

What Makes Humor Aesthetic?

Mordechai Gordon
Professor of Education
School of Education
Quinnipiac University
(203) 582-8442
USA

Abstract

The connection between humor and aesthetic experience has already been recognized by several thinkers and aesthetic educators. This essay extends the research of John Morreall and others who have examined the various connections between humor and aesthetics by focusing on the distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic humor. The author begins his analysis by describing the nature and purpose of aesthetic experience while briefly distinguishing it from other human endeavors. In the next part, he critically examines Morreall's distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic humor and argues that it does not adequately account for the differences between the two. The final part of this essay proposes an alternative understanding of the distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic humor. Drawing on the example of four comedic performances, the author asserts that the difference between aesthetic and non-aesthetic humor needs to be assessed on the basis of the impact of the humor on the people who are viewing it rather than on the motivations and intentions of the performer.

Keywords: humor, aesthetics experience, art, comedy, performance

I. Introduction

The connection between humor and aesthetic experience has already been recognized by several thinkers and aesthetic educators. For instance, humor theorist John Morreall (Morreall 1981: 57) writes that "humor is best understood as itself a kind of aesthetic experience, equal in value at least to any other kind of aesthetic experience." For Morreall, both humor and aesthetic experience involve the use of the imagination, are accompanied by a sense of freedom, and often lead to surprises that we did not anticipate. Another theorist (Martin 1987: 181) has noted that the appreciation of specific kinds of humor and particular aesthetic experiences versus others are often matters of taste. Still, other researchers (Hartz & Hunt 1991: 304) have argued that aesthetic matters play a crucial role in certain kinds of humor that they call advertent.

Humor is used here in the broad sense of the term to refer to "that quality of action, speech or writing, which excites amusement" (OED) and often results in laughter. However, there are many cases of amusement like singing and dancing, which are not humorous and do not result in laughter. There are also many cases in which people laugh that are not really humorous (e.g., tickling, running into an old friend on the street, feeling embarrassed). Our sense of humor is that capacity that enables us to identify ironical, cynical, sarcastic, witty, ludicrous and generally funny expressions, comments or actions. It can manifest in many different ways including jokes, puns, funny facial expressions, imitating others, spontaneous comments that amuse people and so forth. Our sense of humor enables us to laugh not only at other people, situations, and funny incidents that we read or watch, but also to laugh at ourselves. In short, humor allows us to view the world from a perspective that is amusing and comical rather than serious or sad.

Many philosophers from Plato to Hobbes subscribed to what is called the Superiority Theory, which considered laughter and humor as an expression of our delight in the shortcomings of others. Two other theories that have attempted to explain laughter and humor are the Relief and the Incongruity Theories. Briefly, the former suggests that laughter functions to release nervous energy (Spencer and Freud); whereas the latter claims that laughter arises when we perceive something as incongruous (e.g., Kant and Schopenhauer). Contemporary humor theorists such as Michael Clark, Mike Martin and John Morreall have proposed more comprehensive views of the Incongruity theory. Rather than arguing for a general theory of humor, which would attempt to explain what makes people laugh in all situations, I would advocate an eclectic view of humor. Sometimes we laugh at jokes or comments that point out the shortcomings of others and make us feel superior to them.

On many occasions we laugh when we discover an incongruity or a discrepancy between our expectations of something to follow a certain pattern and our actual perceptions of this reality. Still, on other occasions we laugh simply when we are playful with friends or family or make witty remarks toward others. Donald Hanks (2001) echoes the point that it is virtually impossible to construct a general theory that would cover all the different instances of humor when he writes that:

humor wells kaleidoscopically from unseen depths, forever bursting into novel instantiations, and will therefore resist the formulation of any general theory that seeks to integrate it with the other causes of laughter by isolating a single thread. (p. 32).

