PUNCHING UP IN STAND-UP COMEDY

Speaking Truth to Power

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Stand-Up Comedy as Affective Arrangement

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> Only a scene that offers you enjoyment or engages your interest can make
> you blush.
>
> (Sedgwick & Frank 2003)

Coerced in the summer 2020 by pandemic lockdowns to look for alternative ways to make a living, stand-up comedian Teemu Vesterinen might have just accidentally made the world record in stand-up comedy purism, with an ecological back-to-nature twist related to Finnish forests no less. Reducing this art form to its seemingly bare essence, Vesterinen took his crowd of around ten people – that was the officially sanctioned limit in Finland for each show at that time – to the local woods in Kuopio, Eastern Finland, for an event of stand-up comedy unplugged. Known as a comedian with a knack for experimentation, his idea was to do stand-up without any of the usual props, i.e., without music, lighting, warming up, without the iconic microphone, in broad daylight, with just the (corona proof) basics of interpersonal dynamics.

Needless to mention, such an occasion calls for exceptional meticulousness in design so as not to turn exceptionally awkward for everyone involved. Illustrative of the delicate nature of preparing and cultivating audience relations in stand-up, Vesterinen's plan was to start with "low energy". Aiming at obscuring the contours of the show and the boundary between performance and not-performance as much as possible, he started out by handing out supplies for each audience member – a carton of juice and a pasty – casually getting a feel of his audience after which segueing on to his material: less formality and "showmanship," more connection and living in the moment.

This chapter looks at stand-up comedians as specialists of the space and affect of social interaction, who willfully expose themselves to the looming awkwardness

that lies beneath every social encounter in their quest to win over groups of strangers and make them laugh. Stand-up can be characterized as an economy of relatability (see Lindfors 2019a) and an affective arrangement (Slaby 2019a) where the primary job of the performer consists in forging and manipulating affective connections with her audience, to the point of frequently thematizing and aestheticizing this connection and (hoped-for) communion as its privileged targets. While sometimes straightforwardly accused for its individualist ethos, stand-up is a "duet" with the audience – or rather audience*s*, given that a comedian can "play" several audience segments at once, especially in bigger halls, as a conductor of affective bursts – and a group effort to the extent that any definitions of the genre appear inadequate without taking audience uptake into account.

I begin by elaborating on the notion of phaticity by drawing on linguistic and semiotic anthropology, where phaticity has a bifurcated history with two distinguishable but often overlapping aspects of communion and contact (Kockelman 2010; Nozawa 2015; Zuckerman 2016; Lemon 2018; cf. Miller 2015). The first aspect of phaticity, *communion*, takes us back to the Trobriands of the 1920s with Bronislaw Malinowski, who influentially outlined the functions of gossip and small talk in creating social bonds and rapport ("phatic communion") rather than necessarily conveying information in the referential-denotational fashion. Second, it was formalist linguist Roman Jakobson – steeped in the early cybernetics, information and communication theory of the 1940s and 1950s when he came up with these ideas (Van de Walle 2008; Geoghegan 2011) – who was responsible for formulating a more technical conception of specifically *contact* phaticity. Modeling phaticity as a distinct "function" of communication that refers specifically to the mediating channel and infrastructure through and within which communication takes place (cf. Peters 2015), Jakobson downplayed social relations in favor of technical aspects for achieving and experimenting with contact, broadening the locus of phaticity to include "messages primarily serving to establish, to prolong, or to discontinue communication, to check whether the channel works […] to attract the attention of the interlocutor or to confirm his continued attention" (Jakobson 1960, 355). The rest is disciplinary history as scholars from various fields of anthropology, ethnography, media and communication, and sociolinguistics have adopted both of these two denotations of phaticity for their own inquiries, sometimes conflating the two and thus naturalizing the assumption that contact always builds rapport (see Zuckerman 2021; also Goebel 2021).

