the way we're treating it, the way we're defining it, it's a complex thing.

In these passages concerning clever, dark and resonant comedy, it is possible to detect a strong echo of Bourdieu's (1984: 32-48) 'disinterested aesthetic'. Fred and David, for example, are careful to distance themselves from the 'cheap pleasures' or fear that resonates from 'first-degree' comic perception and instead assert the superiority of a disposition that 'can come on the journey' to *Brass Eye*'s 'complexity' or really 'get' Stewart Lee's 'challenging' material. In other words, these respondents affirm that by denying initial emotional or moral reactions to comedy, they are reaching a higher, purer, more disinterested plain of aesthetic perception.

It's also important to note that alongside, and perhaps stemming from this disinterested appreciation, was also a deeply embodied sense of assurance in HCC judgments on comedy. Their bodily *hexis* exuded a 'natural' cultural confidence and compared to those with LCC, they tended to speak louder, for longer, need less prompts and make more eye contact. For example, the interview with David lasted for 1hour 48 minutes and yielded 6,442 words of data, whereas the interview with LCC DJ, which asked the same set of questions, lasted for just 47 minutes and yielded only 1,684 words.

Also central to HCC comedy dislikes was a rejection of what Tom called 'the prosaic things in life'. This encapsulated a lot of 'popular' comedy dealing in everyday observations, such as Michael McIntyre, *Last of The Summer Wine* and *2.4 Children*. Generally, this comedy was problematic because it was too clearly signposted as 'funny'. As already noted, HCC respondents preferred comedy that was more ambiguous, where they didn't know when and when

not to laugh. They desired an element of surprise or shock, where 'you can't see a punchline coming a mile away' (Stephanie, student).

Connected to this theme was also a strong dislike of the TV 'laughter track'. In most accounts, this objection was connected to the notion of aesthetic autonomy. A laughter track was considered fundamentally coercive and respondents resented the implication that 'you're being told when to laugh' (Tom). Indeed, laughter emerged as one of the key battlegrounds in different styles of comedy appreciation. Although most HCC respondents admitted that some laughter was needed to enjoy comedy, it was not seen as a legitimate basis for the judgment of quality. As Alex declared: 'something can be funny without you needing to laugh'. For some HCC respondents, laughter was even seen as contaminating the true experience of comedy:

> I don't think laughter is integral. It's really irrelevant for me personally. I suppose you're taking in the artistic value rather than just purely making you laugh. (Scott)

It is arguably through these sentiments that we see the strongest shadow of Kantian disinterestedness in HCC comic styles. In an attempt to distinguish aesthetic appreciation from 'barbarous sensate pleasures', many HCC respondents travelled as far as to reject what is considered the natural physiological reflex mechanism of comedy; laughter (Dunbar 2005). For Scott it was only through this ultimate act of embodied detachment that he and his friends could genuinely appreciate 'artistic value'.

Beyond disinterestedness: political and moral boundaries

Although elements of aesthetic 'disinterestedness' appeared to shape the HCC orientation to comedy, this was often mixed with different and sometimes conflicting taste criteria. For example, HCC respondents often distinguished their comic appreciation on political and moral grounds. This echoes the findings of Lamont (1992), who in her study of middle class lifestyles in the USA and France, found that respondents drew cultural boundaries not just aesthetically, as Bourdieu argued, but also for political and moral reasons.

However, significantly, among my respondents these kind of distinctions were often hidden behind what they presented as purely aesthetic preferences. For example, most HCC respondents expressed a preference for 'alternative comedy', which was usually defined as a particular 'style' or 'form' of critical comedy. However, although this satirical persuasion was presented as politically neutral, it was often bound up with a distinctly liberal and secular worldview. Certain topics were thus ripe for being 'brilliantly deconstructed', as Alex noted, whereas other topics of satire were 'bullying' and 'offensive'. For example, comedians who subvert areas of social life dominated by traditionally conservative values, such as religion and drugs, were applauded because they 'aren't afraid to deal with topics that might offend people' (Scott). However, when 'trad' comedians who satirize from a more conservative and reactionary position were discussed, such as Roy 'Chubby' Brown, HCC respondents were quick to distance themselves. These

comedians might challenge dominant norms, but their subversion conflicted with norms supported by HCC respondents such as anti-racism and feminism. HCC appreciation was therefore rarely 'morally agnostic', as Bourdieu would presume, but instead performed a distinct ethical function.

