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**VIKTORIA MAIER**

**THE JOKE'S  
ON \_\_\_\_\_.**

**CONSIDERATIONS ON  
ETHICS IN COMEDIC  
STORYTELLING**



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THE JOKE'S  
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CONSIDERATIONS ON  
ETHICS IN COMEDIC  
STORYTELLING

VIKTORIA MAIER  
MA PERFORMANCE PRACTICES

A Thesis presented by Viktoria Maier to Master Performance Practices,  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of Master of Arts in  
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PERFORMANCE  
PRACTICES

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2023

## SYNOPSIS

THE JOKE'S ON \_\_\_\_\_. CONSIDERATIONS ON ETHICS IN COMEDIC STORYTELLING is a practice-led research aimed at enabling dialogues on ethical considerations in comedy and advocate for its transformation into an inclusive art form. Comedic storytelling is a form of expression that has the power to evoke laughter, shed light on social issues, and bring people together. However, it can also be used as a tool for oppression, marginalization, and harm. This thesis explores the ethical implications of comedy, focusing on the analysis of jokes and the identification of cis-normative structures within the comedy field. It provides entry points for analysing jokes from an ethical perspective and highlights the risks of perpetuating discrimination in comedy. To disrupt these structures, the thesis proposes the use of storytelling, puppetry, drag, and hosting as methods of challenging societal norms and promoting inclusivity. It emphasizes the importance of reclaiming comedy spaces to empower disadvantaged individuals, challenge patriarchal systems, and envision a more inclusive future. Through these efforts, the research seeks to contribute to the transformation of comedy into an art form that actively engages with ethics, promotes dialogue, and creates positive social change.

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## **DECLARATION**

I, Viktoria Maier, hereby certify that I had personally carried out the work depicted in the thesis entitled, 'The Joke's on \_\_\_\_\_. Considerations on Ethics in Comedic Storytelling'.

No part of the thesis has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma prior to this date.

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# INTRODUCTION

## HOW THE STORY BEGAN

At the start of the Master's course I was just beginning to understand my artistic practice, or rather I was searching for it. After a few weeks I was with some of my classmates when I told a story about a painful experience I had years ago. I told it to contribute to the topic of the conversation we were having, and my intention was only to share it, nothing more. As I was telling the story, people started laughing and they didn't stop. This story, somewhat traumatic at the time it happened, made them laugh, and I didn't understand why. Nonetheless, I enjoyed it and I was intrigued to find out what made them laugh. I told the story a few more times in different contexts with different audiences, but it never really caught on again. However, I found my practice: storytelling, the environment in which I research: everywhere, and the most important aspect of it: people. I have further defined the practice with a focus on the comic. Throughout the text I will use the term comedic storytelling which I understand as an umbrella term for storytelling that uses comedic elements such as jokes, puns, irony, satire, and timing as well as comedy itself, including stand-up comedy or political comedy.

## WELCOME BREAK

Hello dear reader! This is a break, and you will find many of them in this thesis. They are in a different colour and give additional information. They are introduced by a heading that lets you know what kind of information it is - from historical background, to personal anecdotes, from contexts to definitions they offer a moment outside of the main text so pause for a second and let your own thoughts through. This is just ink on a piece of paper or maybe even only pixels in a screen, but these breaks are also here to provide hospitality. Maybe you hear a voice in your head when you read this text? Whatever this voice sounds like, this is the section to become aware of it again. Let me host you in the parts of personal thoughts and particular facts.

This thesis offers an attempt to understand the ethical implications of a joke and its impact on society. It also identifies the underlying heteronormative and even patriarchal power structures of comedy and their impact on society. It suggests ways to use the affective power of humour to change the structures and become an art form that is inclusive and fights for an inclusive world.

In the first chapter, I discuss the development of my research on comedic storytelling. While my entry point to ethical considerations is a personal one, I also see the need for this research in the transformative power of comedic storytelling as already historically it "was thought to have a rebellious potential" (Müller 2015, p. 35).

The fact that Netflix has a section dedicated to "Politically Incorrect Stand-up Comedy"<sup>1</sup> pushes the belief that this is a desirable way to do comedy. However, these formats carry a risk of either trivialising discrimination or advancing it further. Chapter two addresses this in the context of analysing jokes. Furthermore, it analyses different ways of approaching ethics in comedic discourse to enable further debates. Comedy is linked to social hierarchy which necessitates the need for political correctness and ethics.

## EXPLANATION BREAK

Have you heard the term punching before? I don't mean the physical kind of punching but the term used by comedians. If a joke consists of two parts, the set-up in the first and the punchline is the second part. Punching is used to explain to

<sup>1</sup> Netflix titles in: Politically Incorrect Stand-up Comedy, <https://www.netflix.com/search?q=politically%20incorrect%20comedy&suggestionId=Collection%3A77230> [accessed 27 June 2023].

whom a joke is directed and according to the cultural power of the humour's target it can be distinguished between punching "up" and "down". If a joke punches down, it "is said to target members of socially vulnerable groups, groups that are already subject to injustices and discrimination in the broader social arena" (Anderson 2020, p. 461 f.). Whereas punching up "targets those who are thought to occupy positions of power in society, either formally or informally" (Ibid.).

Chapter three focuses on the underlying mechanisms of comedy. With the queer feminist approach by Sarah Ahmed it explores power structures and offers ways such as feminist humour to break these structures. I will use examples from the stand-up comedy show "Nanette" by Hannah Gadsby, the concept of the PCCC\*, the Politically Correct Comedy Club and my performance "Creature Chronicles". The performance was first shown in 2023 at the Home of Performance Practices. It is a storytelling solo show that uses drag, puppetry, and comedy to address issues in the field of comedy. It is based on auto-biographical as well as auto-ethnographical research and combines true and fictional stories. Figure 1 pictures me showing the rule of three, a technique used in storytelling and comedy.

This research is not about imposing censorship, but about promoting dialogue, rethinking power structures and underlining the importance of hearing different perspectives and keeping an open mind. I want to portray a way of using ethical considerations in comedy and the power of laughter to move towards an inclusive society.