In what follows, I am more interested in phaticity and phatic signs (such as laughter) in the sense that they point to social communion – as a notable intensity that demarcates stand-up gigs as affective arrangements – and to a lesser degree in physical, technical, and communicative channels that in stand-up are (usually) in shape: these performers are up on stage with the sonic channel of their voice amplified by a microphone, sometimes being recorded on video for further dissemination. While keeping an eye on any conflations of contact and communion phaticities into one, however, I will mostly speak of phaticity simply as *connection*,

following the general preference of comedians themselves when referring to the interactional dynamic between themselves and their audiences.

While the first section of the paper lays the foundation for my discussion of phatic connection in stand-up comedy by rethinking it in terms of a social and affective dynamic of relatability, the second attends to the naturalized "contact tropes" (Zuckerman 2021) and reflexive ideologies through which this social and affective dynamic is discursively formulated amongst practitioners. Indeed, phaticity is increasingly understood in research not only as a "pervasive concern and a contingent accomplishment" for interactional participants (Sidnell 2009, 132) but as an index for further ideological – and aesthetic – elaboration with more far-reaching implications – think of how capacities for contact are celebrated, fetishized, and mourned within contemporary sociotechnical infrastructure (see e.g., Turkle 2011). Such contact tropes and ideologies can manifest as explicit verbalizations, norms, maxims even, e.g., as a rule of thumb circulating amongst comedians that the first proper laughs must be attained within the first minute of the gig. More often than not, discursive formulations of interpersonal phaticity are elaborated through metaphor and felt tacitly – such largely affective matters are "difficult to verbalize while being most central" to the genre, as Vesterinen confirms (interview in possession of the author).

In this regard, I am curious about the thermodynamic vocabulary of energies and heat metaphors that both practitioners and pundits frequently adopt for describing the affective and phatic dynamic of stand-up as a self-regulating organism that serially "heats up" in explosive laughter. I suggest that theorizing this affect–driven but often curiously behaviorist imaginary of stand-up comedy also provides a novel perspective on various social and moral expectations and norms concerning the genre, including its famous logic of "punching up" or "down" the social strata, a deceptively simple but apparently pragmatic way of imagining enactments of power in an intersectional manner (see e.g., Quirk 2018). In this regard, beginning with the affective and bodily dynamic at the heart of stand-up should also enable us to revisit some of the premises of humor theory itself (cf. Shouse 2007).[1] Ideally, it forces us to rethink the simplified relief theory of humor that informs our unquestioned habit of correlating setups with tension and punchlines with relief or imagining humor and laughter in particular as a "release" of pent-up mental energy, emotional tension, and aggression (classically, Freud 1960, 120; 1961; see also Schaeffer 1981; Stott 2005, 131; Mears et al. 2019). Combined with so-called superiority theories that frame humor in terms of a people's resonant attachment to – and dissonant distancing from – group norms, this is the taken-for-granted imaginary that allows us to view stand-ups as "Geiger counters" and "social dowsing rods" for the existence and efficacy of various social and moral norms at a given time in a given community (see e.g., Noland & Hoppman 2019, 135).

Rather than taking these metaphors at face value, I suggest this simplified imaginary and such seemingly self-evident binaries through which we have been accustomed to think about stand-up – intimacy and distance, tension and release,

and finally, organic and inorganic that takes us through Henri Bergson (1935) to the third major strand of humor theory, incongruity theory – could be usefully complemented by social and political insights drawn from recent (feminist) affect theory. Pointing to a field of affective intensity and atmosphere that tends to get discursively modeled through binary logics, affect can be described as simultaneously more foundational than any binary significations (such as the ones mentioned above) and only crudely appropriated and represented through them. Attending to its functions in the specific context of stand-up can thus work, I propose, as an important corrective against the well-entrenched pejorative association of comedy with "low" bodily affairs by pointing to the fundamental social significance of somatic intercorporeality (also Protevi 2009).