In this essay, I would like to extend the research of Morreall and others who have examined the various connections between humor and aesthetics by focusing on the distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic humor. I begin my analysis by describing the nature and purpose of aesthetic experience while briefly distinguishing it from other human endeavors. In the next part, I critically examine Morreall's distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic humor and argue that it does not adequately account for the differences between the two. The final part of this essay proposes an alternative understanding of the distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic humor. Drawing on the example of four comedic performances, I assert that the difference between aesthetic and non-aesthetic humor needs to be assessed on the basis of the impact of the humor on the people who are viewing it rather than on the motivations and intentions of the performer.

II. The Nature and Purpose of Aesthetic Experience

Perhaps the most important characteristic shared by the vast majority of aesthetic experiences is that they have intrinsic value for people. Unlike other human pursuits and endeavors, aesthetic experiences are not instrumental, which means that they are not motivated by goals (like money or fame) that are extrinsic to the activity itself. As Elliott Eisner (Eisner 1972: 280) writes,

Aesthetic experience is a process emerging out of the act itself. Unlike so many other types of human activities the experience that constitutes art does not begin when the inquiry is over – it is not something at the end of a journey, it is part of the journey itself.

Margaret Macintyre Latta (Latta 2001: 50) agrees with Eisner, noting that the significance of the aesthetic experience is not really evaluated by the *product* (i.e., the artistic object), but rather by the *process* of making art. For Latta, this process involves the act of interpreting, constructing meaning and engaging in dialogue with nature and the canvas she is painting on.

Aesthetic experience is, therefore, quite different from other human activities such as work, which is frequently driven by external motives, therapy in which we concentrate on understanding and treating our own symptoms and feelings or those of others, and even studying which is all too often a means to attain another end. As such, aesthetic experience is much more like play in which people, and especially children, do for the sheer enjoyment that it provides. Several theorists (Morreall 1981: 60; Parsons 2002: 26) have pointed out that aesthetic experience presupposes a kind of distancing or emotional detachment from practical concerns and immediate threats. However, the term emotional detachment can be misleading since people who have an aesthetic experience are actually deeply engaged with the aesthetic object. The detachment that people feel in aesthetic experience is a distancing from our everyday duties and responsibilities *for the sake of* being engrossed in the experience itself.

Like other kinds of aesthetic experiences, humor involves the temporary suspension of practical concerns in order to feel pleasure and be amused. In fact, when we are preoccupied with work or other practical matters, we typically do not find the humorous words or deeds of others amusing or funny. Another similarity between art and humor is the intrinsic value that both have for us. Many people appreciate jokes or funny remarks for their own sake, with no ulterior motives, much like they enjoy a visit to a museum. In both cases, what is essential (enjoyable) is the *experience* of hearing a good joke or visiting a museum, not some result or goal that is extrinsic to this experience.

Paradoxically, while aesthetic experiences are not instrumental, one of the most important characteristics of these experiences, as Michael Parsons notes (Parsons 2002: 26), is that they are object-centered—meaning that they are “focused on the qualities of some object external to the self.” When we are engaged in any kind of aesthetic experience, whether admiring some paintings in an art museum, listening to a musical performance, or gazing at a beautiful sunset, the focus of our attention is on the aesthetic object rather than on ourselves.

Parsons argues correctly that in all these cases, the qualities of the objects—the painting, the musical performance, and the sunset—are experienced as belonging to the aesthetic objects themselves and not to the viewers who are encountering them. To be sure, different viewers may react quite differently to such aesthetic experiences based on their unique interests and tastes, background knowledge, particular mood at the time, and so forth. For example, when gazing at a beautiful sunset on the beach some viewers might describe it as simply glorious while others might focus on the shades of red, orange and gold that they can see. Yet despite the differences in how they respond to such moments, when people have an aesthetic experience they tend to focus on the particular qualities of the objects they perceive rather than on their own attributes and strengths.

