

What is comedy and what makes something funny?

<http://www.thinctanc.co.uk/words/comedy.html>

What is funny?

Comedy is not a science, it's art. Therefore, there are no rules and it can be very subjective. What one person finds funny another might cringe at. One thing worth noting is that when analysing comedy and what is funny, it is almost like it is only visible out of the corner of your eye. As soon as you try and look directly at it and analyse it too much... all of the funniness disappears... Why do we find things funny? Why does this reaction force us to convulse and make that noise?

There is no simple answer to why something is funny... Something is funny because it captures a moment, it contains an element of simple truth, it is something that we have always known for eternity and yet are hearing it now out loud for the first time.

I think that our need to feel intelligent comes into play a lot in finding things funny... maybe humour is actually the overwhelming joy at feeling intelligent. Somebody tries to put on their shoes standing up and falls over in the process. They look foolish, we therefore feel intelligent as we are not the one falling over trying to put on shoes.

We laugh.

Someone makes a clever joke and only a few people get it. If we get the joke we recognise the person as being clever and feel clever ourselves as we understood the concept.

We laugh.

So is humour partly to do with self congratulation at being intelligent?

Comedy is full of opposites and contradictions.

Something is funny because...

1. ...It is expected

A woman buys white coat she has been saving up for for ages. She tells the shop keeper she has dreamed of wearing it for months and been saving up. The shop keeper says that this is the last one in stock. We see the woman's gleeful face as she tries on her new lovely white coat.

We cut to a scene of a park keeper painting a bench black... oh and let's really overstate it... he's painting the bench black by the zebra enclosure in a zoo. We know what's going to happen already. The comedy is in the anticipation and expectation as we build up to the inevitable moment where she sits on the wet black bench in her new white coat and ends up with black stripes across her back.

2. ...it is unexpected

A hunter is out hunting rabbits. He finds a rabbit hole and sends his dog down. After five minutes of nothing he sticks his head down the hole to find the rabbit and dog playing cards. Or let's go for a twist... That same woman buys her white coat and approaches the wet black bench.

"Look out!" yells the zoo keeper.

" Oh thanks," says the woman, "I almost sat on that."

An escaped lion leaps in from the side and mauls her.

3. ...it is familiar

A woman places a tin in her trolley and turns to fetch another. While she is not looking, her trolley rolls away sideways. We laugh a knowing laugh as we recognise the age old problem of shopping trolleys rolling sideways.

4. ...it is unfamiliar

A woman places a tin in her trolley and turns to fetch another. While she is not looking, her trolley floats up into the air out of sight. We laugh a shocked laugh as we didn't expect that.

The original meaning of the word comedy was merely a dramatic play that was the opposite of tragedy. Tragedy involved big important characters (usually falling from grace). It would often end badly and would explore high themes of power and betrayal etc. Comedy, on the other hand, usually revolved around normal people moving up in the world and would feature a happier ending. This was the origin of the word comedy. In literary circles, people often talk of high comedy and low comedy. High comedy is seen as intellectual wit, often set among high society and using clever characterisations and complex situations. (Oscar Wilde, P G Wodehouse). Low comedy uses coarse language, slapstick and farce. (Monty Python, Little Britain)

Various types of comedy

slapstick

Joe picks up a large plank. Fred behind him says "Hey Joe, careful with that plank!" Joe turns round saying "What?" and whacks Fred in the face with the plank.

parody

Parody is where a work deliberately mimics the style of another for comic effect or ridicule.

spoof

Spoof is light parody or gentle imitation. Is it not necessarily intended to ridicule or make fun of the thing being spoofed but the comedy happens in the recognition of the piece being spoofed. For instance, a woman in glasses with tied up hair who is obviously beautiful anyway takes off her glasses and then unties her hair and shakes it loose. As she does, her wig falls off. We all recognise the Hollywood moment and so this is funny not just because her wig falls off but we are fully aware of the reference and know that usually this is not supposed to happen.

satire

Satire is where a section of society or politics is deliberately mimicked and mocked in order to poke fun at them and point criticism using humour. e.g. Catch-22 is a satire of war.

irony

Irony is where the opposite of what is expected happens or where someone says the opposite

of what they mean. The lack of harmony between something that is expected and the reality (so if you moved jobs from being a dustman to being in a bank but were being paid less then some would point out a certain irony.)

sarcasm

sarcasm is where an insult or quick remark is fired at someone with the intention of causing injury. It is often used in response to an initial statement or comment in order to pour scorn on the stated idea or statement. Sarcasm often features irony (for instance, someone drops a tray and someone else shouts "Ooh, that was SO clever.")

farce

This is where comedy is achieved through exaggeration and extreme characters in preposterous circumstances that seem to spiral out of control and become ever more ludicrous.

black comedy

This is a dark comedy where a light humoured touch is applied to very dark and serious subject matter in order to ease the pain or make some specific point by juxtaposing the humour and the sadness.