# HOME OF PERFORMANCE PRACTICES



Figure 1: showing the rule of three, a technique used in storytelling and comedy

# CHAPTER ONE: THE METHODS BEHIND THE STORY

## ENTRY POINTS TO ETHICAL COMEDY

This first chapter serves as an introductory exploration as to how I arrived at my research topic of the considerations of ethical comedy. Furthermore, it describes the background from where my approaches emerge. During the first year of the master programme Performance Practices, I started building up a practice of storytelling. While I narrate and tell autobiographical stories, my primary interest lies in what affect and impact can be created through the story itself, or the act of telling. I realise that there can be great power in stories through a convincing performance, and I encounter what ethics can mean in the context of considering how one reaches the audience. In their book *Intersections of Storytelling and Ethics*, Meretoja and Davis describe:

*Stories reflect, affect and change who we are, how we experience the world and what we think; but [...] it would be premature to believe that this is necessarily for the good. The power of narrative can be used or abused. It can help us become better listeners, readers and citizens, or it can mislead, disturb and corrupt. (2018, 2)*

Taking the approach from puppetry, that only through manipulation the puppet comes alive, I understand manipulation not as negatively connotated, but in its

etymological sense “to handle skillfully by hand” (Harper 2021). It is an opportunity to animate - in my case the audience towards participation. My final performance of the first year, “Can I ask you a question?” (2022), was auto-biographic storytelling on the topic of grief that I performed with a big teddy bear. I limited the intended participation by asking several questions to a few audience members and ended the performance by inviting people to cuddle with the bear, giving the time span of 5 minutes, while playing the songs “O-o-h Child” and “You’ve Got a Friend in Me”. My research at that time was mainly focused on understanding how I can influence the audience through the space and the setting.

### **BREAK FOR BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Do you wanna read more about my practice? I developed a method of conducting conversations and doing auto-ethnographic research consisting of sharing personal experiences, which I then integrate into the larger cultural narrative. However, this development started by simply asking questions in different environments to people, mostly strangers. My set of questions were:

1. Can I ask you a question?
2. What’s intimacy for you?
3. Do you have a cuddly toy?

4. Do you have pictures of loved people with you or in your home?
5. Are you afraid of death?

Quite often these conversations would lead to people sharing their story of having lost a loved person with me. That was one reason why I decided to produce a work about grief. I lost my father in 2020 and this became the content of the performance *Can I Ask You A Question*. Making the bear as part of it is inspired by the idea of the trauma bear. For example, if a child is taken into an ambulance after an accident, they might be given a cuddly toy to soften the shock of the experience. If you look again at the five questions above - how would you answer them?

Grief can be a heavy theme for holding space in a room, and inviting people to connect with this topic. My aim was not only engaging people but shifting the atmosphere in the room and emotions between comfort and discomfort. As a strategy to make it more digestible and a positive experience for the audience I decided to use humour. Through the occasional use of jokes, not only does it lighten the narration, but it also enhances the play between comfort and discomfort.

Because of this performance, I decided to learn the methods

of comedy and therefore applied to a comedy course in the summer of 2022. The two-week residential course for newcomers in the field of comedy was part of a comedy festival in the south of Germany. The residency, as well as the festival, were organised by the same person, a comedian himself, who also delivered most of the workshops of the course. In the following text, I will refer to him as H. The comedy course was structured in workshops around producing material, writing and rhyming - lectured by H. and comedians who performed at the festival. Further, there were possibilities for the nine participants to share their own texts and give feedback on each other's work.

### CONTEXT BREAK

What is the frame and background of this course? The German term used is "Kabarett und Comedy". A little introduction into the terminology here: Comedy is understood as the broad term for humorous entertainment. Kabarett is a subcategory that emerged in Germany in the 20th century, rooted in political and social satire, which has historically been a medium for dissent and protest, especially in times of political oppression or social upheaval such as revolutions or post war. For the further understanding of my research the distinction of these terms is not urgently relevant. I will continue using the umbrella term comedy unless it is important to refer specifically to Kabarett.

Following the course, I questioned how the origin of Kabarett as political criticism is part of the thinking of the comedians that were there. Over the course of the first days, discussions started on the topic of what we (participants and H.) share when we perform. It became an argument centred on "what is cultural appropriation?" with disagreements about where cultural appropriation begins and to what extent it needs to be considered in one's art. This was the beginning of two weeks of working together.

H. was conducting a monthly satirical show and proposed concluding the festival with a special edition of his performance. He invited all the participants to showcase solo acts or group numbers if they desired. His role involved hosting and bridging the gaps between the performances. To develop the content for these segments, he organised a workshop on gathering topics, and delivered a lecture on joke writing. Essentially, we collaborated on creating the moderation for the show and it therefore became shared authorship. In this workshop a racist joke was formulated which I will further analyse in chapter two.

Some of the participants, myself included, immediately questioned the joke. Firstly, I didn't understand why it "needed" the racist language as a political joke. In my opinion it would have worked as well with different wording and then actually promote what the roots of Kabarett propose: questioning and

fighting politics that are not agreed on. Instead, this incident opened a whole different social and political discussion on racism, privilege, inclusion and cancel culture. Some of the participants immediately questioned the ethics around it and expressed their disquiet. At that point, H. didn't allow a discussion to evolve and moved on with different topics. The incident remained unaddressed for several days, until the evening before the show. Someone approached H. to ask if he planned to include this joke in his moderation. H. confirmed this and when I asked about the exact wording, he insisted on using the version from the workshop because according to him, it was technically correctly structured as he lectured in the workshop and therefore a valid joke to share. This sparked a several-hour-long discussion where the group expressed discomfort at including the joke in a collectively authored show, while H. asserted his right to tell it, frequently invoking the term "cancel culture."

### DEFINITION BREAK

Are you familiar with the term cancel culture? It was first established by conservatives and right-wing politicians in America and describes a form of public boycott of an individual or organisation that are considered to promote socially problematic beliefs. Debates about cancel culture often go hand in hand with those about political correctness,

which also is a term coined from the same source in the 1990s (Thiele 2021, p. 50). What I find interesting here is to see who actually leads the discussions about it. Asking the question of who are the people that feel threatened by cancel culture, it becomes clear that it concerns those with privilege and power. It is necessary to not only be aware but as academic researcher Martina Thiele prompts it: "we must always try to discern who actually suffers exclusion and intolerance, who is able to fight back, and who is denied democratic participation in the first place." (2021, 55) Isn't that a much more important base for a social debate?