In addition to the characteristics already mentioned, aesthetic experiences involve a heightened awareness of the qualities of objects or people “even if they are qualities of pain or tragedy that might otherwise overwhelm us, or be too aversive” (Parsons 2002: 26). Maxine Greene (Greene 2000: 13), who for decades has been one of the most vocal advocates of integrating the arts into the curriculum, claims that aesthetic experiences can “nurture a ground for enhanced wide-awakeness and thoughtfulness and consciousness of one another.” In Greene’s view, aesthetic experiences are essential because they help us become more aware of the deficiencies of our existence while simultaneously opening our imagination to new possibilities for transforming our lives for the better.

To illustrate this point better, it is useful to consider the impact that art can have on us, while acknowledging that there are many other kinds of aesthetic experiences that can have similar effects. The arts, whether we are talking about drama, literature, painting, music or film, are important in that they call our attention to the complexities, ambiguities, and uncertainties of human existence. As Eisner (Eisner 1996: 10) notes, “unlike many other fields where precision and correctness are virtues, the arts often celebrate ambiguity and convey multiple meanings.” The confusion and indecision of Hamlet, the intricacy of a John Coltrane tune, the mysteriousness of a Corbet landscape, and the struggles of the heroine in the film *Frida*—all capture something fundamental about what it means to be human. They do this by making manifest a range of perspectives on the human condition, many of which may not have been visible to us before. Those who encounter such works of art not only experience the frailties of human existence (e.g., jealousy and betrayal) but also the promises and possibilities that it can engender (e.g., love and redemption). In short, aesthetic experiences can provide us a viewpoint on the human condition that is both profound and liberating.

In a similar way to art, humor is beneficial in providing social criticism and exposing inconvenient truths that might otherwise be difficult for many people to accept. Indeed, as Shakespeare’s comedies illustrate, the truth is often communicated to us through the medium of the Fool who uses silliness and humor to convey the sobering message. Using comedy is a very effective way to communicate the truth because it transforms frankness into a less threatening and confrontational style of discourse (e.g. Jon Stewart and Bill Maher). As Sammy Basu (Basu 1999: 391) argues, “comedy can make palatable what is otherwise hard to swallow.” Humor, in short, is similar to art in that it has the potential “to reveal fissures within the notions through which we understand the world, and therefore even in reality itself as we comprehend it” (Farber 2007: 84). Both art and humor are very effective in calling our attention to the ambiguities, incongruities, and absurdities that characterize human existence.

It is important to emphasize that I am subscribing to an honorific versus the classificatory conception of art. Following Richard Shusterman (2003), I am using the term honorific to refer to the view that ascribes “positive artistic value of all the items it defines, so that if an item is defined as artwork by an honorific definition, then it must also be a good artwork by that definition” (p. 296). According to the honorific view of art, value is entailed in the definition of art so that when a work is identified as art this means that it is also good. A classificatory definition of art, on the other hand, is one that claims that art is all of those objects that are commonly classified as artwork regardless of their aesthetic value. The problem with the classificatory definition of art is that it does not acknowledge a qualitative difference between good and bad art and, therefore, does not provide us with a way to distinguish between an artwork that is good and one that is mediocre or poor. Much like in art, I believe that there is a qualitative difference between good and bad humor and that in order to be considered aesthetic, humor has to be good. In the next part of this essay, I explore some of the main differences between aesthetic and non-aesthetic humor.

III. Aesthetic Versus Non-Aesthetic Humor

The discussion above is intended to outline the nature of aesthetic experience while simultaneously to draw our attention to some important similarities between humor and this kind of experience.

However, I am not trying to suggest that all cases of humor are aesthetic or that there is no such thing as non-aesthetic humor. In fact, there are many jokes and other types of humor that have very little in common with our definition of aesthetic experience. In what follows, I analyze John Morreall's distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic humor and make the case that it does not fully explain the difference between the two. I then propose an alternative account that provides us with a clearer and more coherent understanding of this distinction.