LCC styles of comic appreciation

Laughter, pleasure and the everyday

For LCC respondents comedy was fundamentally and inextricably linked to laughter. Amusement was the currency of comedy. In fact, a number of respondents expressed disbelief that anyone would not judge comedy on laughs. As Helene, a retired primary school teacher, stated, *'You've got to laugh'.*

The importance of laughter was also closely linked to the main function of comedy – 'to make you feel good' (Sally, office manager). For LCC respondents, the importance of pleasure and enjoyment was paramount. If you see a good comedian 'you should be buzzing when you come out' (Fraser). This was often expressed in terms of an 'escape', where the pleasurable expectation of comedy was used as a way of 'relaxing after a stressful day at work' (Lynne, secretary), or as a device to aid 'vegging out in front of the TV' (Sally)

For LCC respondents, then, comedy was a distinct 'technology of the self' (De Nora 2000). Good comedy was 'like a drug' (Fraser), it guaranteed a

pleasurable response and respondents were calculated consumers. They used comedy as a tool, helping to change or enhance their mood.

There was also a sense that good comedy should not invoke negative emotions. This humour was judged to be defying the pleasurable spirit of comedy. Instead, there was a sense that comedy exists to be a counterbalance or diversion from the negative aspects of life:

> To be honest with you I see enough shit in the newspapers and the news every day, I'd rather see things that make me laugh, that I get enjoyment out of. I don't want to see anything too highbrow or too morose. I just want to be entertained in a light-hearted way. (David, electrician)

Like HCC respondents, those with LCC also repeatedly expressed their preference for 'clever' comedy. However, whereas HCC respondents attributed 'clever' comedy to complexity, LCC criteria hinged on the comedian's ability to construct humour from everyday life. Comedians like Michael McIntyre and Peter Kay were thus revered for their skill in 'pointing out the obvious' (DJ, retail assistant) or 'showing us things we know are there but don't necessarily see' (Sally). For other LCC respondents, the enjoyment of observational comedy stemmed from the fact that it related directly to their lives. Helene, who was retired and had four grown up kids, noted a particular preference for *2.4 Children* and Jack Dee 'because they make comedy out of family life, and I relate to that'.

There are obvious parallels between these various accounts of LCC appreciation and Bourdieu's (1984) notion of the 'taste for necessity' or 'popular aesthetic'. The strong emphasis on laughter and pleasure, for example, demonstrated that LCC respondents were content to 'subordinate form to function' in their consumption of comedy. Similarly, preferences for observational comedy that 'relates' to everyday life reflects an appreciation where there is a clear 'continuity between art and life' (Bourdieu, 1984: 32).

Defiance vs. deference

Like HCC respondents, the comic style of those with LCC was also underlined by their attitude to comedy they didn't like. Indeed, in some cases LCC respondents questioned the inflated cultural position of highbrow comedy and argued instead that the working classes were the 'best' producers and consumers of comedy. Fraser, for example, argued that the working classes are best suited to making people laugh because their lives are more 'extreme', they've got more experiences to call upon:

> Working-class people are definitely livelier. They're not afraid to express themselves. Let's just say they've hung out their dirty washing in public (laughs). So, so there's nothing to hide…middle-class people, I just think the defences are up.

What's significant about this and other similar passages is that they illustrated that popular forms of humour were not always considered 'lower' in the cultural hierarchy. Although admittedly limited to only 3 interviewees, this

none the less demonstrated that some LCC respondents refused to concede the legitimacy of HCC comic styles and instead held standards of comic value relatively autonomous from those considered 'dominant'. Comedy consumption for these respondents was therefore not a Bourdieusian zero-sum hierarchical field, but more accurately characterized as contested terrain with two comic styles competing to define 'legitimate' British comedy.

