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The Divisive Power of Humour:

Comedy Taste and Symbolic Boundaries

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Abstract

Using British and Dutch interview data, this article demonstrates how people from different social classes draw strong symbolic boundaries on the basis of comedy taste. Eschewing the omnivorousness described in recent studies of cultural consumption, comedy audiences make negative aesthetic and moral judgements on the basis of comedy taste, and often make harsh judgements without the disclaimers, apologies and ambivalence so typical of 'taste talk' in contemporary culture. The article demonstrates how, in particular, Dutch and British middle class audiences use their comedy taste to communicate distinction and cultural superiority. We discuss several reasons why such processes of social distancing exist in comedy taste and not other cultural areas: the traditionally low status of comedy; the strong relation between humour and personhood; the continuity between comedy tastes and humour styles in everyday life; as well as the specific position of comedy in the British and Dutch cultural fields.

Introduction

Distinction is passé. Thus argue many sociological studies since Peterson and Simkus (1992) first proclaimed the emergence of the 'cultural omnivore' (Van Eijck & Knulst 2005). Instead, it has now become a badge of honour to be eclectic in one's cultural

preferences and explicitly *not* be seen as a cultural 'snob' (Bennett et al, 2009). Rather than withdrawing into rarefied cultural domains, contemporary elites now apparently enjoy both consecrated tastes *and* culture traditionally regarded as popular and lowbrow.

However, one cultural form consistently overlooked in such studies is comedy. Traditionally considered déclassé in many Western countries, comedy is now arguably an upwardly mobile art, boasting considerable cultural prestige and attracting diverse audiences. Moreover, our studies in Britain and the Netherlands have revealed that comedy taste is strongly class-specific (Friedman 2011; Kuipers 2006a). We found that comedy consumers are nothing like the eclectic, non-judgmental consumers described in other studies. Comedy lovers with high cultural capital may be omnivorous in their general taste for pop-culture, but their specific comic preferences reveal they are often strongly dismissive of lowbrow comedy. In other words, these omnivores are also snobs.

This paper further explores this intriguing finding by focusing on the relation between comedy tastes and symbolic boundaries, drawing on a field analytical perspective. Following Lamont's (1992) critique of Bourdieu's distinction theory, however, we do not assume that taste differences automatically translate into hierarchical boundaries. Whether this happens depends, first, on whether taste differences are constructed as symbolically meaningful and, second, whether there is societal agreement over cultural legitimacy. In other words: it requires the public to accept the value of certain people's cultural judgements.

This article, therefore, has a dual aim. First, it aims to unravel the relation between taste differences and symbolic boundaries - namely how do differences in comedy taste 'translate' into markers of one's cultural capital? And then, comparing

interviews in Britain and the Netherlands, how does this differ cross-nationally? Although many studies suggest that processes of class distinction and field dynamics are nationally specific (cf. Janssen et al., 2011), qualitative sociological studies of taste, class and cultural hierarchy are usually single-country studies.

Secondly, we aim to show how processes of boundary-drawing may be specific to particular cultural fields. Both Bourdieusian studies of distinction and the competing paradigm of omnivore studies assume that cultural consumers approach all culture with the same dispositions. However, our analysis suggests that the comedy field has its own particular logic and may be a more potent marker of boundaries than other cultural forms. As one informant noted, 'there's something fundamental about what makes you laugh'.

Symbolic Boundaries and Comedy

Central to understandings of how symbolic boundaries intersect with inequality has been the work of Bourdieu (1984). Bourdieu argued that children from the dominant middle and upper-middle classes are inculcated with dispositions that orientate them towards 'legitimate' cultural tastes and a cultivated way of seeing art – described as the 'disinterested aesthetic disposition' (Bourdieu, 1984: 28-42). When these highbrow tastes are activated in social life they become a form of 'cultural capital', acting as potent signals of membership in a high status group and symbolic distance from those outside. Each application of highbrow taste thus becomes an act of symbolic violence against dominated groups, who accept the authority of a cultural hierarchy defined and imposed by the dominant.

 Yet Bourdieu argued that the drawing of symbolic boundaries is rarely explicit or intentional. Instead, within the cultural field, hierarchy acts as an automatic sorting

mechanism, 'automatically classified and classifying, rank ordered and rank ordering' (Bourdieu, 1984: 223). Thus simply to express 'the certainty of one's own value…implies condemnation of all other ways of being and doing' (Bourdieu, 1984: 223).

However, since the publication of *Distinction* many have questioned whether the cultural field resembles a zero-sum Bourdieusian hierarchy. Lamont (1992) argued that the process by which taste differences produce inequality is more complex than Bourdieu implied. She noted that boundaries can only be said to generate inequality and exclusion when cultural legitimacy is 'widely agreed upon' (Lamont & Lareau, 1988: 152). Although her own research echoed Bourdieu in reporting strong aesthetic boundaries in France, Lamont found much weaker cultural divisions in the US. This was because, she argued (1992: 174-178), Americans were largely tolerant of cultural difference and notions of cultural value were contested.