In his new book, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*, Morreall cites male joking as one example of non-aesthetic humor. He writes that "male joking... often involves competition, humiliation, and the enjoyment of others' suffering, as first noticed by Plato and Aristotle. At least in extreme cases, amusement at such humor does not seem aesthetic" (Morreall 2009: 71). Another example of non-aesthetic humor mentioned by Morreall is the type of sexual joke that is intended to shock or embarrass rather than amuse the listener. Today, we sometimes consider these kinds of lewd and offensive jokes as cases of sexual harassment as opposed to real humor.

For Morreall, what distinguishes aesthetic from non-aesthetic humor is first and foremost the person's motivation:

In aesthetic experience, we are not out for sexual gratification, enhanced self esteem, or other self-interested emotions, but are enjoying the experience of the object itself. Here there is a parallel between funny objects and aesthetic objects in general. Any work of art, or any natural object, can be enjoyed in non-aesthetic as well as in aesthetic ways. A general could enjoy a sunset for its promise of clear weather for his dawn attack. Someone could masturbate looking at the Venus de Milo. Similarly, the director of a film comedy could take pleasure in watching its funniest scenes because those promise big profits. And a politician could delight in an editorial cartoon because it is costing his opponent votes. (Morreall 2009: 72)

What makes these cases non-aesthetic, according to Morreall, is the motivation of the person who is experiencing the object, a motive that is external to the activity itself. Thus, the distinction between aesthetic and non aesthetic humor hinges on the extent to which this person is driven by aesthetic versus practical, financial or other external concerns.

Yet whose motivation is at stake here, the person who is experiencing the humor or the person who created it? In the quote above, Morreall is referring to people (like the general) who *experience* aesthetic objects, while earlier he seemed to be talking about the motivation of the *creator* or *presenter* of sexual jokes and other kinds of offensive humor. Even though both may get a good laugh out of it, there is little doubt that the motivation of the creator or presenter of odious humor may be very different from that of the one who is experiencing it. Morreall's analysis falls short since it does not attempt to distinguish between the motivations of the creator of non-aesthetic humor versus that of the person who is merely experiencing it.

More significantly, is the fact that people's motivations are generally speaking not easily identified let alone understood. As Immanuel Kant recognized a long time ago, though people's motivations matter greatly with respect to moral issues, these motives are often quite obscure and rarely known by others with any degree of certainty. In the cases of the general, director and politician that Morreall cites above, it is certainly possible that they are experiencing their respective objects in both aesthetic and non-aesthetic ways. For instance, a general could take delight in a beautiful sunset for both aesthetic and practical reasons. A politician could enjoy the cartoon that pokes fun at her opponent both for its own sake *and* because it will cost him votes. And a director of a comedy could appreciate the funniest moments in the film because they are delightful *and* promise to make the film profitable. The point is that Morreall's assumption that it is possible to distinguish between "pure" versus "contaminated" intentions of the humorist does not hold up to close scrutiny since people are often motivated by a variety of different reasons that interact with each other.

Morreall (2009: 71) attempts to further clarify the distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic humor by appealing to his definition of amusement "as the playful enjoyment of a cognitive shift that naturally leads to laughter." He explains that when we experience a cognitive shift, we do not always take delight only in the shift for its own sake, but rather enjoy other things such as the state of affairs signaled by the shift. For instance, he writes that "if my pretentious neighbor, wearing an expensive silk suit, is showing off his new swimming pool to guests, and accidentally falls in, I might enjoy the cognitive shift, *and* take Hobbesian delight in his humiliation" (Morreall 2009: 71).

To the extent that one's enjoyment of such an incident is mixed with the pleasure gained by the humiliation or suffering of someone else then it is *not* aesthetic. In Morreall's view, only when the cognitive shift is enjoyed for its own sake can the humor be considered aesthetic.

