

Eric Dyer

Mr. Greco

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Cool Story, Bro!

In a world dominated by technology, it's the last thing we want to hear when we take a break from our iPhones and actually interact with each other. "Cool story, bro!" You typically respond with "you had to be there" or "it was funnier in person". Sometimes your friends even stare at you blankly thinking that the story isn't over yet. These uncomfortable situations all share the same main characteristic. Chances are you just told an awful story. What made it awful? You have no idea. Why didn't they laugh at the joke? You have no idea. How do stand-up comedians do it? You have no idea. Why can't you tell stories very well? You can. Through an in-depth understanding of comedy theory, anybody can tell jokes.

It's the question that comedians have been asking for thousands of years yet remains unanswered. Can anybody be funny? The answer holds the key to success in any form of storytelling. Television producers are constantly looking to recreate the success of shows like Seinfeld and The Office (both of which were created by stand-up performers). The problem that people run into is that comedy is an art and not a science. It's no simple mathematical equation that has just one answer. However, like any other art form, there are theories that can be used to improve the quality of your

work. Although, practice is absolutely necessary as well. Can anybody be funny? The following paper will be searching for an answer to that question through an analysis of stand-up comedians: Demetri Martin, Louis Szekely (Louis C.K.), Jerry Seinfeld, and Ricky Gervais.

When you tune in to ABC to watch a television show like *Modern Family* and then change the channel to FOX to watch a cartoon like *Family Guy*, you might notice that the two shows are completely different in their styles of writing. They make you laugh in completely different ways and tell completely different jokes. *Modern Family* is all about the clashing of the characters while *Family Guy* is all about setting up the next joke. Writer for the New York Times, Adam Sternbergh, theorizes that all comedy can fit into two categories: character-driven and joke-driven. In what Sternbergh calls joke-driven comedies, the writers simply “start with the absurd and unbelievable and go from there”. They do not have limits in what they write. However, in character-driven comedies, people “say funny things and fall into funny situations, but it’s all contained within the realm of plausible realism; nothing absurd or unbelievable occurs”. Essentially, the real difference is the perspective that the audience has while watching the show. Are we believing in each of the characters’ flaws or are we waiting for the next punchline?

Now while you might assume that television comedy has nothing to do with stand-up, the writing techniques are very similar. There is no difference between believing in Phil Dunphy’s character flaws and believing in a stand-up comedian’s

on-stage personality. Over the past ten years, character-driven comedies dominated over joke-driven comedies. Sternbergh often refers to this as the “joke genocide” and attributes it to filmmakers Judd Apatow (Step Brothers) and Todd Phillips (The Hangover). Sternbergh says that they removed many elements of what we once considered comedic. He explains that they have taken jokes and “replaced them with a different kind of lure” through the personalities of the characters. Yet, these different genres are very different styles. For example, if you took someone watching Office Space or Groundhog’s Day and had them watch Airplane or Spaceballs, they might not find it as funny. Similarly, if you took someone watching a one-liner stand-up comedian like Demetri Martin, they might not find an anecdotal comedian like Louis C.K. all that funny. Therefore, in order to succeed, comedians must identify what kind of comic they are: one-liner or anecdotal or, in other words, joke-driven or character-driven. Despite what people might think, comedians improve the quality of their work by applying theories. The well-known character-driven comedians are Louis C.K. or Chris Rock are the reasons we believe that only certain people can be funny. These performers very successfully put on a character every time they go on stage. Their performances make us believe that their character must be who they are. In the same way that we subconsciously tell ourselves that Phil Dunphy is real, we tell ourselves that stand-up comedians’ personalities are just who they naturally are.

In joke-driven comedies, we are not fooled by this illusion because it is not there. The writers are not trying to get us to focus on the character development. Still, due to