I tried to express my values that, even though I may not personally belong to the group targeted by the joke, I find it concerning to exploit privilege and consider the dissemination of racist ideas highly problematic. In this discussion there was no room for negotiation. After roughly three hours, I expressed to H. that I couldn't share the stage with a racist joke. However, I offered support to the group in other ways such as cooking, setting up the stage or documenting the show. The discussion did not feel professional anymore and I chose to leave the room. By then, two other people had already decided not to go on stage and left. The following morning, H. informed me, "So, you're leaving today." I made another attempt to address the issue, seeking discussion



and to ease the tension that was built up the night before as well as offering my support to the group behind the stage. H. rejected my offer, stating that if I don't go on stage my help was no longer necessary. He expelled me from the course. He told the other two people to leave as well. A fourth person then decided to also leave because they didn't feel safe anymore.

### THOUGHT BREAK

From a comedy perspective I find this hilarious.  
What do you think?

Someone in a position of power is afraid of being told what to do or, to put it more drastically, of being censored. As a result, he does exactly what he is afraid of with the people he feels threatened by. He does it through his position of power, a power the other people don't even have in this situation. He is against cancel culture but he cancelled us.

I strongly believe in the value of conversations about what can or should be said on stage as well as its boundaries. It is an act of inclusion to negotiate what is discriminatory and what is not. As performers we reach an audience with our stories, statements and jokes and impact them in one way or another. Our society and our language develop and therefore "certain

statements, terms, and phrases that may have been common in the past are now problematic in democratic societies" (Thiele, 2021, 51). Through (re-)evaluation and taking part in debates we have a tool to understand if our own art actually supports the intended impact.

The comedy course was marked by tensions around the issue of permissible content for stage performances, yet conversations were few and often resulted in arguments, defensive reactions, and feelings of offence or avoidance. On reflection of the course with some of the participants we realised that for some of us the experience was accompanied by feelings of personal attack, discomfort and incomprehension. How can this be accepted from a purely human, social idea of living together as human beings? How can this course be advertised as a learning experience and then lacking pedagogical approaches? In our reflection we also managed to point out learning effects such as including ethical considerations in one's own practice, that happened precisely because of the problematic parts of the course. I understood during this time that one way of doing comedy with a specific set of patterns and structures was used here and no deviation from that was allowed. I also understood that this is a hierarchical construct that is rooted in its history, where up "until the early 2000s, the public performance of humour [...] was primarily limited to white cis-men" (Gorke 2021, p.122). I struggled with anxiety connected to these

social power structures that are constructed by the people dominating comedy. And I saw others struggling as well. As a result, I made the decision to learn about these structures and explore them in relation to their impact on audience.

I started exploring comedic elements through the telling of fictional stories. The methods I have employed in my research have shifted away from manipulation to a hospitality approach that gives the audience more agency. I started developing personas around the notion of hosting, placing the audience at the core of my thought-process when crafting a performance. My research method of conducting conversations was redirected by an auto-ethnographic approach to collecting material, especially at comedy shows, and in conversation with (comedic) storytelling practitioners. Taken as a whole, this shed light on the challenges of addressing this topic. Therefore, the following chapter delves into the question of what ethical considerations storytellers face when using humour and how these considerations can be balanced without resorting to censorship.

## CHAPTER TWO: A CREATURE CALLED ETHICS

### WAYS TO PERCEIVE ETHICS IN ART AND COMEDY

Have you ever heard the story of ethics? A great while ago it started to wander from mouth to mouth to text to concept. Philosophers like Immanuel Kant shared their thoughts such as “act in accordance with that maxim which can at the same time make itself into a universal law” (Kant 1785, 55). Kant’s principle is probably one of the foundational concepts for debates on ethics. I consider it useful to keep this idea in mind as a basic premise for human coexistence, when approaching my performance - and more broadly my research. I can also understand the approach of applying the concept as a rule, at least in the sense that I want to embed thinking about ethics as a continuous part of my practice. Writing and analysing jokes which the idea of ethics, opens up controversial viewpoints from practitioners as well as philosophers, and even though it may seem that academic investigation is not an essential part of comedians’ practice, I consider it important because it highlights the complexities and provides a mind-based level of analysis, thus offering suggestions for action.

## BREAK FOR EXPLANATION

When you hear the word ethics do you say: “Ahpppfhuimhpf”? This sound or something like this I heard from several different people as soon as I dropped the word “ethics” when describing my research. It is a term, concept, social idea that is very hard to define concisely or precisely because it relates to any area of human life such as engaging with arts. I chose the word in conversations and I am placing it here because it is so complex and can cause immediate doubt of what follows. The scope of the conversation times or even now the scope of this work is not sufficient to discuss it in all its layers and complexity.

However, I chose to bring the term ethics because it has the ability to provoke. And after all what would you say - are ethics important?

Talking about jokes in connection to ethics is specifically difficult because jokes often play with edges, they try to transgress, play with double meanings, or are open to interpretations. Ultimately, humour is always subjective. Within the realm of ethics and comedy, one can identify various entry points to engage in the debates such as the notion of laughter, the social act of comedic performing or

the joke itself. For instance, a performance can be comedic without the performer using jokes, as in physical comedy or a situation can produce laughter without necessarily being funny, such as laughter out of insecurity. In the following I present different voices of theorists and as a first example I will address the racist joke from the comedy course.

As already described in chapter one, the reason that I and two more people were expelled from the comedy course was our decision to refuse to participate in a show with shared authorship where the moderation contained a racist joke. As the joke is a pun in German it would lose its meaning through translation. I therefore provide a description.

The set-up of the joke is based on a poster campaign by the German right-wing party AfD stating “We love Indians”<sup>2</sup>. The statement refers to cancel culture in a current debate on cultural appropriation in a children’s book. The joke’s punchline is “Since when does the AfD support the red?”. In German, in the political context of the joke red refers to a German left-wing party which uses red as their political colour. However, through the joke set-up referring to Native Americans, red here also is a version of the racist term “redskins”.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.afd-landkreisleipzig.de/zensur-pur-ard-zeigt-keine-winnnetou-filme-mehr/> [accessed on 27.06.2023]. Please note: this link leads to the website of a right-wing political party.