However, as demonstrated above, it is extremely difficult to ascertain whether a cognitive shift is enjoyed for its own sake or "contaminated" by self-centered or other ulterior motives. Moreover, the biggest problem with Morreall's analysis is that comedians' motivations or intentions are not really relevant in determining the aesthetic value of their humor. Unlike law, in which the motive of the offender is key in determining the nature of the crime, in humor the intention of the comedian is not pertinent to the quality of the performance. For instance, there are many cases of stand-up comedy (e.g. George Carlin, Richard Pryor and Robin Williams) that contain vulgar and even offensive language, yet involve great imagination, creativity and lead the audience to new insights. Regardless of the intentions of these comedians, such humor provides us with invaluable social and political commentary that gets people to think more critically about their practices and beliefs. Many people who watch these comedians laugh heartily because they recognize some significant truths about themselves, their friends or human existence in general. Thus, the aesthetic value of humor needs to be assessed on the impact that it has on the people viewing it rather than on the motivations of the comedians. In the next part of this essay, I will show how focusing on humor's effect on the viewers can provide us with a more accurate way of determining its aesthetic value.

IV. An Alternative Approach

Unlike Morreall's approach, which examines the motivations and intentions of individuals to determine the aesthetic quality of their humor, I propose to focus on the impact of humor on the people who are viewing it. My discussion of humor and the nature of aesthetic experience has shown that both generally involve the use of the imagination, expose us to new insights on the human condition, and lead people to be more reflective. These three criteria—imagination, insight, and reflection—are not only fundamental to both art and humor, but are also more tangible than people's motivations and intentions, which tend to be very obscure. Thus, I would like to propose the following hypothesis, which will be tested shortly: *humor is aesthetic to the extent that it arouses the viewers' imagination, provides them with insights about human existence, and provokes them to think more critically and creatively.* My contention is, therefore, that even if the humor in question is very amusing and funny, if it does not meet these three essential conditions, then it should not be considered aesthetic.

Before testing my hypothesis, a few words are in order about the notion of impact as well as about what made me select these three criteria to evaluate the aesthetic quality of humor as opposed to others. To begin with, it should be emphasized that by impact I do not mean a causal connection but rather the *effect* that humor has on us. The notion of impact implies an integral relationship between three entities: a performer who attempts to amuse an audience mediated by the comedic text. Simply put, the performer utilizes the comedic text in order to entertain the audience and make them laugh. Although Wimsatt and Beardsley (1949, 31) are right to caution us about the "affective fallacy" (confusing between the artwork and its result), in humor it is difficult to separate the amusing object (comedic text) from its impact on people. For without an audience that the performer wishes to amuse, there would be little need for the comedic text.

Moreover, an impact theory makes sense here since humor is fundamentally a social experience.¹ For one, we laugh much more when we are surrounded by other people than when we are alone. Indeed, laughter is contagious and it has even been proven to work as a form of therapy for people who are depressed or just feel sad. Jokes are meant to be shared with others and comedians know that when the audience is not being amused, the humor is probably not very funny. Above all, humor can greatly reduce the tension among people and enable individuals who are different from each other to get along and even live together in harmony.

The three criteria—imagination, insight and reflection—proposed to assess humor are ones that most people have experienced and can relate to; they tend to be a little more tangible than other qualities of aesthetic experience mentioned above such as an activity done for its own sake. These criteria are tangible because they characterize both the objects of humor and the impact that these objects have on the people experiencing them. Jokes, for instance, can be objectively imaginative and thought provoking in the sense that the text itself is innovative. Yet ordinary jokes can also stimulate people to think deeper about themselves and their relations to others when the performer is particularly moving. Moreover, much like art, humor has the power to liberate people and move them to view things in a new light.

According to Berys Gaut (Gaut 1998: 66), jokes can emancipate “its hearers from the narrow bonds of prejudice, getting them to see a situation in a better moral light and respond accordingly.” Jokes and humor in general can often lead us to think more deeply and critically about issues that we normally take for granted. Hence, focusing on the impact of humor as a measure of its aesthetic quality is not only more explicit than trying to deal with motives, but also more appropriate to the field of performance arts.