To argue this more thoroughly, I turn to awkwardness as something curiously endemic to stand-up and its social and affective dynamic (which is a different but arguably related concern compared with awkwardness as a popular *theme* in stand-up and comedy more generally). First, in part due to its nature as goal-driven "phatic labor" (Elyachar 2010) in an artificial setting, stand-up seems to court awkwardness and failure as if by definition, for when this goal is not attained and the connection is not there, stand-up quickly turns awkward for everyone involved. Second, stand-up usefully reveals awkwardness as also a social and political issue – an important insight recently made famous by Hannah Gadsby in her 2019 stand-up special *Nanette* (see also Sundén & Paasonen 2019). In the manner that Gadsby describes her own person(a) as a butch lesbian as having induced tension in audiences that she then felt she was obliged to release – through self-deprecative humor – awkwardness in stand-up brings into sharp relief how the viscerally felt relation (whether comfortable or tense) between a person and their comic stage persona analogically corresponds with the visceral comfort or tension one feels in presenting oneself in public more generally. Broadly, then, this essay pursues a political reconsideration of phaticity and phatic phenomena as indispensable for any analysis of power relations in stand-up comedy.

Overall, this chapter is empirically based on my earlier research on stand-up in the Finnish scene (see Lindfors 2019a; 2019b) that has been supplemented with additional data specifically gathered for this article, such as Finnish podcasts on (stand-up) comedy and complementary interviews with Finnish stand-up comedians. I will not be focusing on any singular stand-up routines or performances in detail, as my interest is rather on the foundational phatic, social, and affective dynamic that this genre rests on.

Relatability as Affective Dynamic

While techniques for the constitution and dissolution of audiences have been the hallmark of rhetoric for millennia, they are more central for some oratorical genres than others. Stand-up is one of these genres, as recognized since Lawrence Mintz (1985, 78) who said that the "comedian must establish *for the audience* that

the group is homogenous, a community, if the laughter is to come easily." Not only must a comedian calibrate their self-presentational act with an eye on its phatic capacities for forging social bonds with their audience, they must preferably learn to cultivate positive rapport *between* audience members and segments. Indeed, Teemu Vesterinen opines that audience members are as concerned about other people's moods as they are of their own, and generally quite socially conscious in (dis)allowing themselves to indulge in certain forms of emotional and bodily expression in the presence of others.

Oscillating between forces of stabilizing in-group allegiance and a seemingly divergent process of individuation, stand-up rests on the social dynamic between the degree to which the comedian presents themselves as a representative of their vernacular peer groups (see Noyes 2016), the degree to which the aforementioned groups coincide with the social imaginaries that their audience members identify or resonate with, and the degree to which stand-ups may self-present as idiosyncratic individuals who may even intentionally misalign and distance themselves from their audiences ("digging a hole for oneself" as metapragmatically referred to in the community). This is part of the dynamic trajectory of self-typification or "becoming-character" (Lindfors 2019a; 2019b; cf. Nozawa 2013) frequently discussed in stand-up under the notion of stage persona. The relationship between a stand-up and their comic stage persona is safe to say personal and demands regular assessment and reflexive monitoring. To be sure, it is also imbued with its own awkwardness and potentially visceral discomfort, as occasionally highlighted by comedians when expounding on becoming strangers to their earlier stage personae. For instance, Finnish-Swedish stand-up André Wickström describes out-growing his earlier stage persona, which represented the single-living André of his 20s, into his later persona of a steadily-middle-class-father-of-two – a process that effectively rendered his earlier material lacking in credibility and affective force (see Huumorihommia 2020).[2]

While the above case might come off as a relatively harmless example of the relationship of a stand-up to their stage persona, this relation is a key component of the overall dynamic of stand-up insofar as it – whether manifested in self-assurance of being comfortably "at ease with oneself" or by contrast as self-presentational malaise – has an important effect on the relationship of stand-up to their audience. It is common knowledge amongst stand-ups that the appearance of spontaneity – often indexed or perceived through relaxed yet controlled bodily comportment – bears the capacity to save a lot from an otherwise mediocre gig, because spontaneity makes the performer more relatable and the audience more relaxed. In the sense that an ill-fitting or otherwise awkward stage persona can be analogically paralleled with the relation that a person has with their public persona more generally, stand-up thus brings into sharp relief the question of who can present themselves acceptably and comfortably *as themselves* in various social situations. Moreover, it reveals the comfort/tension one feels in (presenting) one's self in social situations – that potentially has an effect on one's success in stand-up – as unevenly distributed. What Carolyn Pedwell (2014, xi) says

about empathy can be extended to relatability more generally in the sense that both are social and political relations that involve the imbrication of cognitive, perceptual, bodily, and affective processes – a fact sometimes obscured or ignored in accounts of stand-up that often operate in terms of "identification", "world-view", or other designators of largely referential indexicality and similarity.

