

Book review

Quirk, S. (2015). *Why Stand-Up Comedy Matters. How Comedians Manipulate and Influence*. London and New York: Bloomsbury. 248 pages.

As the title and introduction explain, Sophie Quirk's monograph sets out to investigate the reasons and ways comedians manipulate and influence their audience. The term *manipulation*, however, should be considered apart from its often negative connotations and should be interpreted as the comedian's attempt to skilfully communicate with their audience, elicit laughter, and, most importantly in this case, influence their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour (see p. 2). With these premises, Quirk explores instances of stand-up comedy including some interaction between mainly well-known British comedians (e.g. Eddie Izzard, Stewart Lee, Josie Long) and their audience. She also interviews some of these performers so as to gain a first-hand understanding of the comedians' performing experience.

The book is divided into three main sections, which are well balanced in terms of structural organisation of the topic at hand. Part I comprises of two chapters in which Quirk explains how comedians manipulate and control their audience by, for instance, eliciting laughter at the right time. Drawing on Schopenhauer (1987), Freud (1957), and Douglas (1999), Quirk provides a sound overview of joking in relation to laughter, superiority, relief, incongruity, and challenge. She concludes that:

Joking is always part of an ongoing negotiation through which current thought and practices are challenged and tested. Some challenges are gentle and leave their targets in tact [sic]; others are dangerous. Some targets are silly while others are of fundamental importance. Importantly, however, all are challenges (p. 19).

In other words, comedians manipulate their audience through constant challenges. To elucidate her point, Quirk uses incongruity theory (cf. Critchley 2002) and explains that the process of manipulation that takes place every time a comedian sets up a series of associations in the audience's mind and subverts them by introducing a whole set of new associations. Yet, this process is based on consensual manipulation of both parties (p. 25-27; cf. Dore forthcoming). It is important to specify here that script-based linguistic theories of humour have long determined that incongruous jokes also need to be compatible with two overlapping and opposing scripts in order to be considered humorous (Raskin 1985: 99).

The analysis of some comedians' attitude towards their work as social commentators strikingly demonstrates that comics often do not seem to be doing it consciously and seem to mitigate this aspect of their performance. Quirk brings this aspect to the fore and links it to the so-called phenomenon of *observational comedy* or "comedy of recognition" (p. 30). Other scholars have drawn similar conclusions when stating that a comedian aims to promote their *comic persona* (Pate 2014: 58) and their ability to effectively comment on and object to social inequalities or disservices (Seirlis 2011). One cannot but agree with Lash's idea that joking can help us perceive the world better by understanding it more completely (Lash 1948, quoted in Quirk p. 32), whether in a more negative or in a benign manner. Quirk also contends that manipulation can be used by comedians to temporarily move the boundaries of

the audience's morals, especially when dealing with thorny issues such as rape and paedophilia. By suspending their disbelief, people laugh at jokes flouting the possible consequences (a.k.a. practical disengagement), while the possible offence they may contain is mitigated by its implicit and not harmful intention (p. 54). However, even when the comic license may be considered politically incorrect as, for instance, in Wilson's *Dilligaf* show, it is the audience's final decision whether to sit through the show and listen to potentially offensive material. The audience determines the success of the show, but the comedian is able to gear the audience's cognitive and practical disengagement. That said, Quirk firmly opposes Wilson's belief that political incorrectness performed during a gig does not bear its effect outside. Drawing on Howitt & Owusu-Bempah (2005), she points out that the comedian influences their audience's behaviour beyond the event since the joke can be repackaged and retold several times to reach a wider audience (p. 58-59). As Quirk shrewdly remarks, comedians do have the power to persuade their audiences and risk to go beyond genuine and positive social criticism, which can verge into racism.

In Part II, Quirk devotes Chapter 3 to explore the relevance of factors such as the venue, the audience selection and the show presentation (or advertising) and part of the whole comedic experience. As she demonstrates through her interviews, these less debated factors (including consumption of alcohol at the venue) are likely to enhance the manipulative power of a stand-up comedian as they can influence the audience's appreciation of the show as a whole (p. 65-76). The issue of spontaneity and the illusion of hearing a spontaneous conversation are interestingly tackled in this book. Quirk's interviews demonstrate that ad-libbed material is always based on pre-prepared jokes or routines that the comedian accommodates according to the response obtained by the audience (cf. Dore forthcoming). As she contends, the comic's ability to perform and deliver their lines in deadpan or more spontaneous style becomes essential to the audience's appreciation of the show.

