

## Contemporary Comedy on Trial: A Perennial Question on Aesthetics

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**Abstract:** The contemporary surge in ethnic and racial stereotypes represents a notable global trend in the present times. The aim of this paper is to philosophically examine the paradox of individual taste juxtaposed with the normalization of vulgarity in racist jokes, against the backdrop of universal moral schemata and the expectation of common agreement. This discourse seeks to elucidate four primary aspects to enhance our understanding of vulgar jokes in contemporary comedy: firstly, the import of laughter; secondly, the nature of humor; thirdly, the social psychological behavior underpinning such humor; and fourthly, the segmentation of societal spaces which also pints to the contemporary seatedness of comedy. Ultimately, the prevailing standard of beauty—or, in this instance, the humorous—deserves to be elevated to a pedestal precisely so it can be methodically scrutinized: why we continue to consume such antics, tolerate mockery, and normalize it without question.

**Keywords:** *aestheticism, art, comedy, moralism, racism*

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*I don't understand the British.*

*I saw a beautiful British woman looking at a mirror upset.*

*I said what's going on?*

*She said can't you see? It's a fat mirror! She said this mirror makes me look fatter than I really am.*

*I said well I think my eyes have the same problem.*

*I was not mocking her, don't be angry with me! It was a 'cultural misunderstanding.'*

*I'm from Africa, it's different, when we see someone overweight, we don't think of going on a diet, we're more like 'where did you get the food?'*

- Daliso Chaponda, *Britain's Got Talent*

### Comedy and the Current Comedy

In the contemporary context, vulgarity has become alarmingly common that is no longer confined to traditional spaces such as taverns and theaters. This phenomenon has permeated the vast expanse of the global arena. Netflix, for example, is one of the most renowned streaming platforms that made substantial investments in comedic productions, exemplifying the genre of *edgy comedy*.<sup>1</sup> Today's entertainment landscape has swiftly accepted the rapid proliferation of edgy comedy,

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<sup>1</sup> See Bihari and J. V. Yeldho, "Racism Through the Lens of Stand-up Comedy: Digital Ethnography of Netflix Specials," *Media Watch* 14, no. 1 (2023): 61. Edgy comedy pushes the boundaries of what is considered socially acceptable humor. It frequently tackles taboo subjects, including race, gender, and politics, and does so with a mix of satire, irony, and subversion. While some aspects of this genre may be high comedy, its willingness to engage in politically incorrect or offensive humor often leads to discussions on racism, privilege, and societal norms.

which is characterized by its provocative humor leveraging controversial topics such as race, gender, and politics. Those who indulge in this type of humor derive considerable amusement through both physical and digital social settings, especially in the present status of vulgar jests. To illustrate, Daliso Chaponda, a Malawian stand-up comedian, defensively explained that within his African culture, being overweight is regarded favorably as it indicates being well-nourished. This cultural viewpoint is in stark contrast to the British fixation on dieting and slenderness. The humor behind Chaponda's jest emerges from his innocence. His forthright remark demonstrates the pronounced disparity in cultural attitudes towards bodily appearance. Additionally, his quip about the acquisition of food provides an unexpected twist, demonstrating how racial and cultural insights often serve as for edgy comedy.

Chaponda's comedic approach is fraught with potential for offense, affecting not only the immediate audience but also those belonging to the same demographic, as well as individuals outside that demographic. The reception of such material is inherently unpredictable, as it contains racial themes to produce a comedic effect. Despite the inherent vulgarity and sensitivity of the subject matter, the outcome is notably positive.<sup>2</sup> This raises critical questions: what precisely renders it humorous? Is it simply a societal fascination with controversial topics? Or does it depend on the comedian's strategies, timing, facial expressions, and physical movements? What makes this skit resonate and appealing? Why do so many find it amusing, especially those present during the performance? Furthermore, what contemporary standards allow us to deem a comedic piece funny rather than offensive, despite its blatancy?

The incorporation and invocation of racial topics in comedy skits is neither novel nor foreign. Minstrel shows, for example, featured white entertainers wearing blackface makeup to caricature African Americans through song, dance, and skits. Such portrayals heavily relied on racial stereotypes, reflecting and reinforcing the racist attitudes of the time. This type of show began in the 1828 and ascended to become a dominant form of entertainment in the United States by the mid-19th century, maintaining their popularity into the early 20th century.<sup>3</sup> The first full-fledged minstrel show is often attributed to Thomas D. Rice, renowned for his character "Jim Crow."

Comedy has consistently served as a platform for social commentary throughout history. Comedians have utilized humor either to engage with or critique various societal issues, including those related to race and gender. This tradition persists in contemporary times, with audiences expecting comedians to push boundaries and tackle controversial topics. For instance, Paul Pérez contends that:

With respect to race, stand-up comics often rely on blatant racial and ethnic stereotypes of the perceived deficiencies and proclivities of 'others.' Joke tellers justify the use of such stereotypes by pointing out that the role of comedy is to confront touchy subjects, breach norms of etiquette, name taboos, etc...

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<sup>2</sup> Rob Walker, "Daliso Chaponda: From Malawi to a Major UK Tour with Gags about Slavery," *The Observer*, December 31, 2017, sec. Stage, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/dec/31/daliso-chaponda-malawi-gags-slavery-colonialism-britains-got-talent>.

<sup>3</sup> "Blackface! - a History of Minstrel Shows," 2021, *Archive.org*, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140927230547/http://black-face.com/minstrel-shows.htm>.