Many sociologists have supported Lamont's critique, arguing that contemporary cultural boundaries have weakened. Most posit that symbolic hierarchies are now being replaced by open, *omnivorous* cultural orientations (Peterson & Kern, 1996; Featherstone, 1996). Some even argue that contemporary markers of distinction actually involve *refraining* from drawing boundaries (Warde et al., 1999; Bellevance, 2008). Indeed, such eclecticism has been connected to various social benefits, like enhanced communication with diverse groups (Erickson, 1996) or greater political tolerance (Bryson, 1996).

In Britain and the Netherlands, this shift has been bolstered by the influential work of Bennett et al. (2009) and Van Eijck (Van Eijck & Knulst, 2005). These authors argue that snobbery and boundary-claiming among the British and Dutch middle classes has all but disappeared. Van Eijck and Knulst (2005: 527) note that younger generations of

the Dutch middle class are no longer socialised with a 'firm belief in the supremacy of highbrow culture' and therefore the profits to be gleaned from snobbery are negligible. In a British context Bennett et al. (2009: 194) go further, observing a 'more or less total elimination of hints of snobbishness towards other social classes'. Moreover, they posit that it has now become a 'badge of honour' to embrace a 'spirit of openness' in one's cultural preferences (189).

Despite the empirical weight of such large-scale studies, there is not complete sociological consensus. For example, more focused British studies have uncovered that class-inflected taste boundaries persist (Lawler, 2005; Harwood & Yar, 2006). Looking at discussions of the working-class in British media, Lawler (2005) argues that many such narratives are characterised by a distinct middle-class 'disgust' at working-class existence. However, 'objective' economic or occupational class markers are rarely invoked in expressions of disapproval. Instead, disdainful traits are presented as the outcome of pathological cultural tastes and lifestyles.

Other authors have pointed out that the literature on omnivorousness and the erosion of cultural boundaries wrongly assumes that this is occurring in all cultural fields. While the traditional highbrow-lowbrow divide may be eroding, these authors counter that this has not led to the disappearance of stratified tastes (Janssen et al. 2011). On the contrary, there is strong evidence that high-low taste distinctions are now being detected *within* the popular arts. In particular, some subgenres of popular arts, like alternative rock music (Regev, 1994) or arthouse films (Bauman, 2001) are described as 'upwardly mobile', having acquired higher status and elite audiences.

We argue here that comedy should be added to this list of upwardly mobile art. Our own studies in Britain (Friedman, 2011) and the Netherlands (Kuipers, 2006a, 2006b) have both demonstrated strong cleavages in comedy taste. More specifically,

they found that the higher middle classes, possessing higher education and more cultural capital, generally exhibited tastes for highbrow comedy and rejected anything lowbrow, whereas the working and lower middle classes preferred more lowbrow comedy and were ambivalent about highbrow comedy.

Furthermore, we uncovered similar class differences in *styles of comic appreciation*. While the styles of the Dutch and British working (and lower middle) class revolved around notions of comedy as funny, pleasurable and sociable, middle class respondents distanced themselves from this by emphasising that comedy should never *just be funny*. These respondents stressed the value of complex and original comedy, suggesting that to 'work' for one's laughter leads to higher levels of comic appreciation.

Yet, while both studies uncovered salient divisions in comic appreciation, these distinctions do not necessarily constitute symbolic boundaries. To reiterate Lamont's (1992) point, the significance of taste differences must be explicitly interrogated rather than implicitly assumed, particularly if one wants to understand the potential link between taste and symbolic violence. This, then, neatly captures what we aim to investigate: how taste differences relate to symbolic boundaries; and how symbolic boundaries relate specifically to comedy and humour.

Outline of the Research

We draw upon data from two mixed-methods studies of comedy taste, one conducted in the Netherlands in 1997-9 and one in Britain in 2009. The British study consisted of a survey (n = 901) and 24 follow-up interviews, the Dutch study a survey (n = 340) and 66 interviews. Here we concentrate on interview data from both studies.

The Dutch research focused on comedy and humour in everyday life, and used two interview samples. 34 interviews were conducted with people who liked jokes

and joke-telling, leading to an unusual interview pool consisting mainly of working and lower middle class men. The British sample, and the second Dutch sample of 32 respondents, was based on a theoretically defined subsample of original survey respondents. Respondents were chosen primarily to reflect the demographic composition of the population. For more detail on methodologies see Friedman (2011) and Kuipers (2006a).

Comparing Dutch and British comedy audiences is useful, first, because sociological debates on taste and stratification are similar in both countries. Moreover, comedy is an important cultural field in both, with comedians achieving high public visibility and often becoming important public figures. Both nations also *share* certain comedy tastes, with several Dutch and British comedians enjoying crossover success (Logan, 2010)[1]. Finally, there are interesting historical similarities. During the 1970s and 1980s both countries witnessed the emergence of alternative comedy, which combined transgressive humour with left-wing social critique, and catered mainly to educated younger audiences (Wilmut, 1989; Hanenberg & Verhallen 2006). Beside this 'intellectual' alternative, both countries also have a longstanding tradition of more popular performance comedy.