In this example, identifying the joke as racist seems relatively obvious to the extent that the term is officially considered racist. However, due to the fact that this joke was about political parties, it doesn't address the fact that it is racist but simply uses this outdated term to make the political joke. Since the punchline targeted the right-wing party, I assume that the racism was not intended.

### OPINION BREAK

Do you agree with me that humour is subjective? So, setting all the problematics around this joke aside and let's be honest - I didn't find it funny. I get that the construction of the joke - besides the usage of racist language - is well done. Nevertheless, as far as I can remember, no one else laughed or found it extremely funny either. Of course, this is just my opinion and has nothing to do with the question if telling this joke is unethical. But please read on and you will see why I still offered my opinion in an academic paper like the one in front of you.

The debates concerning ethics and jokes often present two contrasting perspectives. One promotes the idea of having jokes that are sexist, racist, ableist, short: discriminating because this will make the joke even funnier. The other one says that discrimination in jokes takes away the humour. This

topic is complex and needs an evaluation from case to case and there are also many more opinions on what is ethical to do between these standpoints, e.g. concerning the intention of the comedian.

In the article "Roasting Ethics", published in the "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism", philosophy professor Luvell Anderson defines this first mentioned perspective as "immoralism" (2020, p. 460). He describes that "for the immoralist, the ethically bad attitudes actually contribute, or at least can contribute, positively to amusement" (ibid.).

This idea is pushed further by academic Martin Schuster to the assertion that - using the example of a sexist joke - it is funnier precisely because it is sexist (2013, p. 618). While I do not agree with the overall essay's standpoint, I acknowledge that there is a possibility that this type of humour has the potential to reveal the sexist attitudes of those who find it amusing (ibid.). People with similar beliefs and a similar style of humour to the person telling the joke can build a target audience for the sexist punchline. This has the dangerous effect that it encourages the comedian to produce this material and believe it is right because there are advocates for it.

Coming back to my opinion in the last break: I don't believe that the originator of the joke constructed it with racist terms to

serve a racist audience because it was directed to also punch at the right-wing party that does support racist attitudes. In the question of whether immoral content of a joke makes it more or less funny, Anderson displays the ethicist as alternative to the immoralist. He explains the “comic ethicist claims that ethically bad attitudes do not necessarily block amusement, but they do always count against a joke’s funniness” (Anderson, 2020, p. 461). He suggests as reason that the laughter is reduced because the audience is making a deliberation on ethical considerations. However, a weakness of this argument is, that in the social setting of a storytelling or comedy show one can never fully control if their words or actions possibly offend or trigger another person. Furthermore, I want to stress that also at a moment when one feels offended, this most likely results in the joke no longer being perceived as humorous, as it can cause harm, for example in case of discrimination.

According to Benatar, “[humour] is immoral where it is intended to harm people or where there are good grounds for expecting it to harm people, and where the harm in question is wrongfully inflicted” (1999, p. 191). He articulates his understanding of harm as negative consequences on people’s interests, encompassing unwanted conditions, hurts and offenses (ibid.). If one examines the joke from the comedy course, still under the premise that the person who constructed it is not racist, according to Benatar it would be considered as inflicting harm:

*“Racial jokes can be harmful and racist even when they do not express racist beliefs. If renditions of jokes inculcate and spread racist views then they are harmful even if the person who tells them does not endorse the stereotypes embodied by them.” (1999, p. 195)*

This can even be taken further: The joke from the course doesn’t present itself as an objective truth but rather uses it as stereotype. The use of racist terminology can 1) produce and/or reinforce a negative stereotype, 2) bring back the term in the (sub)consciousness, and 3) promote the idea that it is acceptable to use the term.

Anderson distinguishes three categories of racial stereotypes in humour. Firstly, the “merely racist”, which means that the intention of the speaker is to undermine a stereotype and it can be assumed the listener recognises this goal. (Anderson 2015, p. 506) The second category is the “racist”, which is the case if a person is “wrongly harm[ed]” because of their “membership in a particular racial group” or the speaker has a malicious attitude or acts out of contempt. (ibid.) The third category which he situates between the first two is termed as “racially insensitive”, which is the case if either there is no aim to counter the stereotype or it cannot be expected to be understood by the audience as such an attempt. This third definition now offers the possibility of classifying and thus evaluating the example joke of the comedy course.

**CONTEXT BREAK**

Let's remember together: The question of whether to include this joke in the show the next day triggered several hours of discussion. The argument the group and the host, H., had was basically a negotiation of what can be said on stage and why. I tried to give a taste of the argument in "Creature Chronicles" (2023) and scripted some of the things that were said into my monologue.

Here's an excerpt:

"What you are trying to do, he said, is cancel culture!

Okay - how about you change the formulation slightly? The wording doesn't need to be this for the joke to work. Or if you insist, maybe just add afterwards a 'by the way did you realise this term is racist?'

No, he said, because technically it is a correctly structured joke as we learned it in the form [in the workshop]. And if I change this or even leave it out you will come and complain about the next joke! You will cancel my right to talk!"

This is my theatre script. In reality, however, he did bring up the statement that there is more material he thinks I would consider problematic. Can you imagine that my brain goes wild when realising that it is probably true? This realisation is accompanied by two thoughts. Firstly, the moderation takes place in a show with shared authorship. A good way would have been to make the material available to everyone beforehand. Although, this would also have required the willingness to change it. The second thought was that this statement means that he possesses an awareness that parts of his material are perceived as offensive or discriminatory. The fact that he is conscious and therefore intentionally creates discriminating punchlines I find alarming.