What matters is ‘being funny.’ The use of comedy to rupture the taboo is not unique to racial discourse, as one can imagine sexual or political humor surfacing in sexually or politically repressive societies.<sup>4</sup>

As an implication, while comedy often conjures images of light-hearted amusement, I argue that the role of a comedian transcends mere entertainment that can have certain implications. It holds profound significance for the mental well-being and flourishing of society, thus confronting *sensitive subject matters*.

This is why the paper aims to philosophically examine the paradox of individual taste juxtaposed with the normalization of vulgarity in racist jokes, against the backdrop of universal moral schemata and the expectation of common agreement. This discourse seeks to elucidate four primary aspects to enhance our understanding of vulgar jokes in contemporary comedy: firstly, the import of laughter; secondly, the nature of humor; thirdly, the social psychological behavior underpinning such humor; and fourthly, the segmentation of societal spaces which also pints to the contemporary seatedness of comedy. Finally, I argue that the prevailing standard of beauty—or, in this instance, the humorous—deserves to be elevated to a pedestal precisely so it can be methodically scrutinized: why we continue to consume such antics, tolerate mockery, and normalize it without question.

### Interrogating Comedy

The class of entertainers known as “jesters,” can be traced back to ancient times. They are individuals who were officially sanctioned and paid to provide comic relief to the king and his court. Their primary duty was not merely to provoke laughter, but also to serve as a corrective force, reminding the monarch of what truly mattered and shielding them from the pitfalls of arrogance and self-importance.<sup>5</sup> This historical precedent suggests that comedy may be more than just a frivolous pastime.

Throughout history, jesters have occupied a unique position in society, often enjoying a degree of immunity when it comes to the consequences of their humor. This leniency stems from the understanding that their role is to entertain and sometimes even to satirize authority figures. This historical precedent of jesters evading punishment for their jests finds resonance in contemporary comedy, where comedians frequently delve into sensitive topics, including race. However, it’s crucial to recognize that the use of vulgar mockery or racially charged humor is not a recent phenomenon. As early as the 11th century, figures like the Persian jester Talhak demonstrated audacity by mocking their rulers, even accusing them of being cuckolded. For example:

One day “Sultan Mahmud was lying down with his head on the knee of Talhak. Suddenly he asked, ‘What is your relation to cuckolds?’ He said, ‘I am their pillow.’<sup>6</sup>

Talhak’s boldness exemplifies the long-standing tradition of comedians pushing boundaries and challenging societal norms through humor. While the context and targets of comedic critique may have evolved, the fundamental tension between freedom of expression and the potential for offense

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<sup>4</sup> Raúl Pérez, “Learning to Make Racism Funny in the ‘Color-Blind’ Era: Stand-up Comedy Students, Performance Strategies, and the (Re)Production of Racist Jokes in Public,” *Discourse & Society* 24, no. 4 (May 2013): 478-503 and 479.

<sup>5</sup> Beatrice K. Otto, *Fools Are Everywhere: The Court Jester Around the World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 76.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

remains a central aspect of comedic discourse. Culture deeply influences the discourse on comedy, forming not only its content but also the way it reflects and interacts with societal values, political dynamics, and aesthetic traditions. Comedy does not exist in a vacuum; it is always embedded within the cultural context of its time, and its evolution is intricately linked to broader social and intellectual movements. Throughout history, the nature and function of comedy have adapted in response to changing cultural paradigms. For instance, during the Middle Ages, theocentric perspectives dominated comedy. It often revolved around religious themes, reinforcing the idea that humor could be a tool for spiritual reflection and moral guidance. During this era, comedy, at times, stressed the personal relationship of the individual to God, with heavy themes of divine order and the need to live morally and ethically. Therefore, through such a comedic form, humans could depict folly before such an almighty divine. It often used the joke to re-enforce piety and demonstrate a person who has erred and wandered from the righteous teachings.

As Western culture entered the classicism period, comedy started to take on a more formal and rational approach, mirroring the increasing significance of reason, order, and humanism. Classicism underscored the distinction between reality and romance, with comedy often focusing on the ridiculousness of everyday life compared to idealized, often heroic presentations of human nature.<sup>7</sup> In this context, comedy was a way to expose the contradictions and failures of people and society, often using satire to comment on social norms and behaviors. The distinction between the real and the romantic became the hallmark of comedic narratives. Humor often came out of the tension between the aspirations of humans and the limitation of reality.

Shakespearean comedy, being at the very top of this movement, shows a more composite mixture of these elements: the comedies of the play exude exuberance in energy, based on romantic plots, mistakes, and happy chaos. However, the darker and more critical parts express the complexity behind the nature of man. While Shakespearean comedy celebrates love and reconciliation, it also grapples with issues of class, gender, and social order, providing a critical lens to the social dynamics of his time.<sup>8</sup> These plays illustrate how comedy can serve not just entertainment but as a vehicle for exploring the deeper, often troubling aspects of society and the human condition.

Meanwhile, discussions over comedy in contemporary world have progressed even more from post-structuralism to critical race theory perspectives. From this angle, a challenge of fixed meanings in post-structuralism assumes that language, symbols, and cultural norms were fluid and contingent.