In order to test my hypothesis, I would like to compare some humorous clips of George Carlin and Richard Pryor to those of Sarah Silverman and Sacha Baron Cohen. I will argue that the former constitute examples of aesthetic whereas the latter are cases of non-aesthetic humor. Consider, for instance, the opening of Carlin’s monologue “Religion is Bullshit,” which deals with some of the major false promises and preposterous claims of organized religion:

When it comes to bullshit, big-time, major league bullshit, you have to stand in awe of the all-time champion of false promises and exaggerated claims, religion. No contest. No contest. Religion. Religion easily has the greatest bullshit story ever told. Think about it. Religion has actually convinced people that there's an invisible man living in the sky who watches everything you do, every minute of every day. And the invisible man has a special list of ten things he does not want you to do. And if you do any of these ten things, he has a special place, full of fire and smoke and burning and torture and anguish, where he will send you to live and suffer and burn and choke and scream and cry forever and ever 'til the end of time! But He loves you. He loves you, and He needs money! He always needs money! He's all-powerful, all-perfect, all-knowing, and all-wise, somehow just can't handle money! Religion takes in billions of dollars, they pay no taxes, and they always need a little more. Now, you talk about a good bullshit story. Holy Shit!²

The opening of this monologue engages our imagination by portraying a very lucid, yet unflattering picture of God, one in which he possesses some of the main vices of humans like greed, hypocrisy, and disgracefulness. We laugh at this God because we are told that he can’t handle money and (later on) that his work resembles that of “an office temp with a bad attitude.” When Carlin proclaims that he has decided to worship the sun and then explains why he prays to Joe Pesci we can appreciate just how arbitrary and ridiculous are some of the beliefs that organized Religion disseminate. By the time we get to the end of the monologue, we realize that the joke is on us for buying into a host of nonsense about God and Religion. In this way, he gets us to laugh at our own superstitions even as we are amused by those of others. Carlin’s irreverent humor and biting lingo may even force some people to rethink some of their most cherished convictions.

Another stand-up comedian whose work can often be considered instances of aesthetic humor is Richard Pryor. Pryor has a wonderful stand up routine on relationships between men and women and the differences in how each gender views the issue of expressing their feelings. Typical to his performances, in this routine Pryor makes frequent use of colorful, vulgar, and profane language while voicing some piercing remarks on the distinction between the sexes. Using himself and his wife as an example, Pryor describes some of the idiosyncrasies of men:

I know that I am hard to get along with. I know that. Because I might wake up in the morning and say: Hey, wake up! What was that shit you said last February? This is about my fourth, fifth, sixth... eighth marriage, I don't know. But I remember every woman I was ever in love with, all twelve of them. I really do. They were wonderful. I have never been able to have, what you call, to sustain a relationship. That's what it's called. In other words, when you want to stop to be with the mother fucker you leave, that's what I do...When you get married, that gets you into feelings and shit. You have to feel, when you get married. My wife says FEEL, express your feelings darling. Don't lock it up. Just speak your mind. When I was just fucking around, I didn't have to say shit except: can I fuck? Goodbye. Here is the money for a cab. But now it's different when you are married. It's really exciting because I am really trying. I really am trying. I am telling you, I am fucking trying...³

In this stand-up routine, Pryor creatively portrays his own struggles and those of many men to have sustained relationships with women and openly express their feelings to them. Perhaps it is *because* men find it so difficult to share their emotions, he suggests, that many of them end up leaving their partner before they get too attached. To be sure, Pryor uses a lot of curse words, vulgar expressions and even offensive language in this routine.

Yet he also calls our attention to some important insights that we don't always think about—such as the difference between how women and men relate to their emotions and how some men treat women as sexual objects. Although we get some good laughs at how Pryor refers to his wife, other women he has been involved with, and women in general, we laugh just as hard at his inability (and that of men in general) to express basic feelings and sustain relationships. Holding up a mirror to our faces, Pryor's gets us to think more critically on some important differences between the two genders and about how men relate to women in general and their significant others in particular.