In another case, an example of an ethically questionable use of humour was illustrated when the organiser shared part of his new show. H. used a picture of people trying to get into a crowded train in India - where people already sat on the roof. He used it to make fun of a problem in Germany. This is an act of supremacy and cultural appropriation, because he takes the depicted situation from a country that is not his own to use it for his purpose. To define cultural appropriation, scholar Rina Arya additionally stresses the importance of "asymmetry of power between two cultures that involves the majority/dominant culture taking from the marginalised

culture" (2021, p.3). It is not addressing any issues in India, it is not connected to the country at all. It is using a picture out of the context that it was taken from in order to create an imaginary context to a joke. Philosophy professor Berys Gaut describes "the apparent target of the joke may not be its real target" and claims that still, the attitude is intended as this is what "motivates the humour" (1998, 58). This joke needs the picture to create an imaginary set-up for the expectation to be broken with the punchline, so the people laugh about the fact that the image and the statement don't fit together. Regarding Gaut's statement it also means that there is a derogatory use of the picture to provoke laughter here: comparing the sincere infrastructural issue in India to a German "privileged problem". Therefore, the comedian actually provokes laughter about the situation in India that the picture shows.

Cultural appropriation is not the same as racism. In this example, the joke has a degrading effect through objectification of the image shown in the picture. In her text "Just Joking: The Ethics of Humor" Robin Tapley presents "social disparity" as well as the notion of "degrading and dehumanizing" as two components of ethically objectionable jokes (2005, p. 180). This is the case when the speaker belongs to a socially dominant group, and purposely degrades people from a socially subordinate group. This definition is also used in a similar way by Anderson, who explains that with regard to unequal social structures, which often place an additional

burden on the disadvantaged, "as rule of thumb, the decent person should not add to that burden by ridiculing their existence for comic relief, especially if the speaker is a member of a socially advantaged group" (2020, p. 462), Both Tapley and Anderson shifted their focus of the analysis to the social situation. I summarise the relevance of this in the following observation: unequal power relations and the abuse of them can make a joke unethical.

### REFLECTION BREAK

This is a lot of theory to chew on, right? Well, to be honest - it is not, is it? To be able to really figure out strategies of possible measurements of what is (un)ethical, there is much more to read and compare. We have merely scratched the surface. And then we still only talk about theory. In the scope of this thesis, I have only brought small insights to show how the discourse can occur. One thing I would like to point out here is the choice of sources: I am aware that the theorists brought in so far are almost all male. Did you realise? Within the frame that I write this text I am struggling to find other voices. Therefore, taking this research further, my aim is to include viewpoints from more genders and especially feminist statements on this topic. Whose name would you like to read in a paper like this one? And why?

In summary, the discussions presented different viewpoints on what a joke may contain or how it may be categorised as unethical, and encountered a range of theoretical perspectives that attempted to categorise this. Ultimately, this leads to the realisation that humour is embedded within social conditions and therefore is connected to social factors that significantly influence its interpretation. To conclude this chapter, I will refer back to my own entry points. Drawing on my background in storytelling and theatre, I argue that ethical considerations in the arts go beyond the field of comedy. Furthermore, I maintain that it is not necessarily about the specific joke, but about the underlying social structure, as I will elaborate in the next chapter.

My practice emerges from dialogues, and my script evolves from telling and retelling the same story again and again because I understand my art and its outcome as related to my surroundings. Following Alain Badiou, scholar Fiona Bannon draws a connection between features of life, ethics and aims: "If we were more attuned to the interconnecting potentials of what goes on around us, we might be able to maximise the common good and benefit that exists in many of our relations" (Bannon 2018, p. 23f.) Through sharing my stories and jokes with the intention to receive feedback and talk about the material I started to work with a dialogue- and reflection based awareness of my own work. I made the ethical consideration part of my practice as I created and

shared with an audience. One of my entry points in doing this was the premise of "producing laughter without hurting anyone" which I very much understand as the basic step of creating common ground for inclusivity.

### STATEMENT BREAK

This is for you and anyone you would like to share it with - an invitation to develop or continue a habit of considering ethics in one's own practice (of whatever this might be - maybe cooking? Maybe going for walks? Maybe even art?) and in the relational encounters with other human beings.

I do not pretend to have solved any of the problems mentioned in this section, but rather wish to highlight considerations that qualify to be included in any comprehensive discussion on the subject of ethics in comedic storytelling. It is not only about what may not be done or said but about understanding the affect of producing humour can be and then - thinking back to Kant's maxim and applying it:

*Ethics is about our ability to operate within the realms of the possibility of change. Ethics is about considering our stance towards ourselves, the contexts in which we live, and the considerations of how we each interrelate with others in our moments of experience. (Bannon, 2018, p. 12)*

By enabling the potential for change and emphasizing interpersonal relations, ethics not only influences individual jokes but also provides a framework for examining broader



structures. In the next chapter, I illustrate this through examples such as a stand-up comedy show, the performance "Creature Chronicles" as well as the concept of a venue hosting comedians.

## **CHAPTER THREE: HOW TO COMEDY**

### **INCLUSIVITY THROUGH RELATIONS**

In this chapter I will investigate the social component of comedy. I describe the underlying political power structures of comedy using Sarah Ahmeds concept of "lines", and propose ways to break these lines open. I will use examples of the stand-up comedy show "Nanette" by Hannah Gadsby, the performance "Creature Chronicles" as well as the concept of the PCCC\*, the Politically Correct Comedy Club.

In chapter one I pointed out the origin of Kabarett as a form of political critique. Even today, comedy is a tool to highlight existing issues, a form of criticism that can be quite powerful by drawing in people through affection. Laughter is a social act of "complicity and solidarity among those laughing, for example in the mockery and ironic investigation of authorities and representatives of power." (Müller 2015, p. 36) The reason for that lies in the format itself which is determined by producing energetic laughter through the reciprocal response to tension and release throughout a performance. Therefore, comedy depends on what theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte calls the "autopoietic feedback loop" (2008, p. 51). The audience and the performance constantly interact

and affect each other. Fischer-Lichte further describes the possibility of the feedback loop to combine the aesthetic with the social and the political to create a temporary community. (ibid.) The spaces of spoken word events are social spaces. Art critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud coins the idea of the "co-existence criterion":

*All works of art produce a model of sociability, which transposes reality or might be conveyed in it. So there is a question we are entitled to ask in front of any aesthetic production: 'Does this work permit me to enter into dialogue? Could I exist, and how, in the space it defines?' (2002, p. 109)*

Comedy reacts to reality as it is usually a response to what is happening in society. The community aspect that comes from laughing at a joke can be a starting point for changing what the joke criticises and a step towards making art that takes more inclusive perspectives than those of a white, patriarchal audience.