From a linguistics standpoint, Chapter 4 is certainly the most relevant. There, Quirk explores how comedians manipulate responses to their own advantage. In order to be successful, a joke must be told making sure the comedian signals (verbally, e.g. through punch line; non-verbally, e.g. through facial expressions, gesture, etc.) when audience response is desired and the audience must act accordingly, i.e. laughing, clapping (p. 97). In her analysis of three-part jokes, Quirk shows that in order to be effective, jokes must entail a contrast. She refers to Koestler's (1964) bisociation theory whereby bisociation is a cognitive process provoked by the presence of two incompatible ideas in the same text (or context), which ultimately explain the incompatible or opposing frames or scripts in a joke (p. 102; cf. Raskin 1985). Quirk also discusses the phenomenon of unfinished jokes that comedians can use once the audience have been trained to recognise a given pattern. They are then able to complete such jokes with the unuttered and intended punch line (p. 106).

Chapter 5 investigates the ways comedians structure their routines and manipulate the audience to obtain consensus. Quirk refers to Stewart Lee's ability to deal with heavy issues such as the IRA and Al-Qaeda bombings in the UK, and how he can ingeniously organise his line of reasoning so as to manipulate the audience response. As Quirk rightly points out, Lee's ability to mitigate such potentially disturbing issues helps the audience absolving themselves from laughing at them (p. 116). Clearly, the audience does not respond unanimously, but the majority of them do applaud. Interestingly, this shows how the audience can be heterogeneous but also willing to agree to do something while manipulated by a comedian.

Chapter 6 is the last in Part II and here Sophie Quirk deals with the ways comedians create, manipulate, and are manipulated by their own *stage* or *comic persona*. Drawing on Barker's (1978) distinction between the comedian's *image* ("the residual memory of the performer outside the performance"; p. 129) and *persona* ("the representation that the

audience encounter on that night”; p. 129), Quirk examines several comedians’ performances to demonstrate how their image can influence their persona-building process. Also, she also shows how the audience’s background knowledge regarding a well-known comedian can be exploited by the latter to enhance the manipulation of the former’s response (e.g. Jenny Éclair’s “I put down my knitting” joke; p. 127-128). It is therefore not surprising to find that many comedians rely on their dysfunctional attitude towards reality to build their *persona* (e.g. Dylan Moran appears drunk and socially awkward on stage and Rhod Gilbert is an impenitent liar). As Quirk rightly points out though, this does not prevent the audience from seeing comedians as witty and able to dictate their own terms while on stage (p. 141). Yet, this does not mean comedians shun democracy; rather they create a partially democratic interaction imbued with social negotiation (p. 148).

Part III comprises of two chapters and a conclusion. Chapter 7 tackles the feasibility of questioning social structure via stand-up comedy. In particular, Quirk considers how comedy can foster serious debate and skilfully navigates through three biased opinions regarding joking so as to refute them: 1) joking sweeps contention under the carpet; 2) joking does not urge us to change the wrongs of the world, but gives us the means to cope with them; 3) joking is a harmless form of protest which just keeps the oppressed happy. By discussing the powerful examples provided by comedians such as Mark Thomas and Franca Rame regarding human rights, Quirk shows that comedy can indeed be a useful tool for social criticism and change. Whenever the audience laugh, it does not mean that they do not (or will not) think about what they hear. On their part, comedians who choose to debate social, political, or cultural issues during their shows consciously attempt to contribute to social change.

Chapter 8 concludes the book: Quirk tries to answer the question in the title and explains how stand-up comedy matters. Drawing on a set of sociological observations, she shrewdly points out that rather than acting on a major change in the audience’s opinion, comedians (and persuaders alike) are more likely to produce small, incremental changes, which offer another point of view (p. 177-178). When considering political stand-up comedy in particular, Quirk shows how the audience’s mind can be changed in the long run rather than for a sporadic moment thanks to the idea of group reference (e.g. people agreeing in being part of a group and in choosing a referent, in this case the comedian). A noteworthy example in this sense is Josie Long’s *Kindness and Exuberance* show that asked for the audience’s active involvement (p. 182-185).