In other words, relatability is an affective and bodily affair as much it is a cognitive or representational one of "sharing the same experience". The reason we might "like" a stand-up comedian might come down to their thoughts being recognizable (or just insightful, bold, outrageous, interesting, etc.) for us. Or, it might come down to the degree their bodies are "recognizable" and familiar for us, to how pleasant it is to engage with them intercorporeally and socially, and so on.[3] Moreover, the connectivity between stand-up and audience can equally turn on marked *difference* that is exaggerated rather than effaced, complicating the intimacy/distance binary dear to much stand-up analysis. For analogous reasons, I believe, Susanna Paasonen (2019) prefers the notion of resonance over identifi-cation (in her study of animated pornography, no less), pointing out that in order to resonate with one another, interactional agents need not be in any way similar (nor even human, for that matter) but merely to relate and connect in bodily terms: "This relating can involve fascination, absorption, or recognition, or it may be registered as more ephemeral pull or interest." Part of being a specialist of phatic relatability such as a stand-up comedian, in turn, is about learning to perceive, make sense of, and manipulate in real-time the finer points of this co-constitutive positioning and social connectivity.

Optimizing the Stand-Up Organism

I will next investigate how the social and affective dynamic of phatic connection is reflexively formulated and aestheticized amongst practitioners through tropic dis-course that I suggest operates as an organizing imaginary through which stand-up is frequently conceptualized. This imaginary is implicitly referenced when stand-ups are colloquially described as either *high* or *low energy*, in how the atmosphere of the venue can be *cold*, how the MC has to *warm up* the audience by generating and mobilizing energy and affect. Once the crowd is warm and the performance has gained momentum and properly got going, the stand-up gig is perceived as pul-sating and surging with *energy* as an essentially self-regulating (homeostatic) feed-back system, where the thermodynamic cycle of accumulation and expenditure can be felt as more and less intensified affective atmosphere and measured as bursts of laughter. An elemental aspect of the craft of stand-up thus involves skillfully *tapping into* this affective dynamic and energetic atmosphere while simultaneously being affected and enabled by it, *riding the waves of laughter* in an ecology of agency that is only partially reducible to willful, subjective intention.

With an eye on its reputation as a generalized vision of feedback systems (e.g., Galloway 2014), one could refer to this reflexive formulation of the phatic dynamic of stand-up as a thermodynamic or "cybernetic" imaginary (cf. Dorst

2016). Although historically characterized as a transdisciplinary study of self-regulating systems from the perspective of their mechanisms of randomizing variation and stabilizing constraint that has since split into a variety of sciences (see Heylighen & Joslyn 2001), I am here pointing to cybernetics as a *popular imaginary*, the appeal of which lies in the flexibility of its dynamic principles that enables to question the line between organic and inorganic systems by imagining a variety of systems and arrangements as seemingly organic adaptive processes (for important treatments of such an imaginary in different contexts, see Turner 2006; Pickering 2010; Modern 2021). Such systems can be equally technical such as homeostatic thermostats, biological such as human nervous systems, or social and cultural such as stand-up gigs (also Dorst 2016, 129). Casting a critical eye on this seemingly disinterested imaginary and vocabulary, I argue, then entails looking at the taken-for-granted ideologies and assumptions that frame how we understand and talk about the stand-up "organism" and its affective body politics – that also happens to be an understanding of the body inherited from late 19th century industrial capitalism (see Smith 1999; Clough 2008; Pruchnic 2008).