The creation of spaces plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of community and affection. The idea of laughing together, being affected as a group, being invited to participate while still having the agency to say no, was something I wanted to explore in my performance. My premise was to invite the audience to participate instead of exposing someone to an interaction as it often is the case in roasting practices of stand-up comedy. Events with several performers are guided by a host who primes the audience to set the atmosphere to make it easier for the teller to affect with humour. I performed alone

but I also worked with the idea of the host. I welcomed the audience already at the door while a brass version of "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun" played. My intention was to create safety through hospitality, and by addressing those entering with a "Hello", or "Welcome", or individual comments such as "You are wet from the rain - now you can dry and relax", I started to prepare the audience members to be open to enjoy.

Another typical technique that hosts use is to explain to the audience what is going to happen, how to behave and react, and more importantly, this relationship is modelled through the use of a warm-up act. In stand-up comedy this often works through roasting audience members by asking them questions to make a joke based on their answer or the way they answered. According to Anderson, one reason to have "practices of insult humor is to promote solidarity among a particular group" (2020, p. 452). While it can generate laughter, this technique carries a risk of offending. Making the one-to-one engagement a pleasant experience is dependent on the decisions of the comedian, and their improvisation. The performer on stage is in a position of power that can easily be abused to get laughs at the cost of the audience member.

## COMMENT BREAK

Have you ever had a joke made on you? It can be quite fun. I acknowledge that people can find it entertaining, and that it possibly functions as a contributing factor to their enjoyment of comedy shows. Additionally, when a comedian selects a participant who appreciates it and adeptly manages these interactions in a respectful, and for the audience member uplifting way, it can be a pleasurable and empowering experience for the individual chosen.

In “Creature Chronicles” I address the audience directly: “You people in the first row, you would live a dangerous life - if this was a comedy show. Because comedians like to roast their audience.” (Maier 2023) Afterwards, I change the mode of talking and explain roasting as a technique of targeting audience members with jokes in a lecture-like introduction of terms used in comedy. There, I am distancing myself from comedy patterns. In storytelling, however, audience warm-up often works through telling a little story and inviting the people to make reactional sounds, for example to laugh if something is funny. As a form of group response this kind of warm-up gives more space for anonymity and agency for the individuals decision to take part compared to one-to-one interactions initiated by the person on stage. Furthermore,

the joint response of the group intends to create an energetic atmosphere and a connection among the people present.

Following this example, I wanted to add another layer through physicality. In “Creature Chronicles”, I invited the audience to imagine and physically represent together the setting of the story I was telling:

*I need your help. Let's create this scenery together.  
I need you people over here to transition into the mountains. Strong and massive. Perfect, stay there! There is a lake, so clear that you can see the fish. You over there, I need you to transition into the floating lake. I love it! And you people in the middle I need you to become the forests. And there are all types of trees, the leafy ones, the more Christmassy type and the ones that doesn't quite know their shape. Amazing! (Maier 2023)*

Important here was firstly, the agency of deciding whether to participate or not remained with the audience members as no one was addressed directly. Secondly, I took part in the action as much as possible to become a part of the community in that moment. The formulations of the prompts were designed so that the actions could only fail. However, I showed the movements or body positions myself first. This moment of collective failure generated laughter as well as it generated communal connection because it was still a collective achievement. Figure 2 shows the participating audience, that not only mirrored my suggested movement but incorporated even more body parts and objects.

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Figure 2: participating audience in "Creature Chronicles"

The timing was coordinated so that holding the position for the participants was not too strenuous and yet long enough to justify the effort of the action. With my physical entering of the audience space – to show the hiking in the mountains and the swimming in the lake – I merge it with the stage area and include myself in the action of failure. Jack Halberstam describes in “The queer art of failure” that “failing [...] may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (Halberstam, 2011, p. 2 f.).

Embracing failure together during this warm-up builds a connection. Further, it shows an alternative to the comedy practice of roasting. The jokes are targeted at someone because of their backgrounds or attributes. In fact, this invitation for action engages the audience with the possibility of laughing about themselves precisely because by embodying a mountain, lake, or tree they transgress the typical audience behaviour and can open up for surprises or new perspectives. This is a step towards answering how comedic storytelling can be framed in order to be inclusive.

For me, the implementation of inclusion is the desired consequence of dealing with ethics and the resulting change of heteronormative structures. In her book “Queer Phenomenology” Sara Ahmed introduces the concept of “lines” to illustrate how bodies and spaces are oriented within social structures. If I apply this concept to the field of

comedy then being “in line” is following the established ways and structures, integrating oneself in “spaces that, as it were, have already taken their shape” (2006, p. 15). It is the path of the white (cis-)male dominated comedy. They are the bodies that currently dominantly inhabit the – physical and social – spaces of comedy and therefore represent normalcy. Lines create boundaries that exclude people who are outside of them. Comedy can become harmful, when the comedian follows the patriarchal line and targets jokes at those who are not a part of it. In the following examples I will use the term lines to refer to common comedy (power) structures.

Hosting can contribute to breaking open the established lines and give space to those who are marginalised. The example of the PCCC\*, the politically correct comedy club, shows how this can work in practice. Self-proclaimed as “Vienna’s First Queer Comedy Club” (WUK 2023), this comedy event series was founded in 2018 and is hosted by its founders, the queer feminist performance artist Denice Bourbon and comedian Joseph Jöchel. It follows the credo “Punch up – but don’t kick down!” (Basis.Kultur 2023). One of the aims of their political comedy is not to reproduce structural inequalities and to reflect the positions from which performers tell the jokes. This is implemented through exchange and reflection by the performers meeting before the show and, with the help of a sensitivity reader in form of a person, reformulating the texts, contextualising and discussing them (WUK 2023).

This approach can create a frame that not only offers a more welcoming space for audience but also helps comedians to engage with their own material through different perspectives. In addition to four comedy events per year, the PCCC\* also hosts open mic events to offer performers a “safe stage” (Basis.Kultur 2023). Compared to other comedy events these shows are already more accessible to a wider audience because they are mixed in English and German language. While it is mostly stand-up comedy that is practiced at the PCCC\* the heteronormative structure gets disrupted by the choice of performers, as “Women/\*, queers and POC have priority in getting a spot!” (Basis.Kultur 2023).