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<sup>7</sup> For example, in ancient Greece and Rome, comedy was elevated to a form of high art that blended social commentary with entertainment. Aristophanes, often considered the father of Old Comedy, is renowned for his sharp wit, political satire, and humor that critiqued societal issues, especially the flaws of Athenian democracy and its leaders. In Rome, Plautus and Terence carried the torch for comedic theatre, creating farces and plays that focused on stock characters, misunderstandings, and intricate plots. Their work emphasized the distinction between “real” and “romantic” worlds, using comedy to explore the absurdities of life, often through exaggerated characters and situations. See Aristophanes, Menander, Plautus, and Terence, *Classical Comedy*, ed. Penguin Classics (London: Penguin UK, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> The Renaissance period saw the flourishing of complex comedic forms, particularly in English theatre. William Shakespeare is the most famous proponent of comedy during this period. His works, including *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, and *As You Like It*, are filled with romantic entanglements, mistaken identities, and social commentary. Shakespeare's comedic plays were boisterous, joyous, and full of dark, problematic elements that offered profound insights into human nature. Another notable figure, Ben Jonson, while more associated with satire, also contributed significantly to comedic theatre, using humor to address social mores and the human condition. See David Galbraith, “Theories of Comedy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespearean Study*, ed. Alexander Leggatt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 14.

Comedic acts then became a contested space where power and social hierarchies were reflective of the existing reality. Simultaneously, they became sites for their deconstruction. This intersection, or the crossing of race with other social categories such as class, gender, and sexuality, introduces an important critique in the sphere of comedy. It underscores how humor, especially when it comes to ethnic and racial stereotypes, can serve to perpetuate or disrupt racial hierarchies. Comedy becomes, in this sense, a tool for the interrogation and contestation of dominant narratives on race, identity, and power. This discussion centers on the modern explosion of ethnic and racial stereotypes in comedy.

As such, post-structuralism brought a new way of looking at comedy, particularly in the 20th and 21st centuries, emphasizing the fluidity of meaning, deconstruction of societal norms, and challenges to power structures. Comedians like Richard Pryor revolutionized comedy by blending personal experience with sharp social critique in addressing race relations and absurdities of American society. The American entertainer, Bert Williams, explained his comedic technique as such:

I try to portray the shiftless darky to the fullest extent: his fun, his philosophy. There is nothing about this fellow I don't know, I must study his movements, I have to. He is not in me. The way he walks; the way he crosses his legs; the way he leans up against a wall, one foot forward. I find much material by knocking around in out of the way places and just listening. Eavesdropping on human nature is one of the most important parts of a comedian's work.<sup>9</sup>

These stereotypes, often found in popular media and stand-up routines, are a reflection of larger societal tensions and struggles regarding race. At the same time, they also reflect a critical commentary on those very tensions. Those comedians engaging with these stereotypes are not just repeating dangerous tropes but are, more often than not, using them as a tool to provoke thought, challenge societal norms, and address racial inequalities. Thus, in this sense, the aesthetics of comedy in the modern age are very much interwoven with political and cultural discourses in the manner that humor is used to reinforce and resist existing power structures. This paper aims to explore how the aesthetics of critical race theory-informed comedy reveal the ways that the genre functions as a societal mirror and a space in which social critique is established.

Comedy serves as a powerful antidote to despair, offering a light-hearted counterbalance to life's somber and melancholic realities.<sup>10</sup> Despite drawing humor from profound themes such as social inequality, it doesn't trivialize or deny their gravity. Instead, comedy empowers us to confront these challenges with a sense of resilience and defiance. Consider, for example, the stark contrast between Harper Lee's solemn portrayal of social issues such as rape and racial inequality in his book *To Kill a Mockingbird* and comical interpretation of the same subject in TV shows such as *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*. While both acknowledge the seriousness of misery, comedy offers a unique perspective—one that acknowledges pain while fostering strength and optimism in the face of adversity. This is exactly what Beardsley calls the *aesthetic experience*.<sup>11</sup>

## The Imperative for Aesthetic Experience

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<sup>9</sup> Elsie Griffin Williams, "The Comedy of Richard Pryor as Social Satire," *American Humor* 4, no. 2 (1977): 15–19.

<sup>10</sup> Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1958), 575.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

Comedy offers upliftment that embodies a spirit of defiance, inviting laughter in the face of life's hardships rather than succumbing to despair. In the 1965 film *Singin' in the Rain*, exemplified by the titular song performed by Gene Kelly, there is a celebration of joy and optimism even amidst rainy weather. Despite the somber mood, there is a steadfast refusal to give in to *gloominess*. Similarly, during the height of World War II in early 1942, the German love song "*Lili Marleen*" captured the hearts of both Axis and Allied troops. In the midst of overwhelming terror and uncertainty, the song served as a beacon of cheerfulness, emphasizing the importance of resilience and defiance in maintaining morale during wartime. As Fitzroy Maclean puts it:

... (To) Lili Marlene, the new German chanteuse, singing her special song for the Afrika Corps from Radio Belgrade, now in enemy hands... Husky, sensuous, nostalgic, sugar-sweet, her voice seemed to reach out to you, as she lingered over the catchy tune, the sickly sentimental words. Belgrade... The continent of Europe seemed a long way away. I wondered when I would see it again and what it would be like by the time we got there.<sup>12</sup>

Humor has the remarkable ability to empower us by mocking things that may otherwise be perceived as threatening or dangerous. Through ridicule, humor renders the seemingly formidable into something absurd and manageable, thereby offering a sense of relief and empowerment.

Moreover, comedy serves as a powerful antidote for feelings of humiliation, especially when faced with situations that challenge our sense of dignity. In the iconic television series *Mr. Bean*, Rowan Atkinson's portrayal of the profound and monumental character exemplifies this concept. Mr. Bean's antics often verge on the absurd, placing him in situations that could be perceived as embarrassing or humiliating. For example, in the opening sequence of the show, he falls from the light apparently coming from a UFO rendering him an alien, a foreigner from outer space as he is extremely bizarre. His clumsiness and peculiar behavior frequently lead to awkward encounters. Despite these flaws, Mr. Bean's character is presented in a lovable and endearing light. His childlike innocence and unintentional mischief evoke empathy and affection from viewers, transforming what could be seen as humiliating moments into opportunities for laughter and warmth. Through the lens of comedy, Mr. Bean's misadventures become a source of joy and camaraderie, reminding us to embrace our quirks and imperfections with a sense of humor and humility.