Rather than as clear-cut causalities, I suggest this imaginary manifests in stand-up as tacit tropisms or affective binaries – intimacy/distance, tension/release, organic/inorganic being some obvious favorite ones, as mentioned above – through which this art form is construed in processual terms as an affective dynamic of accumulation and expenditure that simultaneously gauges social distance and aesthetic-ethic sensibility (cf. Dorst 2016, 128). At its heart, one can find a dominant communicative ideology of stand-up comedy – a conception and valuation of language use in terms of its means and ends – as an inherently goal-seeking teleological activity of *making people laugh*, the success of which can be quite straightforwardly deduced from the number of bursts of low- to high-intensity laughter that an individual bit is able to evoke (cf. Van De Walle 2008, 100–101). Certainly, it is possible and (to a degree) feasible to envision stand-up as a systemic process with an apparent self-repairing mechanism of negative feedback – that is, marked absence of laughter or "unlaughter" (Billig 2005) as an indication of disconnection – which comes into play as soon as comedians stray too far from group norms, or simply bomb. As such, it is also possible to rationalize and optimize this process for "extracting value from affect" (Clough 2008, 16).

Illustrative of such affective optimization of the "black box" of performance interaction in terms of its inputs and outputs – to borrow again from cybernetic logic and parlance – individual stand-up routines are generally developed, assessed, and refined in terms of their "behavior" in changing live situations.[4] That is, bits and routines can be rationally calculated as an array of combinations and permutations – of specific words, of different word/text orders, down to variations in prosody, gesture, and body movement – where subtle nuances of communicative form are tried out for their affective (laughter-inducing) efficacy. The basic unit of a single stand-up routine is thus calibrated in practice in relation to its "environment" and the randomizing element constituted by the "match" between the stand-up, the permutations of bits and routines performed on just this

occasion, for just these people in the audience. The whole process can be assisted by "objectively" assessing one's success rate with the help of recordings, some comedians counting laughs-per-minute to measure their skill, others merely studying their unwitting maneuvers and aspects of bodily expression through video recordings.

In other words, affective dynamic is a central affordance for stand-up economics and vice versa. This also means that if your preferred comic style is telling short puns and one-liners – one after another in the classical vein of Mitch Hedberg or Steven Wright – the challenge of maintaining an appealing affective dynamic is probably different compared with more narrative-oriented raconteurs, punsters working with an entirely different set of textual tools.[5] Needless to mention, the affective dynamic of stand-up can easily inflect toward repetition or even boredom, because the audience can be certain that the comic will aim at outdoing her previous bit by provoking even louder laughter (cf. Kavka 2008, 94). Coincidentally, the utilitarian and behaviorist streak, manifested as a calculative orientation toward maximally effective punchlines, is frequently challenged by other stand-ups by an "experimental" mode of performance and an alternative ethos that is presented as more relaxed in terms of form and function (see e.g., Quirk 2018).

A more serious problem with one-handed emphasis on calculative affective and textual optimization of singular stand-up bits is that such systematized orientation risks obscuring important social and political aspects of the environment in which these affective and textual black boxes are exchanged. Here, cybernetic thinking on stand-up could fruitfully connect with contemporary feminist and affect theory that has brought into relief how differentially positioned bodies and their expressions are surfaces for affect to varying degrees – some bodies invoking authority or positive interest, others provoking hostile aggression more often than others (e.g., Ahmed 2004; Berlant 2011; Wetherell 2012). Affect tends to circulate via established networks of social and cultural investment – within existing "force fields" of race, class, gender, and ability (Helmreich 2013, S141) – typically stabilizing rather than disrupting social demarcations by keeping subjects attached to their (oppressive) conditions through governing affective atmospheres and pulls (Berlant 2011; cf. Riedel 2019).