However, despite these notable instances of defiance, it must be noted that the majority of LCC respondents also registered feelings of deference and failure in the face of 'higher' comedy. Whereas all HCC respondents vociferously rejected LCC comedy, most LCC respondents were more uncertain about 'highbrow' comedy. For many this ambivalence seemed to stem from a feeling of insecurity or intellectual inadequacy. DJ noted that 'some people just get things quicker than others' and most of this style of comedy 'just goes over my head'. In the case of Ian, a hairdresser, this seemed to stem from a feeling of not having adequate knowledge, of being uneducated:

> I was once in a show called *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. And I learnt the lines and delivered them just like the director told me. And it was only until the show night when people were laughing that I knew which bits were funny because unfortunately it was beyond me. I didn't have that education.

These accounts demonstrate what Bourdieu terms the fundamental 'misrecognition' of cultural value among some LCC respondents. Although there is arguably nothing intrinsically superior about political or intellectual comedy, phrases like 'going over my head' and 'beyond me' imply that LCC respondents have conceded its legitimacy. Furthermore, by doing so, they are simultaneously recognising the superior embodied capital of HCC respondents, who have the resources to decode this comedy.

MCC styles of appreciation

One foot in two different taste cultures

Although the social game of distinction may be detectable when contrasting the appreciation styles of those with high and low cultural capital resources, what about those who didn`t fit easily into these two groups? In the survey, for example, 30 per cent of respondents reported 'mixed' cultural capital resources (MCC). Typically, these MCC respondents had upwardly mobile social trajectories. The majority had been brought up by parents with little cultural capital but had gone on to accumulate resources by attending university and gaining professional employment.

At first glance the comedy tastes and appreciation styles of these respondents seemed to challenge a hierarchical conception of comedy consumption. Indeed, most appeared to resemble the 'cultural omnivore' so popular in current sociological literature. These respondents generally combined

preferences for both 'high' and 'low' comedians and integrated both the HCC and LCC style of comic appreciation.

Helen, a primary school teacher, displayed a typically omnivoric taste profile. She reported liking some lowbrow comedians such as Roy Chubby Brown and noted 'I'm not bothered about comedy making me think or anything'. Yet despite this, later in the interview she seemed to employ elements of the HCC comedy style, explaining that she admired the 'dryness' and 'subtlety' of *The Thick Of It* and the way *Brass Eye* 'sends up people with stupid views'

However, although most MCC respondents were accurately defined as comedy omnivores, this diverse consumption did not seem to accord with Featherstone's (2007: 44-5) notion of omnivorousness as a reflexively organized lifestyle choice. Instead, a more diachronic examination of respondent's biographies revealed that the taste diversity of most MCC interviewees seemed to largely reflect their life trajectories, and in particular their evolving resources of cultural capital.

For example Philip, a physics teacher, was brought up in a working-class neighbourhood near Manchester. He recalled little art and culture in his background, but noted that his dad introduced him to what he called the 'usual suspects' of the then northern comedy circuit such as Bernard Manning and Frank Carson. However, Philip recalls that when he moved away from home to go to university his style of comic appreciation changed dramatically. In particular, he responded favourably to what he called 'intelligent satire' such

as *Brass Eye*, *The Day Today* and Eddie Izzard that was emerging at the time:

> I was exposed to that by friends that were living down in London so I suppose things started opening up for me during University, undergraduate days, in the early 1990s.

This process of aesthetic 'opening up' during university and early professional life was also echoed by a number of other MCC interviewees. Paul, a theatre administrator, described being brought up in 'a very uncultured' working-class family where, like Philip, he was brought up with comedians like Roy Chubby Brown and Les Dawson. However, Paul moved to London when he was 18 to complete a drama degree. It was during this period, when he 'came across more highbrow stuff', that he notes a significant shift in his aesthetic style:

> I sort of changed my whole outlook on things. Sounds a bit profound, doesn't it (laughs), what a load of wank! But I did. I suddenly found myself in literally different surroundings but also culturally, as well, and I lapped it up really. I actively went out and looked for things, theatre and cinema, as well as comedy.