### EXAMPLE BREAK

In Open Mic events, where participants can sign up without the host or venue being familiar to them or their material, the audience is usually aware that the performances can be unpredictable. However, the venue and host still can promote certain values. If you were host of such an event and someone shares something problematic, how do you react? There is always the option to stop them - but that is quite drastic and maybe there is a reason and a plot twist in the end. But right after the performance in your moderation time there is the chance to immediately address it, and

by offering a different perspective, bring back the safety of the space in and to the space.

On this occasion, I can give an example from a storytelling night, which took place in the Mezrab - House of Stories. This venue offers different kinds of storytelling and comedy events presented by various hosts. That one night, a white, elderly man told a story that ended by promoting a football song with sexist lyrics. The host afterwards countered the story by inviting the audience to find new lyrics for the song which was very well received by the crowd. This first unpredictable sexist element was turned into temporary community building and together reacting against sexism!

Hosting can be a way to give space to people who are not typically taking up spaces in comedy. However, within the performance itself, it is also possible to follow the established patterns, to follow the lines, which “depend on the repetition of norms and conventions, of routes and paths taken, but they are also created as an effect of this repetition.” (Ahmed 2006, p.16) Comedian Hanna Gadsby talks in her show “Nanette”, shown in 2018 as Netflix comedy special, about how mechanisms of comedy can have a negative impact on people - performers and audience members - who are outside the patriarchal norm. She shares her coming out story

as lesbian to explain how the joke worked: the punchline of jokes releases pre-established tensions. For this to happen, the story, instead of being fully told and resolved, ends with the punchline, which is usually a moment of trauma. She interrupts the stand-up comedy elements in her program several times, stating that she needs to quit comedy and stop doing self-deprecating humour:

*Do you understand what self-deprecation means when comes from somebody who already exists at the margins? It's not humility. It's humiliation. I put myself down in order to speak, in order to seek permission to speak, and I will simply not do that anymore. Not to myself or anybody who identifies with me. (2018)*

She leaves the lines of traditional comedy patterns by commenting on what she does on stage, explaining the comedy and telling her stories sincerely and even angrily without joking. The stories are about rape, abuse and physical violence that have been done to her and she unveils how she previously used these stories in jokes but now understands the need to fully tell them to feel less alone but connected: "Laughter is not our medicine. Stories hold our cure. [...] Because diversity is strength." (Ibid.) Through leaving the lines, Gadsby criticises comedy: its topics, techniques and patriarchal structure.

My stories shared in "Creature Chronicles" are partly following the lines of comedy. I tried to make these lines visible and visibly break them through changing modes of

telling, switching between characters, bringing storytelling and theatre techniques. The performance was meant to understand comedy and offer to change its patriarchal structures from within.

### JOKE BREAK

Wanna laugh with me? Let me tell you the anecdote of the moment I got invited to the course. I received a letter with the confirmation and opened it in the company of my mother and my grandmother. I was very excited when I read that I got accepted and immediately shared the news with them. My grandmother, very unimpressed, replied: "But why? You aren't funny."

This joke always makes people laugh, in and outside of the performance. It is the typical example of self-deprecating humour stopping at the punchline. I agree with Hannah Gadsby that it does something to your understanding and memory. I told the joke so often that I honestly can't recall anymore what happened next - my memory froze with this punchline.

Reflecting on the performance, I realise that it needs more than my attempts of breaking the lines from within the

comedy techniques I studied for this performance. The risk of “being caught in a negative practice” (Arol 2019, p. 122) is that even through critique a reproduction of these lines happens. To truly open the comedy space for the people and the topics that are placed outside of the structure, the space needs to be re-thought. The fusion with different formats from outside comedy, however, shows a possibility for creating a new path. As already demonstrated, hosting is one of them. Furthermore, two elements in the “Creature Chronicles” offer a starting point for further considerations, which I will present in the following.

The performance revolves around the mythical animal *Wolperdinger* that originates from Bavarian folklore. This creature is put together from different animals, the body of a rabbit, feet of a duck and the antlers of a stag. I use it in my storytelling to merge the auto-biographical stories with fiction. First, I bring the *Wolperdinger* description to open an imaginary picture, creating a dangerous monster that hunts and eats men. Figure 3 shows the embodying of the antlers. In a scene, that I several times disrupt with storytelling about the comedy course, I act out a staged fight with the *Wolperdinger* that culminates in me surviving because the animal was confused about my gender: “What is this? A man? A woman? Do I chase them? [...] Can I even eat this?” (Maier 2023) This moment exposes the perception of gender based on clothing and appearance. Moreover, this imaginary

creature is distracted because its understanding of gender is a binary social construct.

Additionally, I present a puppet version of a *Wolperdinger* on stage. In figure 4, the *Wolperdinger* named Ignaz is illuminated by a spotlight during its first unveiling. As a creature that unites body parts from several animals, it doesn't fit in any normative category. The *Wolperdinger* becomes a metaphor for myself, as I do not identify within binary gender categories. I perform a dialogue between my drag character Herman, who is the owner of Ignaz, and a comedian. In this scene, Herman convinces the comedian that it is unacceptable to make jokes about Ignaz's appearance or identity: “He is not weird. Not absurd. Not funny. What if he is not material for your ideas. Not something for you to talk about but to encounter, to touch” (ibid.). After the comedian has given in, the usually man-hunting *Wolperdinger* even lets himself be pet by him. By bringing the puppet, I introduce an object, a body that doesn't apply to human norms or conventions and therefore disrupts the heteronormative lines of comedy. However, the history of puppetry is with the figure of Punch closely connected to comedy and social satire. “A puppet is a natural transgressor” (Francis 2012, p. 8), which I explore in the last scene of “Creature Chronicles”. In a conversation with the puppet Ignaz, I express the struggles I encountered around comedy. While I try to show understanding for the comedians, I also give my voice to Ignaz and have the



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Figure 3: embodying the antlers of a Wolperdinger in "Creature Chronicles"

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Figure 4: Wolperdinger Ignaz is illuminated by a spotlight during its first unveiling in "Creature Chronicles"

puppet react with anger, and even insults and threatens the comedians. This scene expresses the challenges and complexities of navigating ethical considerations emphasised by the conversation with unresolved questions that ends in a blackout. Although the presence of the puppet is a departure from conventional norms, I strongly recommend that comedy with puppets initiate its own analysis to thoroughly explore inclusivity.