Such atmospheres can in turn inflect acts of performing and narrating an identity by rendering some (but not all) expressions of affect appropriate and desirable for certain individuals – e.g., allowing self-deprecation but precluding confrontation as also brought out by Hannah Gadsby – and increasing or decreasing the capacities of bodies in the process (see Krefting 2014; Thomas 2015; cf. Sundén & Paasonen 2019, 8). Finnish stand-up comedian Kaisa Pylkkänen describes an affective atmosphere of this kind from the perspective of a female comedian as follows: "For the most part it has taken time for me to learn an amicable positioning so that the audience would still like me. I'm a strong personality and also formidable offstage. Amplified by a microphone and physical positioning above the audience… it is difficult (especially as a woman) to win over an audience."

While potentially giving some leeway by its excessive nature for differentially positioned bodies in terms of their range and intensity of affective and bodily expression, affordances for relatability in stand-up are distributed in an uneven manner, resulting in diverse tactics for coping with such imbalances. Coincidentally, any analysis of stand-up as phatic labor or as an exchange of energy must ultimately attend to – or rather begin with – the social and political environment that mediates any attempt at connection, relatability, and exchange. This becomes all the clearer when the connection at the heart of stand-up is ruptured, breaks, or is absent from the outset.

Awkwardness as Phatic Rupture

Awkwardness is something integral if not endemic to stand-up comedy, given its nature as goal-driven phatic labor in an artificial setup where repetition rules supreme.[6] To a degree, stand-up comedians must initially transcend the awkwardness linked to the promise of making people laugh, for inasmuch as forceful rhetorical persuasion is a potential affront to our integrity, it can be felt as intrusive, especially in cultures that value individuality. While most blatantly revealed by such performance-related instances of the gig going sour or just not working in the first place, the comedian fumbling and failing, transgressing moral boundaries, or worse, simply forgetting their bits, awkwardness is also invoked by instances that in one way or another afflict and test the connection between stand-up and audience, sometimes by only drawing attention to it (cf. Jakobson 1960). Indeed, the source of awkwardness seems to necessarily articulate with social norms and expectations that are tried and tested by awkward situations: awkwardness is an intersubjective event that feeds on the attention of others on us.[7] Even if we would admit along with Adam Kotsko (2010) that certain people seem to draw in awkwardness as if like magnets, their awkward character also derives from their coupling with social environments and other people, as he also points out. It is as if awkward actions would somehow rupture the social and phatic fabric associated with "things going smoothly".

As a seemingly open arena that famously invites unauthorized participants, such ruptures are frequently dealt in stand-up by hecklers, whose phatic attacks – shouts, groans, drunken hollers, whistles – do not necessarily aim at dialogue but at making a scene or disrupting the event (cf. Zuckerman 2016). In this regard, it can be wise (if not unavoidable) for a stand-up comedian to acquaint oneself with the affective flavor and pull of awkwardness that it certainly possesses even if it might not be generally incorporated into the categorical emotion-types of the philosophical canon (shame, anger, joy, fear). According to Teemu Vesterinen, skillful cultivation and release of tension and awkwardness (e.g., by appropriate insolence) is an essential feature of the comedian's toolkit in the sense that it assists in generating and mobilizing affective energy. He describes the desired outcome of such manipulation of the (collective) nervous system in therapeutic terms as "flushing one's head", after which the audience is ideally more relaxed,

receptive, and less caught up in knee-jerk reactivity. Indeed, it is easy to find comedians – also in the Finnish scene – who seem to tactically draw and even revel in awkwardness, navigating the awkwardly artificial setup of stand-up with seeming ease. Even "irritating, awkward encounters might grip and enthrall us and even bind us together in certain ways", as Jan Slaby (2019b, 64) says, putting us under a different kind of spell that can be partially draining but equally exciting and energizing.