The main objective of the interviews was to understand respondents' aesthetic orientation to comedy and humour, including their comedy dislikes. To ensure systematic interview analysis we looked for three types of utterances typical of boundary drawing: First, we searched for explicit delineations of highbrow and lowbrow humour. Second, we marked instances where people rejected specific types of comedy, and looked at the reasons for rejection: aesthetic, moral, social, or other. Third, we marked judgments of other people on the basis of their comedy taste.

These elements were analyzed separately for respondents with high (HCC) and low (LCC) cultural capital. We focused on levels of cultural capital since this was the main determinant of comedy taste. In the Dutch study, cultural capital was operationalized rather straightforwardly: all people with finished tertiary education were considered HCC. In the British study cultural capital 'resources' were calculated using equally weighted measures for social origin (parental occupation and education), education and occupation.[2]

High Cultural Capital Boundary Construction

Aesthetic Boundaries

Considering the literature on eroding symbolic boundaries, HCC boundary-marking on the basis of comedy taste is surprisingly strong in Britain and the Netherlands. Indeed, for many HCC respondents, the drawing of aesthetic boundaries is inextricably linked to their comic taste. For example, one of the most prominent themes of HCC appreciation – the desire for comic 'difficulty' – is bound up with the knowledge that this aesthetic approach sets one apart from other comedy consumers. David, for example, explains the appeal of one of Britain's most critically-acclaimed stand-ups, Stewart Lee[3]:

> To be perfectly honest he makes me feel like I'm in an in-crowd of comedy nerds. You've got to see him delay the punchline. You have to see him bring about comedy through repetition. He's got all the tricks. 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 that's an awful thing to say, but it makes you look down on the people who don't get him. (UK: David)

Similarly, Louis discusses the difference between people who like satirical Dutch comedian Freek de Jonge[4], and those who like popular performer André van Duin[5]:

Well I tend to think that it's usually reasonably well educated people who like him. With van Duin, I guess the people who like him are sort of not educated or only a little.

But do you also tend to make a high-low distinction in the humour?

[snickers]

Sounds a bit like it...

Yes, yes, naturally. Yes. One humour for the happy few and one, er, sort of humour for... Let me say it like this: it is naturally awfully difficult to tell someone who's completely crazy about André van Duin why you don't like him… Can you really go so far as to say: "Well, you're too stupid to understand this?" Yes, sometimes I do think that, of course, but it's not something you come right out and say to people very often, is it? But okay, it's just a fact of life that some expressions of humour require a fair amount of mental elasticity on the part of the receiver while other forms of humour can be consumed if people are sagging dead tired in their chairs on Friday evening (NL: Louis).

For David and Louis, then, there is something knowingly exclusive about their appreciation of consecrated comedians like Lee and de Jonge. David feels he is able

to successfully 'sit' the comedic exam set by Lee, therefore profiting from the 'smugness' of recognising the formal conventions of his comedy. Likewise, Louis describes himself as one of the 'happy few' with the requisite 'mental elasticity' to understand de Jonge.

The ability to understand comedy often relies on 'humour-specific knowledge' (Kuipers 2009). Without this, audiences lack the tools to 'decode' certain comedy and are excluded from appreciation. Sometimes, this exclusion is a side-effect of humour, but in other cases it is purposively sought out. For David and Louis, this sense of exclusivity is central to their enjoyment. Their smugness is heightened precisely by the awareness that their knowledge is not evenly distributed. David knows Lee's comedy has a certain rarity, and he enjoys the fact that 'some people' simply 'won't get him'. The exclusive nature of appreciation creates an almost conspiratorial pleasure between the joker and the informed audience member. Safe in the knowledge that their appreciation contains a certain scarcity, David and Louis are able to look down on those that 'don't get' Lee or who are 'too stupid to understand' de Jonge.

Moreover, HCC respondents also frequently draw aesthetic boundaries on the basis of recognising and appreciating transgression in comedy. Many express preferences for 'black' comedy, where disturbing subjects are probed for humorous effect. By deliberately suppressing initial emotional reactions to black comedy, like disgust and offence, these respondents claim to reach a higher plain of appreciation, beyond the direct visceral pleasure of 'just funny'. Again, this is a boundary predicated on knowledge: specifically the *knowledge to recognise* a particular joke as deliberately transgressive.

Among British HCC respondents, one striking example emerges when discussing the 'paedophilia' episode of *Brass Eye*[6] – a TV series of 'spoof

documentaries' – which many people 'simply couldn't handle', according to Stephanie. A conversation with Fred highlights the pivotal role of this 'black' comedy in delineating aesthetic boundaries:

If you sat a *Daily Mail* reader or a *Sun*[7] 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, it's a complex thing.

Why do you think some people can't 'come on the journey' to Brass Eye?