If one were to witness a scene with a man resembling Edmund Blackadder, wearing a medieval armor with a conniving and often bumbling behavior whose plans frequently lead to chaos, the immediate impression might be an individual engaging in eccentric and seemingly nonsensical behavior. This description could easily lead to the assessment of Edmund Blackadder as an odd and somewhat bewildering figure. However, the fortunate reality is that Edmund Blackadder exists not in the realm of reality, but within the whimsical world created by the actors. In this context, Edmund Blackadder transcends mere eccentricity to embody the quintessential comedic archetype: the charming yet foolish clown.

The character's flaws are juxtaposed with endearing traits, fostering a sense of affection towards someone whom we might otherwise regard unfavorably. This transformative effect is intentionally done by the creators of the show to portray the character in a lovable light despite being perceived negatively, which alludes to the narrative where Jesus encouraged compassion towards the

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<sup>12</sup> Fitzroy Maclean, *Eastern Approaches* (Great Britain; Alden Press, 1949), 208.

outcasts and sinners. Thus, comedy has the capacity to create positive and empathetic portrayals, challenging stereotypes and fostering benevolent perceptions.

Comedy plays a significant role in mitigating power differentials by encouraging those in positions of authority to engage in self-deprecating humor. Witnessing individuals with influence and status laugh at themselves serves as a reassuring reminder of their humanity and fallibility. Embracing one's own comedic aspects signifies a level of maturity, demonstrating an ability to acknowledge personal shortcomings without becoming overly defensive. Soren Kierkegaard has a better way to explain such phenomenon of humor amidst tragedy:

What gives humour its legitimacy is precisely its tragic side: that it reconciles itself with the pain from which despair would abstract though knowing no way out. Irony is warranted in respect of immediacy because the equilibrium – not as mere abstraction but as an existence-art – is higher than immediacy.<sup>13</sup>

Humor serves as a constructive avenue for those with less power and in despair, thereby facilitating cope and potentially catalyzing response to life's tragic situations.

Indeed, the sentimental implications of comic relief extend beyond mere amusement as it challenges our preconceived notions and societal archetypes. By providing a lens through which we can perceive the underlying collective spirit of defiance against life's adversities, comedy offers a form of solace and resilience in the face of brutality and harshness. To clarify, this perspective does not condone the use of racial topics within comedic materials, but rather to rationalize their presence as a response to our innate desire for control. However, when control is unattainable, comedy serves as a means of coping with life's challenges.

Humor is both the binding force and the wedge in society. In reality, it represents a psychological collective behavior determined by societal norms, power structures, and group identities. Common laughter tends to produce a group identity and facilitates emotional discharge while reinforcing in-group solidarity. Thus, humor without restraint could further promote stereotypes and debase those at the wrong end of its stick. According to psychological theories, such as Freud's *relief theory* and *superiority theory*, humor serves as a means of coping with the societal tensions that exist but simultaneously reinforce hierarchies. For instance, racial or ethnic comedy sketches may both provide a form of catharsis and subtly reinforce social power imbalances. The reception of such humor is usually determined by the social conditioning of the audience, cultural awareness, and collective experience.

In the context of contemporary comedy, the digital landscape plays a very important role in amplifying the psychological impact of humor. Streaming platforms, viral memes, and social media discussions allow comedic content to transcend local contexts, resulting in diverse interpretations based on varying cultural and psychological perspectives.

Additionally, humor relies on shared cultural references and in-group dynamics. Comedians write their own material based on implicit mutual agreements with their audience on what they can assume; that is, a specific level of shared experience, cultural literacy, and so on. When agreements are not aligned, their humor can fail, or even worse, be hurtful. Imagine a comedian who performs at a

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<sup>13</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscripts to the Philosophical Crumbs*, trans. Alastair Hannay (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2009), 435-436

culturally homogeneous audience receiving success in material that he would have failed or perhaps offended at a more varied setting. This dimension of humor from a social psychological perspective relates directly to the dynamics involved in performer-audience relationships that deserve closer inspection in this paper.

An example of how humor fails because of cultural differences is when comedian Tony Hinchcliffe performed at a political rally in Madison Square Garden in October 2024. Known for his relentless and sharp roasting style, Hinchcliffe cracked a joke referring to Puerto Rico as a *floating island of garbage*. His remark was highly controversial since it was offensive to the Puerto Ricans and many others, showing how a joke that might be amusing to one group can be hurtful or inappropriate to another.<sup>14</sup> This incident calls for comedians to be aware of the cultural background and sensitivities of their audience. Material that works well in a homogeneous environment can lead to a backlash in a more heterogeneous environment; therefore, it becomes important for the performer to navigate cultural nuances very carefully to avoid misalignment and offense.

Segmentation of societal space indicates the manner in which comedy performs differently through various materials, cultures, and virtual spheres. Comedy performed and was well supported historically at certain venues—taverns, court jesters’ chambers, or stages, with their expectations and boundary lines. Nowadays, through digital platforms, comedy venues have expanded into a worldwide scale wherein the audience can enjoy comedic contents irrespective of their cultural context or timeline. In the case of comedy clubs or live performances, audiences respond instantly and collectively for a group experience. Stand-up comedy, specifically, occurs in a setting of specialized venues in which there is an agreement between the audience and the comedian.<sup>15</sup> This setting is like a permanent comedy club, theater, or temporary festival tent and frames how the performance is received. The particular context offers two readings: first, a bare, artifice-stripped stage synecdochally signifies the bare, artifice-stripped performances that occur thereon, and thereby indicates the ‘authenticity’ of the performance. The comedy performance is received as an immediate, direct, candid, and almost private encounter with the spectators. Compared to this, digital arenas enable humor to be engaged with asynchronously and alone. Jokes that would find success in one specific culture or situational context become out of context and often lead to misinterpretation once shared online.