In stand-up, the manifestations and functions of awkwardness range from a dysphoric feeling of suspended agency – think of a comedian freezing on stage – to an aesthetic affect one can cultivate and play with (cf. Ngai 2005). These functions emerge in relation to what Sianne Ngai (2005, 22–24) has described as "the boundary confusions built into the structure" of such "ugly feelings" as irritation, anxiety, paranoia – as well as, I suggest, awkwardness. According to Ngai, such confusions follow from the fact that these feelings seem to lack a distinct object – a feature shared by awkwardness – and from how they mediate or "reflexively 'theorize'" through their social structure the subjective vs. objective status of feeling and affect more generally. This is the diffuse, intransitive, and curiously impersonal quality of awkwardness that is evoked in Adam Kotsko's (2010, 5) description of his local joint where a woman patron launched into a drawn-out off-key *a capella* performance without warning: "We might just as easily say that I feel awkward, that the singing is awkward, or that the situation as a whole is awkward. It is as though the awkwardness is continually on the move, ever present yet impossible to nail down." Insofar as it bestrides the subjective/objective division in being socially mediated yet physiologically experienced, I suggest the contagious extension of awkwardness from a private feeling of the comedian into a shared affective relationality of the whole social arrangement is also one of the reasons why stand-up is thought of as exceptionally harsh emotionally and how notoriously shameful failures on the stand-up stage can be according to comedians (see also Probyn 2005).

Symptomatically, Finnish stand-up Heikki Vilja has depicted phatic breakdowns and failed attempts at connection as forcing himself to simultaneously adopt a "playback mode" and to perform "like a robot that is executing an assigned mission." The significance of phatic connection for stand-ups thus comes down in part to legitimizing their own agency as authentic selves rather than "robots," "automatons," or any other mechanical entities that comics invoke when referring to themselves as inauthentic performers. Somatic self-awareness and social comportment, not to mention bodily appearance, can thus in and of themselves become expressions of dissent against politics of oppression and inequality, for as Finnish-Canadian transgender stand-up James Lórien MacDonald (2018, 68) puts it, "When the non-normative body is presented onstage and speaks with its own agency, it calls into question the relationship of that body and society at large."

And so, we are back, although from another angle, at the reciprocal correspondence between the relation of a comedian to their public comic persona and

the affective/phatic relation of a stand-up comedian to their audience – both of these relations embedded within more overarching social norms that have the capacity to influence the matter by making bodies tense, awkwardly mechanic, vulnerable, or light, spontaneous, and relatable in the first place (cf. Sundén & Paasonen 2019, 5). If stand-up could be said to have a philosophy and aesthetics of its own, as some analysts have pondered (cf. Lintott 2017; Brodie 2020), this tripartite mediation and mutual implication between selfhood, public person-hood, and sociality maintained by phatic connection and viscerally disrupted by awkwardness would be a promising place to locate aspects of it. What is more, it would be an endemic philosophy and aesthetics of stand-up comedy, staged and creatively articulated by the form itself, grounded in corporeal co-existence.

Conclusive Remarks

In this chapter, I have presented stand-up as goal-driven phatic labor that rests on forging and manipulating provisional affective relations – connection for short – between performer and audience. With an eye on how our mutual phatic connection is generally felt as something to be protected or covered up by replacing silent moments with small talk and banter – in the hope of banishing potential awkwardness – calibrating this connection is a delicate matter demanding active semiotic labor that can itself be turned into an art. In contrast with more representationalist accounts of stand-up that often operate on the logic of iden-tification (and proceed through content analysis of singular stand-up bits and routines), I have found it useful to begin from its bodily dynamic as an affective arrangement that arguably underlies any attempt at successful identification and ideally "takes over" subjects and channels their affective expressions into unified patterns of behavior.

Owing similarly to its character as teleological phatic labor in an artificial interactional setup, stand-up is endemically or even formally constituted by awk-wardness as a communicative and connective gap (cf. Lemon 2013). Not only is the prospect of awkwardness ever-present in stand-up, but to some degree nec-essary for comedians to acknowledge, prepare for, and acquaint with themselves. As a contagious and relational affect, awkwardness illuminates stand-up gigs as affective arrangements and brings into relief the interdependence and mutually constitutive relation between comedian and audience. In this regard, I suggest that further analyses of awkwardness in stand-up (or comedy more generally) should look into the intersections of gender, sex, class, ability, and race on which the social and political dynamic of this affect – and stand-up as an aesthetic form determined by it – is fundamentally implicated.