What these passages illustrate is that rather than making a conscious decision to become all-embracing comedy omnivores, Paul and Philip`s shifting taste had more to do with the trajectory of their lives. Undermining Bourdieu's (1984: 56) assumptions about the 'practical unity' of the habitus,

education did not *reproduce* their low cultural capital resources, but instead *created* new resources. Thus the intellectual demands of a degree combined with the inter-subjective influence of friends in this new social milieu, orientated Paul and Philip towards a more highbrow appreciation of comedy. However, notably, in both cases there was also an unshakeable retention of the comedy style and taste developed during socialisation. For example, Philip maintained a preference for more 'in-your-face comedians' such as Bernard Manning and Paul a fondness for 'honest observational comedy'.

On the surface, then, Philip and Paul both represented the textbook definition of a cultural omnivore. They had diverse taste spanning both high and low comedy, and argued they were open to any type of new comedy. However, what became clear during the course of these and other MCC interviews was that holding omnivoric taste often put these respondents in socially uncomfortable positions. For example, Paul described how 'awkward' it is in his current social milieu when he discusses his preferences for 'un-PC' comedians with friends, or even his partner, who he described as 'much more middle class':

Paul: I wouldn't go and see one of his [Chubby Brown] shows anymore but that comedy was very popular at the time and I mean, it's just jokes…

Friedman: Do you still find the un-PC jokes funny?

Paul: Some I do, some I don't. But I wouldn't find it not funny because it was a racist joke. I'm not easily offended. I mean even if (feigns a more middle class accent) "one should be seen to be offended by something in polite company" then I will deliberately not be.

What Paul's comments illustrated was that although his comic style defiantly traversed the cultural hierarchy, he still felt the pressure it exerted, and the institutional power it wielded. Like most MCC respondents, the styles of high and low comedy do not seem happily united within him and far from proudly parading his omnivoric openness, Paul`s mixture of tastes placed him in an uneasy social position. Far from enhancing his ability to communicate with diverse groups, as Erickson (1996) has suggested, or acting as a marker of distinction or 'cool', as Warde et al. (1999) have argued, Paul was acutely aware of the negative cultural capital his new HCC friends associated with his lowbrow comedy tastes and was thus forced to defend (rather than celebrate) this comic style.

Similarly, Philip described another problematic consequence of his comic omnivorism. Despite developing a taste for much highbrow satirical comedy, Philip often seemed insecure about his understanding of this 'intellectual' type of comedy:

It often makes me feel like I've missed the point with something, and this is where it comes to intellect or whatever. I might have a PhD but it doesn't mean I'm getting it at the level they're wanting me to get it at. I

often read reviews and think 'oh that's interesting. I never got that side of things, I didn't realize that was going on'.

What this illustrated is that although Philip`s upward social trajectory has ensured the cultivation of certain legitimate comedy tastes, he had only limited opportunities to activate these tastes as cultural capital. Arguably, because his highbrow taste had been 'learned' rather than 'naturally' embodied, he lacked the confidence to express this taste in the legitimate aesthetic manner exemplified by the culturally privileged. Instead, Philip is left with a lingering but persistent sense of self-doubt that he is unable to 'correctly' employ the HCC style of comic appreciation.

Rather than proud omnivores, then, most MCC interviewees could more accurately be characterised as *culturally homeless* – caught with one foot in two different taste cultures. While they certainly held an affinity with both LCC and HCC comedy styles, most reported a sense of ontological insecurity in both taste cultures – a *habitus clivé* – 'torn by contradiction and internal division' (Bourdieu 2000: 161). While their life trajectory had allowed them to bridge artistic boundaries, they none the less seemed acutely aware of the cultural hierarchy and their slightly precarious position within it.