the massive “joke genocide” that Adam Sternbergh attributed to Judd Apatow and Todd Phillips, studios feel uncertain about joke-driven scenes because they feel that they “impede the audience’s ability to feel an emotional attachment to the characters”. Studios are simply not willing to take a risk to produce joke-driven comedies similarly to stand-up comedians willing to take the risk of performing joke-driven material. Rather, in television, joke-driven comedies have a much greater presence through shows like Family Guy. Andrew Goldberg, writer for Family Guy, explains that “on our show, the laugh is kind of king”. Goldberg even articulates that in most shows, “the jokes are really character based... and they feel very unique to that character and the character’s relationship...” But, in a show like Family Guy, “somebody like Peter Griffin, can do almost anything at any given moment”. For joke-driven comedies, boundaries of characters are not a concern because the audience is not emotionally attached to the characters. Often, these joke-driven television shows are cartoons because they are limitless. If a writer is writing a joke-driven comedy, he might write in a bit that is impossible to film. Therefore, it’s easier to do it in animation. In stand-up comedy, it’s extremely difficult to establish yourself as a joke-driven comedian because most of the jokes are going to be audio. Joke-driven comedians like Demetri Martin must then rely on puns and wordplay for the majority of their performance. That is also why the audience tends to see more repeated jokes in one-liner performances.

Yet, even with joke-driven comedies, comedians use techniques to perfect their material and get the most out of their audiences. There are many ways that both

joke-driven comics and character-driven comics can evaluate their writing. Mel Helitzer theorizes in his book, *Comedy Writing Secrets*, that all comedy falls within six categories: surprise, emotion, exaggeration, realism, hostility, and target. Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren furthered research of Tom Veatch by creating the benign violation theory, stating that all comedy is a balance between benign and a violation. Meanwhile, Steve Kaplan says in his book that all comedy falls into one equation; “comedy is about an ordinary guy or gal struggling against insurmountable odds without many of the required tools and skills needed to win yet never giving up hope” Although, Kaplan’s book primarily is about character-driven comedy. Through analyzing theories by Helitzer, McGraw, and Warren, and how they apply to stand-up comedy routines, anybody can learn how to be funny.

Demetri Martin is the modern-day joke-driven comedian. He gives off a unique persona but primarily bases his routine off of jokes and not anecdotes. While he does occasionally go off on tangents, he primarily stays on track with his one-liners. The laughs from his jokes can still be deconstructed all the way down to theories made by Mel Helitzer, Peter McGraw, and Caleb Warren. For example, in Martin’s routine, he talks about what he loves about going to concerts: “I like to go to concerts because I like to see my favorite band through the phone of the asshole who’s standing in front of me.” In this instance, Martin is using the fourth tool of comedy: realism. Martin has been to concerts before and understands that many other people have. This lets him know how big of an audience this joke has. If nobody had ever gone to a concert, then nobody

would laugh in the audience. In a way, Martin has to assume that people have. He assumes correctly and gets laughs from it. He also uses the tool of exaggeration. Of course, when you're at a concert, it's difficult to see up to the stage, but you don't watch the entire concert through the screen of the phone above you. Martin is using this exaggeration to make the problem even bigger than it is. Martin is also using hostility and target as comedy ingredients. His target is the "asshole" who is holding his phone up to record. Martin is essentially attacking everyone who does that for his target. He uses hostility towards his target to increase the amount of laughter by calling him an asshole (an excellent example of when swearing is necessary in comedy). "Humor is a powerful antidote to many of the hostile feelings in our daily lives," says Helitzer. Without hostility, comedians would be missing opportunities to get some more laughs. McGraw and Warren explain in their article about comedy that philosopher, Sigmund Freud, argued that humor "is a way for people to release psychological tension, overcome their inhibitions, and reveal their suppressed fears and desires." In Martin's bit about the asshole at the concert, he attacks someone that we all essentially hate. Nobody likes watching through a little phone screen. Therefore, he is revealing to us a certain hatred that we all did not recognize unless we are currently in the situation.

Louis Szekely, otherwise known as Louis C.K., is a lot like the modern day George Carlin. Szekely's material is strongly character-driven. Unlike most character-driven comedians, he never uses jokes in his routine. He relies entirely on

anecdotes. For example, in Louis CK's special titled, *Chewed Up*, he tells a long story about Cinnabon.

"The other day I got a cinnabon. Do you know what a cinnabon is? Let me explain cinnabons to those of you with self-respect who just walk right by shit like that and have no idea what dudes like me are eating... The line at Cinnabon is not a varied group of people. It's not all kinds of folks trying out a cinnabon... and no one's happy on the cinnabon line. No one's like "I love these I can't wait!" No one's excited to get one. It's all dudes like me or fatter standing there like 'Oh fuck I'm getting a cinnabon.' Here's what a cinnabon is, it's a six-foot high cinnamon swirl cake made for one sad fat man... It's a sticky hot bun and it comes with a little tub of jizzy hot syrup."