I have also attended to how the affective dynamic at the heart of stand-up is discursively formulated by practitioners and naturalized into an array of tropes and metaphors that construe a stand-up gig as a self-regulating organism and at-mospheric field of energies, pressures, and intensities. Described here as a cyber-netic imaginary that organizes talk about the interactional dynamics of stand-up,

this imaginary is suggested as making itself felt through self-evident tropisms and binaries through which the genre is discursively construed. Envisioning the stand-up performance as a machinic organism also affords for an oratorical calculus of affective optimization, reminiscent of a behaviorist and utilitarian ethos where "meaning is secondary to information; information is primarily a matter of contact and connectibility, a modulation of affectivity and attention" (Clough 2008, 13). I would venture that articulating stand-up even more explicitly with cybernetic principles could potentially unlock some further interesting associations, bearing in mind that stand-up emerged in the Cold War heyday of early cybernetics of the 1950s. For example, one could productively (and critically) revisit the genealogical roots of stand-up in mid-20th century modernist aesthetics (for some relevant works, see Belgrad 1998; Dinerstein 2017; Grobe 2017), perhaps with particular attention to one of its socially and racially charged thermodynamic attributes of the 'cool.'

Notes

1 Along with Eric Shouse (2007; see also Berlant & Ngai 2017), I encourage broadening the locus of explanation from individual minds – that Shouse sees the three conventional humor theories starting from – to relational scenes of affective interaction in order to bring into relief the social and embodied nature of comic performance and humor more broadly.
2 Wickström's example also makes it clear that as narrators, stand-ups often animate the two realities of the narrated world (where André was still single) and the narrating occasion (where André is now a father), and the incongruity (or parallelism more generally) between these realities can be a source of much creativity but also of anxiety if not under control of the performer (cf. Shuman & Young 2018).
3 Phenomenologically, our perceiving the comedian as a unique subjectivity is by necessity mediated by our perception of their body – perhaps only a voice if we prefer to consume stand-up audios but nevertheless a material body (see Dolar 2006). What lies beside intersubjectivity is thus intercorporeality, where movement is perceived through the body that "has a seemingly innate ability to appreciate certain equivalences between perceived external movements and felt inner bodily movements." (Dolezal 2015.)
4 In classical cybernetics, a black box designates the basic principle and worldview comprising of systems that people are trying to get grips with by only limited knowledge. A black box is any entity the structural-functional behavior of which one does not know in advance but which one has to inventively manipulate by trying out different alternatives. As early cyberneticist Ross Ashby mundanely illustrated the matter: "The child who tries to open a door has to manipulate the handle (the input) so as to produce the desired movement at the latch (the output); and he has to learn how to control the one by the other without being able to see the internal mechanism that links them." (Cited in Pickering 2010, 20; Dorst 2016.)
5 It needs to be mentioned that paradoxically, while stand-ups recount short anecdotes and other narratives, it would be difficult to present narrative storyline or character development as being globally relevant for the genre. Stand-up performances tend to sequence mostly unrelated bits that might construct a seemingly consistent persona but that do not usually build into a coherent grand narrative, life story, or *Bildung*. While many comedians might aim at something like a narrative arc in their performances, one could argue that such arcs are generally derived as much

from an appealing affective dynamic as on thematic content like plot or character development.

6 At the same time, the predictability of enough repetition also enables the comedian to live in the moment. As Elizabeth Grosz (2013, 219) has said about the related notion of habit, repetition should not be thought of as something mechanically dehumanizing as if by definition, but as a creative capacity that creates possibilities for stability in a world where change is fundamental.

7 One's perception of and adherence to social norms and expectations is naturally conditioned by various subjective, cultural, and social factors, and can be (temporarily) altered by such agents as illness, various substances, etc. For instance, a Finnish stand-up Joel Herman, who has frequently addressed his autism spectrum disorder onstage, has brought out that he does not feel social pressure in the same way as others seem to do, which he counts as one of his assets as a comedian: "I have a different filter for what I care to say or about which I dare to be open in public." (Maksimainen 2000.)

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