One example of non-aesthetic humor that I would like to analyze is called "Sarah Silverman and her racist jokes." In one part of this routine, Silverman pokes fun at Martin Luther King and at how most people merely idolize him without giving it much thought:

I am working on an open letter and it goes like this. Guess what Martin Luther King, I had a FUCKING dream too. I had a dream that I was in my living room; it wasn't my living room, but it was playing my living room in my dream. And I walked through to the back yard and there is a pool, and as I am diving in, there is a shark coming up through the water with braces! So maybe you are not so fucking special. Martin Loser King. Yeah! I want to be the first comic ever to shit on Martin Luther King! Cause people only talk about the good things. They don't mention that he was a litter bug. He would roll up all his windows and lock them and fart in the car with the heat up, while his family suffered and he would laugh.⁴

Although one might argue that Silverman's routine on Martin Luther King is innovative and amusing, it is much more difficult to claim that it provides the audience with insights about human existence and provokes them to think more critically and creatively. In short, only one of the three necessary conditions for aesthetic humor is present in this comic skit. The problem with Silverman's message is not that it criticizes Martin Luther King, but that the specific critiques that she mentions are petty and have no basis in reality. Of course, one might respond that it is precisely the trivial nature of her mockery of King that makes it so funny. But, to me, it seems as though Silverman's comedy skit is more about bringing attention to herself ("I want to be the first comic ever to shit on Martin Luther King") than about illuminating a genuine problem in our society. In contrast, aesthetic humor, as we have defined above, has to move beyond the level of personal scorn into the realm of the social and common welfare. In addition, to be deemed aesthetic, humor needs to make us think deeper and more critically about our world. Silverman's routine falls short on both these criteria.

The second example of non-aesthetic humor is taken from an interview of Sacha Baron Cohen by "Chuck the Movie Guy" around the time that the movie *Borat* was released:

Chuck: When you were travelling around the country in the United States, what surprised you the most about it?

Sacha: I'll tell you Chuck, I was very surprised to learn that it is now illegal to shoot at red Indians.

Chuck: What was your favorite moment during your stay?

Sacha: Eh. Shooting at red Indians.

Chuck: The least favorite?

Sacha: The least favorite was one time in Washington, I invited two boys to my hotel room. And we wrestled with no clothes. And one of them put a rubber fist in my anus. And it then later turned out that he was a homosexual.⁵

Even before this brief exchange, Sacha Cohen remarked that "there is nothing wrong with women as long as they stay in their cages." Thus, in the course of this brief, four-minute interview, Cohen comes across as a misogynist, bigot and a homophobe. Now, even if we assume that Cohen deliberately presents himself in this way in order to create amusement and get us to question our gender, racial, and sexual biases, there is very little that one might consider imaginative in his responses (the text is objectively dull and uninspiring). If anything, Cohen's remarks are crude and insipid rather than complex, nuanced and original. Moreover, I do not believe that Cohen's responses provide us with any significant insights about our existence and provoke us to think more critically and creatively. In my view, it is much more likely that such responses only serve to perpetuate racial, gender and homophobic stereotypes. I do not wish to deny that some people might be amused by Cohen's remarks. The point is simply that both the content of his humor and his delivery are not aesthetic in the sense that they are not particularly innovative or thought provoking.

Thus, as in the case with the Silverman skit discussed above, we cannot consider Cohen's answers a case of aesthetic humor since at least two of the three essential conditions have not been met.