This segmentation also extends to cultural and social divides. A comedy skit that may work wonderfully in one cultural or social context can easily elicit backlash, depending on the values or histories of a given moment or the power dynamics inherent in that setting. That is, racial humor serves as a critique of systematic inequality in one setting while perpetuating harmful stereotypes elsewhere. Humor, or rather the failure of it in these segmented spaces, therefore, depends not only on the content but also on the sociopolitical environment that exists and the intended audience. On the contrary, digital spaces blur the lines between public and private spaces of comedy. A joke that was told privately between friends can go viral within a short span of time and become a controversy.

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<sup>14</sup> Kirsten Fleming, “Comedian Roasted for MSG Rally Jokes Is No Racist — Joe Biden Is Much Further out of Line,” *New York Post*, October 30, 2024, accessed December 24, 2024, 12:00 p.m., <https://nypost.com/2024/10/30/opinion/comedian-tony-hinchcliffe-roasted-for-msg-rally-is-no-racist/>.

<sup>15</sup> Ian Brodie, *A Vulgar Art: A New Approach to Stand-Up Comedy* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), 20.

This raises critical questions regarding accountability, the interpretation of the audience, and shifting boundaries of comedy spaces.

### Re-understanding Humor through Aesthetics

The nature of humor presents a bizarre paradox that is both universally recognized and deeply understood. Humor operates within the realm of judgment, making it a subjective experience—an aesthetic encounter. While aesthetic judgments are inherently rooted in individual feelings and preferences, they also aspire to a *universal validity*, suggesting that others should concur with our judgments if they are correctly made. This duality creates a tension between subjectivity and universality in aesthetic evaluations. As Immanuel Kant posits:

It is quite plain that in order to say that the object is beautiful, and to show that I have taste, everything turns on what I make of this representation within myself, and not on any factor which makes me dependent on the existence of the object. Everyone must allow that a judgement on the beautiful which is tinged with the slightest interest, is very partial and not a pure judgement of taste. One must not be in the least prepossessed in favour of the existence of the thing, but must preserve complete indifference in this respect, in order to play the part of judge in matters of taste.<sup>16</sup>

This implies that it is an intrinsic aspect of aesthetic judgment to expect others to agree with us. Although we often say, “*beauty is in the eye of the beholder*,” our actions suggest otherwise. We debate and argue about our aesthetic judgments, especially regarding works of art, and we believe that such discussions can yield meaningful conclusions. For many purposes, “beauty” functions as though it were a real property of an object, akin to its weight or chemical composition. However, Kant asserts that universality and necessity in aesthetic judgments are products of features of the human mind, which he refers to as “*common sense*,” and that no objective property of an object renders it beautiful.

The nature of humor and what we find funny can be fruitfully explored through a Kantian critique of judgment. According to Kant’s first moment of judgment, we find something humorous because it elicits pleasure and simultaneously seems to serve a purpose. Laughter, therefore, might be deemed necessary not only for its role within societal ethos but also for its psychological benefits. This necessity imbues humor with teleological significance, suggesting that it possesses its own intrinsic formal properties that justify its worthiness.

However, this perspective brings us to a critical examination of the concept of *transgression*, which will be elaborated upon in subsequent sections. The paradox lies in humor’s inherent tension between subjective pleasure and the universal aspiration of comedic judgment. Although humor is deeply personal, our interactions imply a belief in their universal appeal. This intersection of subjectivity and universality in comedic judgment raises profound questions about the nature of humor and its role in human experience. As Kant asserts, the universality and necessity we attribute to humor are products of the human mind’s faculties, rather than any objective property inherent in a joke or comedic situation.

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<sup>16</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith, ed. Nicholas Walker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 37.

## Standards of Beauty... and *Funny*

Beauty, in philosophical discourse, is contemplated as an aesthetic attribute, implying that it is bestowed upon objects through subjective-universal judgments, derived from pleasure and productivity. However, our perception of beauty, goodness, or, indeed, humor—every attribute we attribute based on personal preference—is contingent upon our cultural milieu. Consequently, our societal norms and economic conduct derive from these cultural underpinnings. Yet, our conduct and artistic expression are riddled with perplexity and intricacy. While we adhere to a particular moral framework, we often transgress its boundaries. We find amusement in jokes laden with racial themes, consuming them as if they were conventional forms of entertainment. However, the reception of such topics in real-world contexts is markedly distinct, highlighting the enigmatic nature of human behavior and societal norms.

The artists themselves then, I posit, take up the position of artworld ‘jesters’, like those of the English historical tradition, employed by noble persons to entertain their guests. They thus straddle both the inside and outside of artworld infrastructures. This special liminal position is what allows them to poke fun at the ‘court’, an approach also noted by Sheri Klein who writes, ‘Certainly, temporary clown/artists draw upon moral, social, political and aesthetic issues, and in doing so, they embrace the role of rebel’.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, there exists an expectation that everyone should find humor in such jests. Those who fail to do so are often labeled as rather *foolish* or, simply, *lacking in common sense*, thereby earning the disparaging epithet of *killjoy*. Thus, we deem it pleasurable, beautiful, and ultimately funny.