We have a brittle, animal reaction to stuff and to take us from there to a place where we think in a civilised way about these things is a hard journey. So it's not a simple thing to view a complex and difficult issue with a desire to get on top of all the complexities. It's much fucking easier to say [faux cockney accent] "These paedos, they're getting our children, watch out, name and shame 'em, could be in the park, could be next door." (UK: Fred)

Among Dutch respondents, black comedy denotes similar boundaries. Maria explains the vastly different aesthetic reactions elicited by absurdist and confrontational comedian Hans Teeuwen[8]:

The first time you see his show you are a little shocked. But when you start understanding, then.... He is so sharp, that when people don't understand they just get very angry. [laughs] And that I find that a very strong point. In my group of friends – we all love Teeuwen. (NL: Maria)

HCC respondents like Fred and Maria imply that audiences who do not find 'black' comedy funny are aesthetically deficient. Such a difference is not considered a neutral quirk of perception but instead ordered as inferior. Moreover, HCC respondents explain such reactions not through a lack of knowledge but more presumptuously via an implied lack of intelligence. Such audiences, according to Fred, are confined to first-degree 'animal' reactions to black comedy that 'can't come on the journey' to the 'complexity' of *Brass Eye's* comedy, or as Maria laughingly dismisses Teeuwen's critics, just 'don't understand'. These judgments illustrate the stark and sometimes aggressive aesthetic boundaries drawn by HCC respondents.

However, the quotes also illustrate an important difference in the judgments made by Dutch and British HCC respondents. While Dutch respondents make strong judgments, their wording is less explicit than their British counterparts. Even more significantly, Dutch respondents largely restrict judgments to comedy itself. In contrast, most British HCC respondents extend their judgments beyond the realm of comic objects towards the aesthetic deficiencies of comedy *audiences*. A conversation with Alex concerning the Australian comedian Kevin 'Bloody' Wilson[9] illustrates this:

> I had this old school friend, Colin, and when we were about fourteen me and Colin went to see Kevin 'Bloody' Wilson. It's an embarrassing thing to admit now (laughs), because he's sort of…well he's a kind of an Australian Roy Chubby Brown[10] character. But anyway I met back up with Colin a few months ago, and halfway through our conversation he mentioned he'd just been to see Kevin Wilson again. I mean if you have the same taste now as you do when you were fourteen then something's seriously wrong, you know? That was really the

cherry on the top of knowing we didn't have anything in common. But the interesting thing is that if he'd said he'd seen Kevin Wilson at the beginning of the conversation then nothing else would have been a shock to me, because him liking that one act of cultural awfulness, just made me think I know exactly what you've done with your life…nothing (laughs). (UK: Alex)

What is striking here is the significance that one comedian holds for Alex in his assessment of Colin. Taste for this 'one act of cultural awfulness' acts as a proxy for all the information he requires concerning the personality of his 'old school friend'. A similar example emerged when talking to David:

People who love that kind of comedy, like Karen Dunbar[11] and Michael McIntyre[12], I would probably think they were fucking idiots to be perfectly honest with you. It's about a lack of ambition to find anything for yourself. (UK: David)

In both these cases, comedy and sense of humour marks a potent boundary not just in terms of aesthetics, but concerning personhood. British HCC respondents consider LCC comedy tastes as powerful indicators of pathological identities, expressing a tangible sense of horror and even disgust. Such expressions of disdain also act to bolster HCC identities, linguistically policing the symbolic boundary between 'us and them'. As Kuipers notes (2009: 220), 'by expressing your sense of humour, you show what you find important in yourself, in others, and in social life'.

Moral Boundaries

Our analysis of HCC dislikes shows that lowbrow comedy taste does not just invoke aesthetic boundaries, but also moral borders. For example, when British HCC respondents talk about 'trad' comedians – stand-ups synonymous with the working-men's club circuit – their first weapon of denigration is the morally transgressive element of this comedy, which they consider 'aggressive', 'hostile' and 'bullying'. Indeed, in both countries, there is a strong sense that comedy targeted at traditionally marginalised groups, like women, ethnic minorities and homosexuals is morally wrong:

It was, well, macho-ish. So I wasn't really happy sitting there. The whole way of looking at women, and relations with men, I didn't find that agreeable – not acceptable. To me. (NL: Corine)

Similarly, although most British respondents admit they have no personal connections to consumers of such politically incorrect comedy, they are remarkably confident about judging the moral integrity of these imagined audiences:

Certainly, if I found out someone I knew liked Roy 'Chubby' Brown I would think twice about them. I'd be thinking, bloody hell, you're probably a bit of a racist. (UK: Alex)

All I would need to hear is 'I went to see Roy 'Chubby' Brown last week, it was magic' and I would want to glass them. I wouldn't. I would probably have a short conversation and then get the fuck out of their company. But the fact that they didn't have the wits, the sensitivity, to see that that kind of bullying is

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disgusting tells me that they are a pathetic race and they need to crawl back into…(UK: Fred)

These findings challenge Bourdieu's understanding of the role of morality in marking boundaries. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu downplays the moral boundary-drawing of the culturally privileged, arguing that disinterested aesthetic judgments hold greater cultural currency. However, echoing the observations of Sayer (2005), our findings indicate that HCC respondents frequently draw hierarchical taste boundaries on the basis of morality.