Surrealism

Throwing together completely disjointed concepts and random ideas to weave together something bizarre. (I once heard a very funny stand up comedian come out with: "Suppose you're a fish... (pause) how the f*** you supposed to get to the airport?... (pause) They don't make rivers go that way."

Timing

Probably the most mysterious part of performance comedy. In any performance comedy a rhythm is destablised and people often talk about beats. A beat is a small pause put in place to enhance a joke... sometime after the punchline to enable the audience time to react and get the joke, but often a pause is placed before a line to build expectation. It can also be used to throw in a double punchline. the punchline is delivered.. (laugh) (pause) ...Second punchline follows on

that audience weren't expecting. These beats are often called 'pregnant pauses' as they are full of expectation.

Some basic techniques...

Misunderstanding

Joe is holding a large girder in the round. Fred is holding a large hammer.

Joe: "When I nod my head, you hit it."

Joe nods.

Fred hits Joe over the head with the hammer.

pun and wordplay

Probably the second oldest joke after the chicken/road effort:

A: My dog's got no nose.

B: How does he smell?

A: Awful.

mock epic and travesty

These are actually literary terms used in discussion of straight literature and plays however but they can be employed very effectively in comedy.

Mock epic is basically where something very trivial is treated as if it were high and lofty and important on a grand scale.

Travesty is the oposite - high and important issues treated very lightly as if they were trivial.

double entendre

Typical british 'saucy postcard humour': A vicar with an umbrella is having trouble with opening it and so he says to some woman in a tennis skirt "Can you help me get it up?" and she says "Oh my, it is a big one!"

stereotypes

Stereotypes work because we immediately recognise the character and so we are familiar with what sort of person this is without too much information needing to be given. The problem is

that they very quickly become old and repetitive and so you have to try and spot new stereotypes or add a twist to an old one to avoid the joke looking tired.

Out of context

Everyday objects used for other purposes or people assuming roles they should not occupy.

Banana used as a gun in a bank raid.

Hospital cleaner called in to help with brain surgery.

Characteristic swap

Attributing human characteristics to animals and objects or attributing animal/object qualities to humans. Man arguing with a toaster and accusing it of deliberately burning his bread.

A man gives directions and says "go over the hill and past the sleeping tramp..."

Other person asks if the sleeping tramp is a pub, person replies and says "No, there's a tramp asleep on the bench."

the infectious wisdom of the fool

A wrong opinion is expressed and catches on with others. Often a wise person will say something and a fool will hear it and misinterpret it loudly. A second fool hears it and agrees and so the wise person then has to race about correcting it to prevent the foolishness from spreading. An example of this from a photoshoot sketch:

LORNA: Oh, hang on

PHOTOGRAPHER: Yes?

LORNA: What's my motivation for this shoot?

PHOTOGRAPHER: You'll get paid, don't worry

LORNA: No, what's my character's motivation?

PHOTOGRAPHER: There isn't any... ok?

LORNA: Ok, got it

PHOTOGRAPHER: Right, poses.... now, on 3... Lorna, what's with the face?

LORNA: I'm trying to look demotivated.

NIKKI: Oh, sorry, I wasn't doing that

PHOTOGRAPHER: I don't want either of you looking demotivated!

The flawed plan

A character is discussing a plan but it is obvious to the audience that one glaring aspect of it is doomed to fail. This can either be due to information the audience has been told elsewhere or it can simply be that the character is overlooking something blatantly obvious.

Paralleling reality

Taking a familiar framework but replacing all the elements. The situation is familiar but the details are bizarre. The hotel sketch is a good example of this... we recognise the set up and the social norms at work, but there is a mini-bar full of various types of beans rather than alcohol, but this appears to be accepted as proper by the characters involved.