Another sociological tool used to explain how stand-up comedians can manipulate their audience is the concept of *dissonance resolution*. As Quirk explains, comedians prefer to avoid a contradictory idea as it is perceived as awkward. By the same token, comedy-goers attending a comedian’s show are likely to share the latter’s world view and agree with his/her political opinions so as to resolve cognitive dissonance, especially if the comedian is liked or respected (p. 188-189). Another tool that can help understanding how comedians manipulate their audience is the concept of *diffusion of innovation*. According to this principle, comedians try to share a more positive view of what they are discussing (e.g. the French Revolution). This calls the audience into action, encouraging them to change their mind on the subject the comedian brought up. Thus, comedians become “change agents”, who are seen as aides and therefore never suspected of having selfish motives driving them (p. 195). As Quirk puts it, “by seeing the role of political comedian as that of change agent, we discover the importance of the comedian’s role in galvanizing social change” (p. 197) and “[s]tand-up not only shapes individual opinions, it shapes public opinion too” (p. 201). The case of the Italian comedian Giuseppe, a.k.a. Beppe Grillo, is particularly telling in this sense. After many years of mocking and condemning Italian politics, he founded his own party (i.e. The Five Star Movement), which has managed to win several seats in the Italian Parliament.

Moreover, many members of the movement have become mayors of major Italian cities, including Rome.¹

In the concluding chapter Quirk asks: “Can stand-up change the world?” (p. 202). In her opinion, it can, slowly but steadily. Stand-up comedy can stir debate, broaden points of view and ultimately ignite change; it is based on a process of negotiation between two parties. Its effect is normally short term, but at times can also become long-term (p. 208).

All in all, this full-length monograph on the manipulative power of stand-up comedy is likely to be a very stimulating reading for scholars and students who are interested in its performing and sociological aspects. It can also be a valid companion for linguists who may like to broaden their understanding of the way humour is exploited and manipulated onstage. Yet, it only cursorily touches upon language-specific and cognitive-based theories of humour. Hence, it may only be partly suited for students and/or young scholars interested in studying humour from a mainly linguistic perspective.

Margherita Dore

Università di Roma “La Sapienza”

margherita.dore@uniroma1.it

Notes

¹ Beppe Grillo’s Five Star Movement is used here as a way of example and should not be understood as this author’s political orientation.

References

- Barker, C. (1978). ‘The “image” of showbusiness’. *Theatre Quarterly* 3, pp. 7-11.
- Critchley, S. (2002). *On humour*. London: Routledge.
- Dore, M. (forthcoming). ‘Laughing at you or laughing with you? Humour negotiation in intercultural stand-up comedy’. In Tsakona, V. and Chovanec, J. (eds.) *Creating and Negotiating Humor in Everyday Interactions*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Douglas, M. (1999). ‘Jokes’. In Douglas, M. (ed.) *Implicit Meanings: Selected Essays in Anthropology*, 2nd edition, London: Routledge, pp. 146-164.
- Freud, S. (1957). *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Howitt, D. and Owusu-Bempah, K. (2005). ‘Race and ethnicity in popular humour’. In Lockyer, S. and Pickering, M. (eds.), *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 45-62.
- Koestler, A. (1964). *The Act of Creation*. New York: Dell.
- Lash, K. (1948). ‘A theory of the comic as insight’. *The Journal of Philosophy* 45, pp. 113-121.
- Pate, G. (2014). ‘Whose jokes is it anyway? Originality and theft in the world of stand-up comedy’. *Theatre Journal*, 66(1), pp. 55-71.
- Raskin, V. (1985). *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel.
- Schopenhauer, A. (1987). ‘The world as will and idea’. In Morreall, J. (ed.) *The Philosophy of Humor*, New York: State University of New York Press, pp. 51-64.
- Seirlis, J. K. (2011). ‘Laughing all the way to freedom?: Contemporary stand-up comedy and democracy in South Africa’. *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research*, 24(4), pp. 513-530.