Conclusion

Despite its traditionally discredited cultural position, this article has demonstrated that British comedy is, to some extent, now being mobilized by the culturally privileged as an instrument of distinction. Those who have

assembled high cultural capital resources via socialization, education and occupation, are activating these reserves through distinct modes of comic consumption. However, unlike previous studies on cultural capital and taste, this research finds that field-specific 'comic cultural capital' is mobilized less through taste for certain legitimate 'objects' and more through the expression of rarefied but diffuse *styles* of comic appreciation. In short, it is embodied rather than objectified forms of cultural capital that largely distinguishes the privileged in the field of comedy.

Indeed, in terms of statistically measured 'objectified' comedy taste, many HCC respondents appear to resemble open and versatile cultural omnivores. However, closer qualitative analysis reveals a much more nuanced picture. Rather than 'rejecting snobbery' as a 'badge of honour' in the manner reported by Bennett et al. (2009: 186), HCC respondents draw strong symbolic boundaries between their darker, more disinterested style of comic appreciation and what they perceive to be the more simplistic or learned readings of those from MCC and LCC interpretative communities.

However, it is important to acknowledge that the drawing of symbolic boundaries through comic style does not always map smoothly onto a Bourdieusian conception of cultural consumption. First, echoing the findings of Lamont (1992), this research finds that HCC interpretative communities also draw moral and political boundaries via comic style, each of which are harder to explain in terms of cultural capital resources. Furthermore, the appreciation style of some LCC respondents indicates an autonomous conception of comic

value that undermines a straightforwardly relational view of embodied cultural capital.

Despite these qualifications, there is still strong evidence that embodied resources are being successfully activated in the field of comedy. Significantly, this may have implications that reach far beyond the boundaries of comedy. In particular, it may be indicative of new strategies being utilised by the culturally privileged to reassert their dominance in the contemporary era. Instead of relying on the consumption of traditionally legitimate objects, the culturally advantaged are diversifying into new fields of popular cultural consumption such as comedy. While most large-scale surveys of taste interpret these shifts as evidence of a newly omnivoric elite embracing diversity, such a picture may be misleading. In particular, if future researchers measure this popular consumption with a specificity that allows for inferences regarding embodied *styles of taste*, profound differences may be uncovered, as has been shown here. In these popular environments, cultural objects are rarely stable status markers, and therefore the privileged must call upon what does remain stable – their embodied aesthetic advantage. This embodied capital is particularly powerful because it returns the power of distinction back to the consumer. By activating a general predilection for 'enlightened eclecticism', then, the culturally privileged may be potentially cultivating new forms of distinction in myriad other fields of popular culture.

Notes

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[1] In order to avoid bias towards particular taste communities, the items were selected on the advice of a panel of professionals working in the comedy industry. It must be noted, however, that such a process was still subjective and many other comedy items could have been chosen.

[2] The calculation of the Cultural Capital 'Score' was made as follows: 'Education' was calculated on a scale of seven of 'highest completed' and 'Occupation' on a scale of nine corresponding to which jobs most emphasize 'cultural skills' (Peterson and Simkus 1992). Finally, 'Family Socialization' was calculated by recording both parents' education and both parents' occupation when the respondent was 14. The figure for each of these three measures was then collapsed into a score out of 5 to make a total score out of 15. This is an updated version of the scale used by Holt (1997). Although Bourdieu (1984) measured cultural capital only by looking at a respondent's social origin and education, I see cultural capital as a resource that can continue to evolve through the life course, particularly as a result of contact with certain occupational cultures.

[3] Respondents with cultural capital scores over 10 were considered 'high', between 8-10 'mixed' and below 8 'low'. I do not claim these three groups contain any special explanatory power, rather that they identify the most

salient divisions in capital resources. Typically, those with high resources were university graduates employed in professional occupations. They also tended to have at least one parent with a similar profile. In contrast, those with low resources tended to have GCSE or A-level equivalent qualifications and were employed in more manual or skilled jobs. Again, their parents typically had similar profiles. Finally, those with mixed resources tended to have a distinctly upwardly mobile trajectory.

[4] From axis 4 onwards little additional variance was explained, implying that 3 axes provide an adequate summary of comedy taste.

[5] When visually interpreting the axes, the general rule is that active modalities are retained when their contribution to the axis is greater than the mean contribution – here 100/72 = 1.4%

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