 Yet, as Lamont (1992: 178-179) noted, moral boundaries may not have the same sociological significance as aesthetic boundaries. Aesthetic boundaries are particularly important in terms of social inequality because they reflect a cultural hierarchy widely agreed upon by all social groups. However, moral boundaries are 'less conducive to hierarchalisation' (Lamont, 1992: 184) because there is less consensus on moral value or purity. Thus, while HCC respondents draw moral boundaries on the basis of comedy taste, their moral norms are rarely accepted by LCC respondents. Indeed, as we outline shortly, LCC moral norms are often in direct conflict with those of HCC respondents

Comedy, Personhood and Symbolic Violence

What is noticeable about HCC respondents in both countries is not just the strength of their aesthetic and moral judgements, but the charged emotion that often accompanies them. Indeed, comedy taste does not just mark boundaries, but often indicates an intractable social divide. Especially in the British sample, people with LCC comedy taste are not just rejected but explicitly shunned. Disparaging terms like 'disgusting',

'pathetic' and 'fucking idiots' illustrate the potency of this sentiment, which in Fred's earlier quote even manifests in the violent threat of 'glassing'. These respondents thus appear to believe that a sense of personal worth can be ascertained from comedy taste. Significantly, though, such personal expressions of disgust do not extend to other areas of culture. Instead, comedy seems to have a unique boundary-drawing power, rooted in its connection to the social properties of humour:

> When I just met my girlfriend, I took her to see Waardenberg and De Jong[13]. Cause if you don't like that, I can't be with you. It's just who I am. (NL: Bart)

> Yes. Someone needs to have a sense of humour. My sense of humour, that means, I guess. To become friends, we need to laugh at the same things. That is mostly just joking, in conversation. But also comedians. Television shows. Books. I couldn't be friends with someone who doesn't get *Absolutely Fabulous*.[14] No. (NL: Anke)

> I think there's something really personal about what makes you laugh. And unique about it. So maybe it goes deeper. If someone says something made them laugh, I think you can make quite a deep judgment about that person whereas I think theatre and film is more interpretative. There's something fundamental about what makes you laugh (UK: Tom).

All these informants point to the importance of comedy – as distinct from other cultural realms – in drawing boundaries. Whereas Tom notes that film and theatre 'are

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more interpretative', comedy taste implies more 'fundamental' and 'personal' elements of a person's personality – namely what 'makes you laugh'.

Reaching beyond the judgments of certain comedians or comic styles, then, these quotes suggest that comedy's potency has more to do with the pivotal role played by humour and laughter in everyday life. In particular, they bring out the importance of humour in shaping friendships and relationships.

As Collins (2004, cf. Kuipers 2009) has noted, humour and laughter play a crucial role in everyday 'interaction rituals'. In everyday life people gravitate towards, and form durable bonds with, others whom they can create positive emotional energy. Often, the successful exchange of laughter is central to this. The discovery of shared humour is a sign of similarity; and similarity breeds emotional closeness and trust. Inversely though, failure to share humour and laughter is often an explicit sign of not being 'on the same wavelength'.

 It may be precisely because comedy has this ability to create social bonds, through the proxy of humour and laughter, that it has a heightened capacity to reveal strong symbolic boundaries. Thus, comedy taste is indeed 'something fundamental': via the connection with everyday humour and laughter, it is directly related to personhood. Moreover, this connection between comedy, everyday humour, and personhood also suggests that comedy taste may act as a powerful form of symbolic violence – 'the process whereby power relations are perceived not for what they objectively are but in a form which renders them legitimate in the eyes of the beholder' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979: xiii). Therefore, we now turn to our informants with less cultural capital. To what extent are these people, whose comedy tastes are so strongly disparaged, excluded or hurt by this rejection? And do they draw symbolic boundaries on the basis of comedy taste?

Low Cultural Capital Boundary-Drawing?

Openness, Puzzlement and Dejection

Both the British and the Dutch study found that respondents from LCC backgrounds have fewer comedy dislikes and know fewer comedians than HCC respondents. Following from this, LCC respondents are also less likely to draw boundaries on the basis of comedy taste. They are more accepting of differences in comedy taste, and less likely to see their own comedy taste as superior:

> But I always say to each his own. One can think he's really great and the other – it's the same with all jokes: one likes it the other can't see what's to laugh. It doesn't bother me at all. (NL: Jelmer)

Many LCC respondents indicate that taste is personal, random almost, and provides inadequate grounds for judging others. This is illustrated strikingly in Dutch interviews, where several LCC respondents explicitly discuss how much their comedy preferences differ from their spouses' – which obviously has not hindered their relationship. However, issues of morality are not absent in LCC 'taste talk'. Often, though, LCC morality hinges on intentionally refraining from drawing boundaries, on being open and tolerant. Many note that comedy taste, and taste in general, explains little about a person's true character. It is, after all, 'just an opinion' (UK: Sally):

> It's nothing major like. Like if someone absolutely loved Stewart Lee, thought he is the best thing since sliced bread, I would say ok fair enough, because I

haven't really seen enough of him. It wouldn't really change anything anyway (UK: DJ).