Louis C.K. is currently considered to be the best-known comedian especially after the launch of his television show, *Louie*. He has enjoyed a large amount of success because his material has mass appeal. This joke is just one of many examples. Here, C.K. uses five of Helitzer's six ingredients of comedy. He uses hostility, target, realism, exaggeration, and emotion. One of the most iconic things about C.K. is that he is not afraid to make fun of himself. In this joke, he targets himself as a sad fat man who is in line to get a Cinnabon. He also is targeting everyone else who has ever been in a cinnabon line. His target is large enough for the audience to understand what kind of person he is talking about but small enough to where he is not insulting too many people in the audience. He also uses realism when he says to himself "oh fuck, I'm getting a cinnabon". Anybody who has eaten anything unhealthy understands what he is

going through in the cinnabon line. Therefore, it is relatable and is a very realistic observation of people in line. He uses exaggeration when he talks about the cinnabon being a “six-foot tall cinnamon swirl made for one sad fat man”. Obviously a cinnabon isn’t six feet tall but saying that it is puts a funny mental image in our heads. Here, C.K. is also exaggerating to help us better understand how he feels about eating a cinnabon. He knows that it’s a lot but he is still going to eat it. The last ingredient he uses from Mel Helitzer is emotion. He uses words like “fat” because people are typically offended when they are called that. He calls himself a “sad fat man” because it allows us to better understand how he feels about getting a cinnabon. Without this emotion, we wouldn’t really understand how he feels. Also, he uses emotion when he uses swear words in his act, expressing his frustration with himself. Similarly, C.K. uses swear words, emotion, and targets to shift his joke from being benign to being a benign violation. According to Warren and McGraw, the swearing and targeting that Helitzer theorized about is absolutely necessary in order to get the right balance between benign and violation and get laughter from the audience. Also, C.K.’s story and character is a great example of the comic equation theorized by Steve Kaplan. C.K. is the ordinary guy who is struggling. He is struggling against the resistance of cinnabon. He is not able to resist because he is overweight and feels the need to stop eating there. It might seem like C.K. has given up hope because he still eats cinnabon but he actually is still struggling because later in the bit he talks about crying because he feels so ashamed about eating cinnabon. Therefore, he is showing us that he is clearly upset about his inability to control himself and wants to change it but can’t.

“Comedy is about an ordinary guy or gal struggling against insurmountable odds without many of the required tools and skills needed to win yet never giving up hope”

Meanwhile, Jerry Seinfeld is considered to be the everyman comic according to other comedians like Louis C.K. and Ricky Gervais. Almost all of his material falls under the category of realism. His comedy is strongly character-driven as well, therefore making us believe that he is just like us. One of his best-known bits is about airplane travel.

“Then you get on the plane. The pilot, of course, always has to come on the PA system. This guy’s so excited about being a pilot he can’t even stand himself. He’s giving you the whole route, all his moves. We’re in the back going, ‘Yeah. Fine... I don’t know... Just end up where it says on the ticket, really.’ Do I bother him with what I’m doing? Knocking on the cockpit door. ‘I’m having the peanuts now... Just thought I’d keep you posted. I’m not gonna have em all now. I’m just gonna have a few. I don’t wanna finish it because it’s such a big bag.’”

Seinfeld is known as an everyman comic because he appeals to the mass audience. This bit about airplane travel is applicable to anybody who has ever been on a plane so, most likely everyone in the audience. In this part of his act, Seinfeld uses realism, exaggeration, and target. A large part of his success can be attributed to realism. Realism is what has driven his career in both television show and stand-up comedy. Jerry Seinfeld was the star of his own television show, “Seinfeld”, from 1989 to 1998. Interestingly enough, Seinfeld said part of the reason he left acting to return to