This phenomenon of deeming antics and skits, for instance, as funny and ridiculous are, just like how Kant presupposed an aesthetic judgment, based on a *private* feeling but there is an expectation from everybody to laugh at the same object. Should an individual fail to align with this collective sentiment, they risk being subject to *blame* for their differing judgment.<sup>18</sup>

Before stepping into the complexities of our reception and consumption of comedy skits featuring vulgar jokes, particularly within the context of contemporary cultural attitudes towards racism, it is essential to address a fundamental question: Does art require alignment with morality? Must our approach to sensitive issues such as racial discrimination and power dynamics reflect our socio-political, moral, and perhaps even religious convictions?

## Transgression of Morality

Andres Serrano, an American photographer and artist, gained significant attention for his series of Cibachrome photographs featuring iconic objects submerged in bodily fluids, such as urine. Among his most notable works is *Piss Christ*, a photograph depicting a wood and plastic crucifix suspended in the artist’s urine, measuring 5 feet by 3 feet. This particular artwork sparked nationwide protests in the United States in 1989, prompting Congress to pass a law directing the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) to disregard *depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the sexual*

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<sup>17</sup> Nicola McCartney, “The Significance of Authorial ‘Play Spaces’ for Seriously Funny Art,” in *Comedy in Crises: Weaponising Humour in Contemporary Art*, ed. Chrisoula Lionis (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 102.

<sup>18</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 43-44.

*exploitation of children, individuals engaged in sex acts, and which do not have serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value* when awarding grants.<sup>19</sup>

The conflict between the NEA and the US Congress transcends mere institutional or ideological struggle; it is fundamentally philosophical in nature. At its core, it embodies the tension between the autonomy of art and artistic expression and our adherence to prevailing socio-ethical values and principles; or are they *inseparable*?<sup>20</sup> This dilemma extends to contemporary comedy, raising questions about whether art truly exists beyond the realm of morality. Can art be considered exempt from moral scrutiny? Advocates for the autonomy of art may argue that the authenticity of the art form lies at the heart of this debate. Personally, while I appreciate and engage with comedic content circulating online, including skits and memes, I believe it is imperative to question whether art should ever subvert morality—for this inquiry is intrinsic to philosophical discourse surrounding the nature and purpose of art.

In Plato’s *Phaedrus*, for example, beauty is conceptualized as that which incites our yearning for moral goodness. Our perception of beauty plays a triggering role in propelling us towards virtue and the pursuit of knowledge concerning the good.

And now I think that you will perceive the drift of my discourse; but as every spoken word is in a manner plainer than the unspoken, I had better say further that the irrational desire which overcomes the tendency of opinion towards right, and is led away to the enjoyment of beauty, and especially of personal beauty, by the desires which are her own kindred—that supreme desire, I say, which by leading conquers and by the force of passion is reinforced, from this very force, receiving a name, is called love.<sup>21</sup>

Plato introduces the idea of a supreme desire, fueled by passion and reinforced by its very intensity, which he labels as “love” or *erromenos eros*<sup>22</sup>. This love, Plato implies, transcends mere physical attraction; it encompasses a deep, passionate longing that can overpower rational judgment and lead individuals to pursue beauty and desire with fervor. Notably, in his work *Republic*, Plato criticized music and poetry arguing that these arts were *‘corrupting the youth.’*<sup>23</sup> His critique culminates with Socrates asserting that poets, including Homer, would be banned from the ideal city.

Similarly, Aquinas, in his neo-Platonic work *Summa Theologiae*, articulates the notion that *Beauty and goodness in a thing are identical fundamentally; for they are based upon the same thing, namely, the form; and consequently goodness is praised as beauty.*<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, Aquinas posits that both concepts share a

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<sup>19</sup> NCAC Staff. “National Endowment for the Arts: Controversies in Free Speech - National Coalition against Censorship.” *National Coalition Against Censorship*, 2019, <https://ncac.org/resource/national-endowment-for-the-arts-controversies-in-free-speech>.

<sup>20</sup> Elisabeth Schellekens, *Aesthetics and Morality* (London; New York: Continuum, 2008), 95.

<sup>21</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. B. Jowett (The Project Gutenberg, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> While eros, “ἔρως”, certainly encompasses elements of attraction and desire, its primary focus lies in the pursuit of beauty, truth, and spiritual fulfillment. Thus, for Plato, erotic love represents a profound and transcendent longing that forms the basis for the human quest for wisdom and enlightenment.

<sup>23</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, ed. G. R. F. Ferrari, trans. Tom Griffith, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 61.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Aquinas and Dominicans, *Summa Theologica*, (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1981), Reply to Objection 1, 58.

common objective: while moral goodness guides us towards the attainment of our ultimate aims, beauty invites contemplation of the realization of such fulfillment-*causa formalis*.

Explicitly addressing this theme, the poet and philosopher Friedrich Schiller, in his efforts to revise and elucidate what he considered the central elements of Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, posits that our sense of beauty inherently serves moral purposes. Schiller argues that *aesthetic education*—the deep and contemplative engagement with objects of beauty—has an expressly moral objective.

That which I before said of moral experience can be applied with greater truth to the manifestation of “the beautiful.” It is the mystery which enchants, and its being extinguished with the extinction of the necessary combination of its elements.<sup>25</sup>

Unlike many of his contemporaries, who viewed the problem of taste primarily as an artistic and cultural issue, Schiller believed that an intimate familiarity with the fine arts is crucial to fostering a desire for the common good. Thus, the cultivation of taste becomes an integral component of our *moral education*. This ultimately implies that if a work of art contains immoral implications, those implications can be considered as contributing to its ‘aesthetic defects.’ Consequently, the aesthetic value of art may be compromised by its immorality.