In this passage we see another important distinction between these informants and HCC interviewees. People with low cultural capital often admit they didn't know a comedian well enough to judge, or don't 'get' certain humour:

Freek de Jonge. No it's more that I just don't follow. And he [husband] will be there laughing and I say: come on, tell me, because half of it I just – It's just going to quick, I have missed half it and then I think, I simply won't bother to try to follow it, because I just don't think it's interesting enough. If it is costing me too much to think (NL: Claire).

These quotes show a general disinterest in 'taste talk' among LCC informants. Not only are they unwilling to judge on the basis of taste; they attach limited importance to talking about, or presenting themselves, through taste. This unwillingness to judge others may reflect a lack of confidence or a sense of cultural inferiority. Although earlier in his interview British LCC respondent DJ remarks that he dislikes Stewart Lee ('he is just very patronising'), in the quote above he still doesn't draw any boundary with those who like Lee. Similarly, Claire is somewhat stung by her husband liking Freek de Jonge, but concludes that 'she simply won't bother'. In the end, both reserve judgment, DJ because he hasn't 'really seen enough', Claire because 'it is costing her too much'. This indicates a tension between seeing taste as trivial preference and an awareness of positioning in the cultural hierarchy.

The absence of boundary drawing among LCC informants often coincides with a dejected or puzzled attitude towards highbrow comedy:

Van Kooten and de Bie[15]. It could be that is was too highbrow for me. I don't know. Or they're too sharp or something. I didn't like them. (NL: Ton)

I was once in a show called *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. And I learnt the lines and delivered the lines 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 (UK: Ian)

In both countries, many LCC informants discuss highbrow comedy in this despondent tone. They realize they do not possess the cultural capital to appreciate 'legitimate' comedy and underscore this by frequently using vertical metaphors: 'highbrow'; 'beyond me'; 'over my head'.

This marks a stark contrast with HCC respondents who often made strong judgments even when they hadn't even seen the comedian in question. Indeed, it arguably underscores one of Bourdieu's main points in *Distinction* (1984: 397-465), namely that there is a critical difference between the culturally privileged, who feel they have 'the right to speak' and pass judgment on others, and those with less cultural capital, who don't. The open and tolerant attitude of LCC informants, therefore, may be a result of necessity, rather than ideology.

Challenging the highbrow aesthetic

This asymmetric pattern of highbrow rejection versus lowbrow puzzlement seems very Bourdieusian: a strong cultural hierarchy upheld by symbolic boundaries and the lower classes lacking the aesthetic tools to challenge these boundaries. However, this is not the full story. Especially in the Netherlands, LCC informants sometimes explicitly reject (some) highbrow comedy (Kuipers, 2006: 99-119). In demarcating such boundaries, these informants draw on various alternative 'repertoires of evaluation' (Lamont, 1992). Often, rejections of HCC comedy are framed in terms of morality. In both countries, LCC informants object to a certain self-congratulatory smugness they perceive in highbrow comedy audiences:

> I have to say I found him [Stewart Lee] utterly unfunny. He was in an environment where people come to see him because he is Stewart Lee, he was feeding off that, they were feeding off him, y'know I hate this sense of feeling good inside with an audience.
> (UK: Derek)

In the Netherlands, such objections go hand-in-hand with objections to highbrow 'black' comedy, and represent a clear inversion of boundaries drawn by HCC respondents. LCC informants often disapprove of the coarse language, sexual references and deliberate offending in transgressive comedy. In their view, this clashes with presumed levels of sophistication, and the highhanded morality of educated audiences:

> These shows of Youp van 't Hek[16], yes I've never been there. But I have the strong impression that 80% of the people there has completed some sort of

degree. Well, and they sit there. And he goes – when there is a guy with a beard he calls him 'talking cunt'. Well if I – I wouldn't dare. (NL: Josef)

You hear people say Youp van 't Hek is so good. And then I hear this guy say: "Folks, hotdogs, you know what you are eating? Ground cow cunt! Yes, ground cow cunt, and ground very well at that!" Well I'm sorry. Cause why, in that case, am I not allowed to tell a Turk joke? That's going much too far for me. (NL: Egbert)

Both speakers are dismayed by the vulgarity of Youp van 't Hek, a well-known comedian with a column in prestigious newspaper, *NRC Handelsblad*. They are most indignant, however, about what they see as the hypocrisy of his audiences. These HCC audiences enjoy public offensiveness, but deny others the same pleasures. Two different types of moral judgement interplay here. First, a notion of public morality that states that one should not offend, swear or cuss in public (Kuipers, 2006a). Second, we see traces of the same laissez-faire tolerance ('to each his own') noted above: LCC informants specifically object to attempts to set limits on other people's humour. This points to a highly charged area of contestation between the aesthetic values of HCC respondents and the moral LCC criteria of honesty and straightforwardness. However, because morality tends to be contested, moral evaluations do not easily convert into universal repertoires of evaluation. Hence, they may function as 'subcultural capital' with little currency beyond one's social class (Thornton, 1996).