Another attempt to deflect gender normativity is the use of drag within the performance. I introduce my drag king character Herman as the solution to have a conversation with a comedian, who wouldn't talk to me as a non-binary person. The reason for the decision to include drag was that, in this way I ridicule male dominance in comedy, thereby emphasising the need for openness to all genders. Fully visible to the audience, I get into the character of Herman by reversing the jacket that I have used before in this performance, to its brown coloured side. Earlier, I linked the brown side to my description of being dressed accordingly the heteronormative and conservative village conventions. When wearing the colourful side visible, I indicated non-binary freedom of expression, for example in the part where I was fighting the *Wolperdinger*. Further, for the transition to Herman, I add a fur collar, a hat and lastly, put on a self-adhesive fake moustache made of fake fur. The complete transformation can be seen in figure 5, where Herman holds his *Wolperdinger* Ignaz.



Figure 5: Herman and his *Wolperdinger* Ignaz in "Creature Chronicles"

Herman portrays a queer parody of the stereotypically Bavarian, with a heavy Bavarian accent. This character reveals “modes of behaviour [...] and they are robbed of their power, without resorting to the gesture of open criticism” (Gorke 2021, p. 138). The modes Herman shows are cis-men actions routed in privilege but also in toxic behaviour. The most extreme example is, when Herman introduces himself and intimidates the audience by telling them that he has trained Ignaz to kill on command. Also, he demands from the comedian - that the audience needs to imagine - to talk with him. In relation to the idea of feminist humour, comedian and scholar Neslihan Arol describes “subversive laughter” happening in comedy that “attempts to target and parody the dominant heteronormative culture”. (2019, p. 226). Herman, through the parody, subverts the patriarchist trait of the culture.

The second reason to bring Herman as character is to contest gender expectations.

*Drag is an example that is meant to establish that “reality” is not as fixed as we generally assume it to be. The purpose of the example is to expose the tenuousness of gender “reality” in order to counter the violence performed by gender norms. (Butler 2006, p. xxv)*

Hermann’s behaviour changes in the performed dialogue with the comedian to a friendlier and conversation-seeking person to convince the comedian to also take on new perspectives. The comedian starts to make fun of the *Wolperdinger* and

Herman intervenes to protect Ignaz and the animal’s identity. He corrects the misgendering comedian, “This is Ignaz. Not it, he! His pronouns are he/him.” (Maier 2023) The content of the scene illustrates the importance of subverting traditional notions of gender in comedy. Through drag, it additionally becomes a critique of gender norms.

In summary, queer and feminist humour can be a way to create new lines of comedy and ridicule a system that needs to be changed to become inclusive. Alongside different artistic approaches to sharing this humour, such as drag, hosting is a tool to build a community that enables social change.

## CONCLUSION

### NOT THE END BUT A STARTING POINT

The aim of this research is to foster dialogue and encourage individuals to contemplate how art can influence society and how, through ethical considerations, comedy can become more inclusive. Through the sharing of my personal experiences in the performance and engaging in conversations throughout this process, I discovered that my concerns regarding cis-normative structures resonated with others. By engaging in these conversations, I am contributing actively to my goal of promoting debates on ethical considerations. Additionally, by creating a solo performance with comedic elements, I have also positioned myself to apply ethics to my practice, experiencing its limitations and challenges. This thesis has identified several approaches to understand ethical considerations in comedy. It explored ways of analysing jokes to give entry points for debates on this topic. In order to further advance this research, the exploration of ethics in comedy can be expanded upon with Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality. It illuminates the complex political implications of social structures as it shows "the interrelation of forms of oppression" (Jones 2021, p. 263). By incorporating this concept, the importance of ethical considerations in comedy can be further highlighted and its profound implications demonstrated.

Furthermore, I argue that comedy has transformative power through temporary community building. Therefore, it should become a platform for people who are not privileged and part of the dominant group to strengthen society and make it more inclusive. I suggest changes of the patterns of comedy through hosting in order to open the stage for subversive and feminist humour, which “reveals and ridicules the absurdity of gender stereotypes” (Gallivan cited in Arol 2019, p. 116). I refer to the queer, “Politically Correct Comedy Club” PCCC\* as an example. In addition, I discuss elements of hosting that can be applied in other venues as well as in performances, as I have explained with the example of the warm-up in “Creature Chronicles”.

By incorporating comedy elements in my storytelling, and through drag and the use of a puppet, I tackle the issues of power structures in comedy, especially gender inequality as a central theme.

*“Marginalised people who make fun of the system under which they suffer, instead of just making fun of themselves, are still a deviation from the norm - and arouse rage in those who it's a transgression threatens to do so.” (Gorke 2021, p. 124)*

However, I have also found that trying to change the comedic storytelling norms through comedy itself has its limitations, especially as it risks criticising the structures but nevertheless applying them in this way. Therefore, as a next step, I propose to seek inspiration from other disciplines such as, for example, physical comedy, clowning, performance art, queer and social studies, to find new ways of disruption. As our

society changes, art will inevitably change as well - especially comedy as an art form that responds to the society in which it is situated.

## GOODBYE BREAK

Thank you for reading this text.

In my performance I express my struggles with the experiences I had around the research on comedy by admitting that “I should have just said comedy is not my thing” (Maier 2023). But I didn't. One result of this fact is this text. I decided to claim my space on stages and in this text. I shared my personal experiences because I agree with Hannah Gadsby, that “stories hold our cure” (2018). It might be a big question when talking about comedic storytelling but I will ask it anyways: what kind of world do we want to live in?

Feel free to answer it for yourself. For me it raises more questions. How can art contribute to a change and who are therefore the voices about with topics we want to hear? What do we need to hear? Let's claim comedy spaces and use them for empowerment of those that are disadvantaged or disregarded by patriarchal systems.



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