We then ask the question, “Should art invariably be evaluated within a specific moral framework vis-a-vis *moralism*?” On one side of this debate is the autonomism movement. As Noel Carroll writes:

...it is clear that once we categorize the situation as an artwork, our response to it will differ radically from the way in which we regard comparable seated couples in “real” life.<sup>26</sup>

Art and ethics are autonomous realms of value, and criteria from the ethical domain should not be applied to evaluate the aesthetic domain. This perspective, known as *aestheticism*, asserts that art should be valued for its aesthetic qualities rather than for its potential to morally enlighten or improve us.

Another perspective on Immanuel Kant's critique of judgment emphasizes the need to distinguish between aesthetic and moral faculties. Kant posited that what we find pleasurable aesthetically reflects our taste, while moral pleasure is derived from our moral feelings. Clive Bell further contends that art, particularly visual art, must fulfill two crucial criteria: it should elicit a specific emotional response—a *means to emotion*. This emotional response forms the appropriate basis for its aesthetic evaluation.<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion: Race as a Subject of Comedy

Therefore, in light of the debates surrounding *artistic transgression*, what does our reaction to racial jokes indicate about our values and the broader context of Western culture? Both race and humor scholars suggest that overt racist discourse has largely vanished from public view. The primary theories of humor interpret it as a tool for fostering *in-group solidarity* while *establishing out-group boundaries*, often by means of oppression or control. Additionally, humor serves as a *relief mechanism* or social

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11. <sup>25</sup> Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Reginald Snell (New York: Dover Publications, 2013),

<sup>26</sup> Noël Carroll, *Philosophy of Art: A Contemporary Introduction* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), 81.

<sup>27</sup> Clive Bell, *Art* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1913), 77.

safety valve and as a way to resolve *incongruity*.<sup>28</sup> These theories, though not mutually exclusive, provide various insights into the societal functions of humor.

The *superiority theory of humor*, however, posits that one of its main functions is to assert dominance over others. Building on Freud's analysis of the "tendentious joke" in *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, this theory of humor posits that jokes provide a means to express otherwise unspeakable thoughts and release repressed feelings of anger and resentment towards individuals or institutions. As Freud writes:

Where a joke is not an end in itself, i.e., innocuous, it puts itself at the service of two tendencies only, which can themselves be merged into a single viewpoint; it is either a hostile joke (used for aggression, satire, defence) or it is an obscene joke (used to strip someone naked [Entblößung]).<sup>29</sup>

For over a century, spanning from the pre-Civil War period to the pre-Civil Rights era, blackface minstrel shows were a prevalent form of humor in American society, serving to subordinate Black Americans. During this time, white performers brazenly painted their faces black with burnt corks to imitate, mock, and caricature both Southern and Northern African Americans.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, scholars observe that humor was used as a tool to force immigrants to get americanized by ridiculing their language and customs in a 'banally mundane way'.<sup>31</sup>

The pre-civil rights period was marked by ethnic and racial '*humor of accommodation*' (that is, accommodating to white tastes and expectations). They observe that it was during and after the civil rights period that ethnic and racial minorities, blacks in particular, openly engaged in anti-racist comedy or 'reverse discourse' as a form of resistance to oppression.

Lastly, the *relief theory of humor* underscores its function in alleviating social tensions, rupturing societal norms, and disrupting established conventions.<sup>32</sup> Notably, comedians of color emerged as influential figures during this period, using their comedic prowess to address racial inequality and promote social change, thus contributing to the easing of racial conflicts within society. Emphasizing the significance of proximity in humor, Mikhail Bakhtin observes that:

Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its centre, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it.<sup>33</sup>

Humor serves as a potent vehicle for individuals on the margins of society to mock and defy established systems of order. Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the *Carnavalesque* embodies a domain of unfettered freedom and emancipation, where laughter, parody, and grotesque imagery hold sway. This mode of expression exalts the corporeal, the grotesque, and the anarchic, frequently integrating

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<sup>28</sup> Emma Sullivan, "Kara Walker's Fons Americanus: A Comic Anti-Monument," in *Comedy in Crises: Weaponising Humour in Contemporary Art*, ed. Chrisoula Lionis (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 69.

<sup>29</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 92.

<sup>30</sup> See Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (London: Verso, 1990).

<sup>31</sup> Simon Weaver, *The Rhetoric of Racist Humour: US, UK, and Global Joking* (London and New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2011), 54.

<sup>32</sup> McCartney, "The Significance of Authorial 'Play Spaces,'" 115.

<sup>33</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 23.

elements of wit, satire, and hyperbole to interrogate prevailing ideologies and power dynamics. Through laughter, we are able to challenge the power structures not only in its ideological form in our society but in the sense of *cosmological order*, thus an *existential refusal*—and hence farther rendering us more mature in viewing life. Bakhtin contends that through the Carnavalesque, voices and perspectives relegated to the periphery can assert themselves, while entrenched hierarchies are subject to scrutiny and subversion.

Skits that feature racial topics, often viewed as conduits for discriminatory racism, possess a potential beyond mere offense. Rather than perpetuating divisions, they possess the capacity to foster relational and mutual understanding among individuals from varied backgrounds. Laughter, stemming from a recognition of truth and relatability within comedic content, can signify an acknowledgment of shared experiences and a readiness to engage in discourse about sensitive topics. Through humor, barriers are *dismantled*, paving the way for *genuine connections* and contributing to a more inclusive and interconnected world.