Both in the Netherlands and in Britain, LCC interviewees also sometimes draw on cultural-aesthetic repertoires to reject HCC comedy. Lowbrow comedy is generally explained through a popular aesthetic of fun, entertainment and sociability

(Friedman, 2011). Some Dutch LCC informants employ this popular aesthetic to critique highbrow comedy, and to question the good sense of its audiences:

I don't like Freek de Jonge. I think humour should be easy. He makes a joke and then a half-hour later he comes back to it and I can't even keep track of that. I don't see why he can't just have fun. (NL: Gerrit)

No, I don't like him [De Jonge] Yes, I find him a little hectic, chaotic. Running all the time. I remember we had to watch it at school, teacher said it was really smart. Well, he [teacher] was a little stuck-up always. I'd rather have normal, funny humour. (NL: Eduard)

These informants, regarding de Jonge through the lens of the popular logic of fun, simplicity and emotional satisfaction, find him quite unfunny. Both also make disparaging comments about his fans: a stuck-up teacher; people who 'can't just have fun'. While this does not lead to outright rejection of highbrow audiences, it is certainly distinct from the dejection of other LCC informants. Most significantly, these respondents make objections on *aesthetic* grounds, pitting their own cultural logics against that of highbrow comedy.

Finally, there is one aesthetic repertoire that enables several LCC informants, both in Britain and in the Netherlands, to express cultural *superiority* over the educated middle classes. This is the belief that the working classes, or the 'normal people', simply have more fun and a better sense of humour:

I just think the defences are up, I don't know, maybe it's the manner you've been brought up in. Much more open. Much more able to laugh. At themselves and at each other. And many more affluent people seem less able to do that. (UK: Fraser)

Crooswijk is Rotterdam's salt-of-the-earth neighbourhood and that's where I come from. I think Crooswijk, being the working-class district it is, has more humour than the gentlemen's hang-outs on the canals, don't you? (NL: Albert)

Dutch LCC informants also spoke in pitying tones about people with more cultural capital, whom they felt to be 'stiff', 'sterile'. 'serious', 'yearning for diversion', and 'not being able to let go and have fun.' (Kuipers, 2006a: 72-73).

Here, the restrained highbrow ethos is confronted with 'aesthetics of everyday life': sense of humour grounded in everyday experiences, an openness to sensory pleasures, and a firm conviction that humour and comedy is first and foremost about sociability. Fraser, Albert, and other critics of HCC seriousness draw on a somewhat idealized image of working class life, which they oppose to constrained, bookish, individualized, middle-class restrictions on 'having a laugh'.

These sentiments are important because they demonstrate that not all LCC respondents blindly uphold what Bourdieu called the 'dominant values'. In the UK study, signs of such alternative repertoires are less clear than among Dutch LCC informants, maybe due to the different sampling procedures. However, in both countries we find people who are not at all in awe of legitimate culture. In contrast, and drawing perhaps on the historical dominance of working class comedy, some

LCC respondents express contempt or pity for HCC comedy taste. For them, comedy, and humour more generally, is the privileged domain of the working classes.

This raises the question of whether LCC boundary-drawing contains significant symbolic power. Similar to discussions about alternative notions of comic 'value', it may be that the aesthetic judgments of LCC respondents only convey status within their social group. As Lawler (2005: 443) suggests, 'working class disgust or contempt simply does not count: they lack the social authority to make their judgments stick'. Yet, this implies HCC respondents *do* have the authority to make their judgements stick, a conclusion not fully fully supported by our findings either.

Conclusion

According to prevailing sociological thought, the cultural snob is in terminal decline, replaced instead by a new generation of non-judgmental omnivores. While this may be accurate in some fields, it provides a misleading portrait of comedy. Examining patterns of comedy taste in Britain and the Netherlands, we find an arena marked by remarkably strong symbolic boundaries. In both countries, those with high cultural capital use comedy taste as a key tool in claiming social distance. A sense of aesthetic superiority underpins these claims, with HCC respondents explicitly judging inferior those who do not have the knowledge to decode highbrow comedy. Furthermore, the strength of this boundary is underlined by the manner in which – particularly in the British case – aesthetic judgments meld into moral and personal verdicts on the 'worth' of those with lowbrow taste. However, although HCC respondents draw strong boundaries on the basis of comedy taste, the sociological significance of these borders is hard to ascertain. Whether comedy taste functions as symbolic violence relies, firstly, on whether the legitimacy of HCC comedy tastes are 'widely agreed

upon' and secondly, whether LCC respondents are excluded by HCC rejection. Yet in both countries neither mechanism is clear-cut. On the one hand, many LCC respondents – particularly in Britain – appear to accept the intrinsic cultural value of HCC comedy taste. This mainly manifests through 'self-elimination' (Bourdieu, 1984: 379), whereby LCC respondents express despondency at HCC comedy and deliberately opt out of consuming. However, such deference is not uniform. Often it is tempered by explicit moral and aesthetic rejection of highbrow comedy – and contempt at the smugness of HCC audiences. Several LCC respondents – particularly in the Netherlands – augment these judgments by drawing strong boundaries of their own, asserting a confident counter-notion of comic value premised on an aesthetic of everyday life. This illustrates how, in traditionally popular fields like comedy, those with low cultural capital often have the confidence to *challenge* dominant notions of cultural value.