Of course, someone might argue that the impact thesis proposed to determine the aesthetic value of humor leads to relativism. In other words, what one person finds imaginative or thought provoking another might think is dull and uninspiring. While I acknowledge this argument, I believe that, as in the case of art, there are some objective criteria that can be used in order to distinguish the great works of humor from the mediocre. These criteria include qualities such as complexity and subtlety as opposed to simplicity and crudeness. Moreover, it is precisely the complexity and innovation of an artwork or a humorous performance that stimulates people's imagination and prompts them to think deeper about important issues in their lives. I would also expect that most people would be able to differentiate the more imaginative cases of humor from those that are mundane. As in the case of art, some humorous performances (i.e. Charlie Chaplin, the three Stooges and George Carlin) have withstood the test of time while others have not. Such endurance over time is another testimony to aesthetic humor's objective value. And my argument in this essay is simply that humor that is complex, imaginative and thought provoking (i.e. aesthetic) tends to have a significant impact on people who are exposed to it.

V. Conclusions and Caveats

The discussion of the performances of the four comedians I chose is not intended as an endorsement of George Carlin and Richard Pryor and a condemnation of Sarah Silverman and Sacha Baron Cohen. It is certainly conceivable that someone might find instances in which the latter created humor that is aesthetics or ones in which the former presented non-aesthetic humor. However, my aim is simply to use specific examples from these four comics to illustrate some of the fundamental differences between aesthetic and non-aesthetic humor. My analysis suggests that in order to be considered aesthetic, humor has to meet at least three essential criteria: it must arouse the viewers' imagination, reveal some insights about human existence, and challenge us to think more critically and creatively. Simply put, if the humor in question meets only one or even two of these three criteria, then it should not be deemed aesthetic.

Ultimately, my investigation has shown that evaluating the aesthetic quality of humor based on the impact that it has on the viewer is a better approach than trying to ascertain the humorists' motivations and intentions. As we have seen, the latter approach falls short not only since it is often impossible to separate the aesthetic motives from the practical and self-interested ones, but also because the comedians' intentions are not really relevant in determining the aesthetic value of their humor. The three criteria that I have identified to evaluate how humor affects viewers, namely, imagination, insight, and reflection, seem to provide us with a clearer and more accurate way to assess the aesthetic quality of humor.

Still, even with the help of these three criteria, I do not believe that one can always easily and accurately determine the aesthetic quality of an instance of humor. The reason for this difficulty is that each humorous situation is unique and, therefore, we shouldn't assume that we can just lump all cases of aesthetic humor together and view them as one and the same. Instead, it seems more plausible to conclude that humor can be more or less aesthetic, that is, that different cases of humor vary in the *degree* in which they are aesthetic. To be perfectly clear, I am not suggesting that we should not always hold humor to the three criteria outlined above, but rather that each case of humor may be more or less imaginative, more or less insightful and more or less thought provoking. For instance, one case of aesthetic humor may be highly imaginative but only moderately insightful and thought provoking, while another case may be extremely perceptive and stimulating but not so innovative.

The approach proposed here to evaluate the aesthetic quality of humor is certainly not intended as a panacea or the final word on this subject. On the contrary, it should be viewed as merely an attempt to advance the conversation on this important issue. There is no doubt in my mind that there are more ways of assessing the aesthetic quality of humor than the ones mentioned in this paper. Indeed, my hope is that other scholars and humor researchers will take up this challenge and propose additional and even better ways of evaluating humor. In addition, my study leaves many questions unanswered and opens up areas for further research. For example, if humor can vary in the extent in which it is aesthetic, is there a way to measure this variance? Also, is there a correlation between the degree to which humor is aesthetic and how funny it is? Finally, are there instances of humor that contain so much vulgar and offensive language that, regardless of how insightful and imaginative they are, should not be considered aesthetic? Addressing these questions can greatly advance the study of both humor and aesthetics.

Notes

- ¹ The term ‘impact’ seems to take this social reality into account since to impact implies affecting others.
- ² Downloaded from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MeSSwKffj9o&feature=player_embedded/ November 10, 2010.
- ³ Downloaded from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4z0nA7SbNDQ/> November 11, 2010.
- ⁴ Downloaded from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b3RYrQSir7k&feature=youtube_gdata_player/ November 15, 2010.
- ⁵ Downloaded from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DP_2o3220o4&feature=related/ November 15, 2010.

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