One prime example of these claims that will be depicted is the “*The Race Draft*” in Dave Chappelle’s Show.<sup>34</sup> In this draft, a “draft” occurs to various racial and ethnic groups as they each pick from a set of famous personalities, utilizing stereotypes to add humor. While the sketch uses racism as a form of comedic ridicule of how America sells race and identity as commodities, it also introduces an opportunity to reflect over racial tensions and divisions so that it can both lead to laughter and deeper analysis. In this way, the sketch uses humor through pointing out the absurdity about racial categorization while passing a subtle critique on the way society allows these divisions in society. The laughter created through the sketch can be termed as mutual recognition—a form of mutual understanding about tensions inherent in racial identity and the complexity of race negotiations in a multi-ethnic society.

Another example would be *Black Jeopardy* from Saturday Night Live (SNL). This is a sketch that repeatedly brings to the fore differences and stereotypes in American culture related to race, but there is an added layer of empathy and shared understanding here.<sup>35</sup> A notable episode is when Tom Hanks played a Trump-supporting white man who ended up participating in a game of “Black Jeopardy” with predominantly African-American contestants. The sketch plays on stereotypes and cultural differences but also shows moments where the characters realize their shared human experiences, resulting in a moment of mutual understanding and laughter. Here, humor becomes the way to engage with issues that are uncomfortable—alignment, race, and identity—while also provoking reflection and empathy.

It is not clear how these claims are workable: humor rooted in racial topics can indeed be a good vehicle for dialogue and understanding, *but it needs to be handled with care*. Cultural positionalities—the social and historical context from which individuals view the world—play an important role in how one receives racial humor. Those who occupy marginalized or oppressed racial positions may view certain racial jokes as reinforcing harmful stereotypes rather than promoting understanding. In contrast, members of dominant cultural groups may perceive these sketches as humorous without

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<sup>34</sup> See Lyndsey Lyn Wetterberg, *Deconstructing “Chappelle’s Show”: Race, Masculinity, and Comedy As Resistance* (master’s thesis, Minnesota State University, Mankato, 2012), Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato, <https://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/etds/133/>.

<sup>35</sup> *Saturday Night Live*, Season 43, Episode 3, “Black Jeopardy,” (NBC, 2017).

recognizing their potential to perpetuate inequities. The reactions to these sketches are often shaped by the viewer's own experiences with race, privilege, and historical power dynamics.

Theoretically speaking, critical race discourse, therefore, would be extremely skeptical of these claims in that while humor can stand as a form of resistance, it can also further normalize and trivialize what is systemic racism. Students in this field of scholars often argue that the requirement for humor is to break beyond the mere pointing out of racial issues and to deliberately explore power structures and inequality more deeply. While some people appreciate the fact that comedy could open the door for conversation, others may criticize the fact that it doesn't solve the root problems in the structural division of race. This means that while such a sketch can effectively create a mutual understanding in one scenario, in another, its effectiveness may differ because of cultural positionalities.

In globalization, humor becomes a useful tool to overcome cultural barriers and achieve cross-cultural understanding. Such sketches become a means of cultural sharing which help us to gain insight into the different outlooks and experiences of others. As society becomes more and more global, humor fills the language gap and travels across cultures. Through the discovery of shared humanity in laughter, people gain empathy and awareness of different outlooks and thus learn to develop a better global village.

In terms of racial matters in comedy sketches, it's not about what words to use but which audience, time and place to use those words. Race-related material as a form of comedy requires sophistication as a premise for laughter because of the inherent danger of hurting someone's feelings and the need for proper context. Moreover, comedy sketches on racial matters and social justice integrity hang on getting the other elements right.

It is critical to understand that comedy exists within a social context defined by the sensibilities of the viewers. The same skit can be funny to one audience and offensive to another. As Ian Brodie puts it:

... the consequences of stand-up comedy do not extend into the "real world": there is a mutual understanding between audience and performer that what is said in performance does not require enactment.<sup>36</sup>

The difference may be the general racial composition of the audience and the racial attitudes prevalent in their society. Furthermore, context includes time as comedy never exists in a vacuum; the social and political climate at the time of the performance defines the boundaries of comedic expression. A comedy sketch about racial issues that misjudges its audience, the time, or the place – without the necessary sophistication and context – has the potential to do harm instead of good, and may actually reinforce detrimental stereotypes. Brodie continues:

But the nature of that entertainment, for both performer and audience, both participants in a performative exchange, implies how the "text" presented by the stand-up comedian can so easily fail in its immediate goal of eliciting laughter. It can be found "not funny" in one of two ways: it can simply not elicit laughter as it is found trite, dull, uninspiring, or insipid; or it does not elicit laughter by it being too painful, too scandalous, too threatening, too novel. It is deep play.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Brodie, *The Vulgar Art*, 20.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

In short, the use of racial issues within the comedic discourse of a skit can be an effective tool of critique or comment but requires caution and sensibility in doing so as we still use invariable judgments in the very first place as Immanuel Kant posited- that is, in the end, the uncertain nature of our judgment faculty. The audience, time, and place of a comedic skit matter greatly in determining when racially charged comic commentary crosses the line of sensitivity for the sake of humor, and ultimately transgressing the cultural and moral sensibility of racial talk. At the very least, for now, we are not anymore conscious of color on a global scale. Negative reception still persists, in the end we differ in judgment because, despite the blurring of social standards, society is still composed of people endowed with the same faculty vis-a-vis people belonging to *autonomism* or *moralism*. Comedians and audiences alike must be keenly aware of these factors to ensure the use of racial issues within comedy serves to expand the social conversation around race and identity instead of diminishing it.

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