These findings can be interpreted in several ways. First, LCC boundary drawing may represent a non-transferable form of subcultural capital, with little currency outside local surroundings. This would mean that our findings are consistent with a Bourdieusian logic: only dominant groups have the power to impose aesthetic hierarchies. The problem with this interpretation is that it is untestable: in the strictest, zero-sum version of Bourdieu's theory, LCC cultural capital can never, *by definition*, have wider currency. Another possibility is that LCC boundary drawing indicates growing cultural confidence among the working and lower middle classes: although they are aware of cultural hierarchies, they do not uncritically accept them. Indeed, a burgeoning pride in their own taste suggests that these people increasingly question the legitimacy of highbrow aesthetics. Third, LCC boundary drawing may reflect mounting societal differentiation. People from different social groups increasingly

have their own taste cultures, but while they may dislike other people's tastes, they do not directly subvert each other's cultural hierarchies.

It may be that such scenarios are unfolding differently in different national contexts, as well as across different fields. Although patterns of boundary-drawing are similar in Britain and the Netherlands, there are notable cross-cultural differences. In Britain, the boundary-drawing of HCC respondents was particularly strong. This may reflect the traditionally strong class structure in Britain compared with the Netherlands, which possesses one of the most self-effacing elites in Europe (Kennedy 1999). Currently, the Netherlands appears to be witnessing a redefinition of cultural hierarchies largely consistent with the second scenario. For instance, government support for the arts is severely cut by a (sociologist) secretary of state who legitimates himself through popular aesthetics. In the UK, developments seem more in line with the first scenario: growing cultural confidence on the part of lower class people generally does not translate into a revision of the cultural hierarchy. However, in both countries the third scenario seems a serious possibility: segmentation of taste cultures with little exchange across a growing but banal 'humorous divide'.

Finally, reaching beyond questions of boundary direction and cross-cultural variation, it is worth reiterating our most striking finding: comedy taste invokes unusually strong symbolic boundaries among HCC *and* LCC respondents. We suggest that this heightened capacity is relatively unique, and bound up with comedy's inextricable relationship with personhood. For example, while they may not map onto each other perfectly, there is much overlap between what people find humorous in comedy and in everyday life. As Tom neatly summed up, 'there's something fundamental about what makes you laugh'. Moreover, humour acts as a pivotal lubricant in social interaction, an immediate marker of one's ability to communicate

with others. While shared humour is thus a foundational ingredient of friendship, trust and intimacy, its absence often marks an unbridgeable social divide. Considering this centrality in constituting notions of 'us' and 'them' in everyday life, then, it is perhaps not surprising that comedy taste has a similar ability to mark such vehement boundaries in culture.

Notes

[1] British comics regularly perform in the Amsterdam comedy club Toomler, see www.toomler.nl.

[2] The Cultural Capital 'Score' was calculated with 'Education' on a scale of seven of 'highest completed'; 'Occupation' on a scale of nine corresponding to jobs emphasizing 'cultural skills'; 'Family Socialization' on both parents' education and both parents' occupation when respondent was 14. These measures were collapsed into a 5-point scale to make a score of 1- 15. This is an updated version of that used by Holt (1997).

[3] Stewart Lee (1968-) is an English standup comedian known for his intellectual and form-bending material.

[4] Freek de Jonge (1944-) is among the Netherlands' most critically-acclaimed comedians, central to the development of alternative, intellectual left-wing *cabaret*.

[5] André van Duin (1947-) is a Dutch popular comedian. His comedy has roots in the *revue* or music-hall tradition, relying on impersonations and physical comedy.

[6] Brass Eye (1997-2001) was an English TV series of satirical and darkly comic 'spoof' documentaries.

[7] *The Daily Mail* is a British newspaper with a traditionally lower middle-class readership; *The Sun* is a tabloid newspaper with a traditionally working-class readership.

[8] Hans Teeuwen (1967-) is an avant-garde, absurdist Dutch comedian who has also been successful in the UK.

[9] Kevin 'Bloody' Wilson (1947-) is an Australian comic singer/songwriter known for his explicit, crude and sexually misogynistic humour.

[10] Roy Chubby Brown (1945-) is an English stand-up known for his obscene, racist and sexist material.

[11] Karen Dunbar (1971-) is a Scottish comedienne known for her Scottish-focused, sexual and physically comic style.

[12] Michael McIntyre (1976-) is a very popular English stand-up comedian known for his observational style.

[13] Martin van Waardenberg (1956-) and Wilfred de Jong (1957-) were a comic duo performing absurdist, physical comedy.

[14] *Absolutely Fabulous* (1992-) is a British sitcom featuring Jennifer Saunders and Joanna Lumley as two drunken irresponsible middle-aged women friends.

[15] Kees van Kooten (1941) and Wim de Bie (1939) had an influential satirical sketch program on Dutch TV from the 1970s to the 2000s.

[16] Youp van 't Hek (1954-) is a popular satirical Dutch comedian with broad, largely (upper) middle-class audiences and a column in the prestigious newspaper *NRC*.

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