stand up comedy is that “a lot of people just say they can do it (acting)...” He says that there is nobody in the world of stand up comedy “that says they can do it but can’t do it”. While his reason directly contradicts my claim, his comedy uses elementary comedic techniques that need to be analyzed in order to perfect a comedy routine. In his airplane routine, he uses realism to relate to his audience. They feel cramped when they use the restroom. They feel squished in their cramped seats. They are disappointed every time they reach into the small peanut bag to remember they ate all the peanuts in one handful. Seinfeld understands that people get frustrated at these things while in that certain situation but they never talk about it in conversation. He is articulating our frustrations. As Helitzer puts it, “without some fundamental basis of truth, there's little with which the audience can associate”. Seinfeld uses realism to relate with the audience. Once they are on board (no pun intended), he can lash out his target, airlines. Seinfeld is essentially criticizing the airlines and it works because he says what the audience is thinking every time they are stuck on an awful flight. Helitzer explains that “targeting must reaffirm the audience’s hostilities and prejudices”. He also uses exaggeration to an extent when he talks about knocking on the cockpit door and letting the pilots know that he is eating the peanuts. We, the audience, would never even think of doing that but Seinfeld puts the image in our heads and gets a laugh from his use of absurdity. Also, the joke fits perfectly into the benign violation theory. If he walked up to the cockpit, people would be shocked. Then if he told them they were eating the peanuts after the pilot explained the route they were taking, the violation suddenly becomes benign and innocent according to McGraw and Warren. Helitzer theorizes that

Seinfeld wins us over through the exaggerated idea tied with realism and targeting. However, according to Steve Kaplan's theories, what really wins us over is the fact that Seinfeld is struggling to win. All he wants is a relaxing flight but he can't ever get that. We know it's practically impossible but we watch him struggle because he hasn't given up hope. While each of these comedic theorists believe there are different reasons people find this funny, they all believe there are reasons and that these reasons can be taught to anybody. While Seinfeld strongly disagrees, his material is so mechanical it further supports the argument that comedy can, in fact, be taught.

Lastly, we come to the British comedy legend, Ricky Gervais. Out of the comedians listed here, Gervais and Seinfeld have the most similar careers. They both started out in stand up and later went on to create their own shows. Jerry Seinfeld was the creator of Seinfeld while Ricky Gervais was the creator of United Kingdom broadcast of The Office (later adapted for American television). Gervais differs from Seinfeld in that he believes that anybody can be funny. Gervais especially believes this because he tends to find sources and make comments on them. An example is his bit where he personifies animals...

"Stroking a spider can cause it to go bald... What sort of maniac goes around stroking spiders? Is that a problem in the arachnid world? Premature balding? You stroke a little spider... He runs back to the web and all the other spiders go, 'What you wearing a baseball cap for?' 'Fashion.' 'Well take it off in the web.'

‘Nah. I’ll just keep it on.’

Gervais claims this is one of his favorite bits throughout his career. Part of the reason this routine is so successful is the exaggeration. Of course these animals can’t talk but Gervais creates personalities for them. He does not utilize many of the comedic elements the other comedians used which makes his audience more specific. He is not targeting himself like Louis C.K. nor is he an everyman comic like Jerry Seinfeld.

Gervais does not really make many violations other than when he swears. However, he does use realism to talk about the spider worrying about baldness. He gives the spider a baseball hat because it is commonly used to cover male baldness. He uses it with spiders to demonstrate the absurdity of a spider going bald and being concerned about it. The reaction, “fashion”, just makes it more relatable to the audience.

Gervais mainly attributes the comedic value to the facts themselves and not his commenting. He even notes it in the HBO special titled, Talking Funny. The special has Ricky Gervais, Jerry Seinfeld, Chris Rock and Louis C.K. all talking about comedy.

Gervais talks about the animal bit and how he isn’t being funny but that the facts are instead. He asks the question to the others, “Are we allowed to just go out there and be funny?” Seinfeld instantly responds by critically asking what he means. Gervais says that he feels anyone can be funny. Immediately, Seinfeld and Rock reject his claim.

C.K. later adds that “they get quickly to a place and stay there”. Gervais explains how stand up comedians have an “elitist mentality” when it comes to who can tell jokes.

Some of the greatest philosophers ever have theorized on what makes something funny? Can anybody do it? Sigmund Freud created the relief theory of laughter. Plato

and Aristotle formed the superiority theory in which all comedy belittles the comedian. Essentially, they believed that we never laugh with someone. There is always a target whether it is the comedian or someone/something else. Comedy is as old as language itself. It has been theorized about for thousands of years yet people still believe you are born funny. While there has been research over a 'funny gene'. It affects our perception of humor overall, not just our ability to tell jokes. Therefore, it is likely that the majority of the population has it. Stand up comedians are not just an elite group of the population when it comes to getting people to laugh. Rather, there is a select group of people who could not be stand up comedians. The majority of the population can perform stand up comedy successfully if they understand the theory and never give up. After all, comedy comes from personal experiences and you are just *an ordinary guy or gal struggling against insurmountable odds without many of the required skills and tools with which to win yet never giving up hope.*

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