

1-1-1994

The poetics of sketch comedy

Michael Douglas Upchurch
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/rtds>

Repository Citation

Upchurch, Michael Douglas, "The poetics of sketch comedy" (1994). *UNLV Retrospective Theses & Dissertations*. 368.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.25669/8oh8-bt66>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Scholarship@UNLV with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in UNLV Retrospective Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Scholarship@UNLV. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@unlv.edu.

INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.



University Microfilms International
A Bell & Howell Information Company
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
313/761-4700 800/521-0600

Order Number 1358581

The poetics of sketch comedy

Upchurch, Michael Douglas, M.A.

University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 1992

U·M·I

300 N. Zeeb Rd.
Ann Arbor, MI 48106

**THE POETICS
OF
SKETCH COMEDY**

**By
Michael Upchurch**

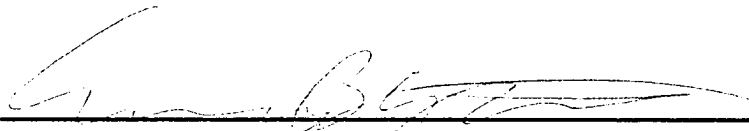
**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of**

**Master of Arts
in
Communication Studies
Greenspun School of Communication
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
December, 1992**

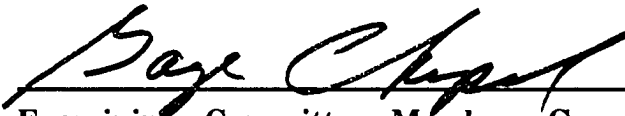
The Thesis of Michael Upchurch for the degree of
Master of Arts in Communication Studies is
approved.



Chairperson, Brad Chisholm, Ph.D.




Examining Committee Member, Evan Blythin, Ph.D.



Examining Committee Member, Gage Chapel, Ph.D.



Graduate Dean, Ronald W. Smith, Ph.D.



Outside Examining Committee Member, Joe
McCullough, Ph.D.

University of Nevada, Las Vegas
December 1992

Copyright© 1993 Michael D. Upchurch
All Rights Reserved

ABSTRACT

The Poetics of Sketch Comedy labels, defines and analyzes the conventions of sketch comedy. The comic sketch is examined for its structural conventions, and is broken into categories for analysis. The superstructure of variety entertainment, and conventions used to simulate cohesiveness in variety shows are also examined. Included is a review of pertinent literature, a brief historical background and a summary of conclusions with suggestions for future research.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS - CONT.	v
Acknowledgments	vi
 CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION	 1
SCOPE AND PURPOSE	3
METHOD	5
PREVIOUS WORK	7
<i>Books</i>	9
<i>Articles, Dissertations etc.</i>	13
INDICATIONS	14
 CHAPTER II - HISTORICAL BACKGROUND	 15
VENUES	16
<i>Early Forms</i>	16
<i>British Music Hall</i>	17
<i>Minstrelsy</i>	17
<i>Burlesque</i>	18
<i>Vaudeville</i>	19
<i>Broadway Revue</i>	20
<i>Radio</i>	20
<i>Television</i>	21
WHAT'S A SKETCH?	22
<i>Borderline Cases</i>	24
 CHAPTER III - STRUCTURE	 28
CATEGORIES	28
<i>The Classic Sketch</i>	29
<i>The Revue Sketch</i>	33
<i>The Modern Sketch</i>	36
SKETCH = PREMISE + ESCALATION	38
<i>The Premise</i>	38
<i>Escalation</i>	39
<i>Exposition</i>	42
ENDINGS	43
<i>The Punch</i>	44
<i>The Turn</i>	48
FACILE ENDINGS	50
<i>The Non-sequitur</i>	50
<i>The Rave-off</i>	51
<i>Death</i>	54
THE FRAME	55
<i>Linearity?</i>	57

TABLE OF CONTENTS - CONTINUED

CHAPTER IV - THE SUPERSTRUCTURE OF VARIETY	60
<i>Narrative and Variety in Symbiosis</i>	61
<i>Dynamics of Variety Entertainment</i>	64
<i>Timing</i>	67
<i>The Master of Ceremonies</i>	68
<i>Recurring Characters</i>	70
MONTY PYTHON'S FLYING INNOVATIONS	71
<i>Superstructure</i>	74
<i>Serial Links</i>	75
<i>Continually Developing Sketches</i>	76
<i>The Thematic Link</i>	78
<i>The Serial Ending</i>	79
<i>Lateral Cohesion</i>	80
 CHAPTER V - CONCLUSIONS	 81
CONCLUSIONS	81
SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH	81
<i>Genre Studies</i>	82
<i>Character Studies</i>	82
<i>Quantitative Possibilities</i>	83
AFTERWORD - (A SLIGHTLY NON-SEQUITUR END)	83
WORKS CITED	86
WORKS CITED, CONT.	87
WORKS CITED, CONT.	88
WORKS CITED, CONT.	89
WORKS CITED, CONT.	90
ARTICLES	91
ARTICLES, CONT.	92

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I must thank Brad Chisholm for thoughtful, helpful and incisive criticism of this work, and for his uncanny ability to know more about what I'm trying to say than even I do. Second, Alfredo Tryferis for reading my work and saying things like "this doesn't make sense" and "this sounds hackneyed." Without his help this work would be less readable. Third, the other members of my committee, Evan Blythin, Gage Chapel, Tony Ferri and Joe McCullough. Finally, to Al Franken, Mel Tolkin, and Lucille Kallen for giving me insight into the sketch writing of *Saturday Night Live* and *Your Show of Shows*.

THE NARRATIVE OF SKETCH COMEDY

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

...the wilding heirs of art at the vaudeville were giving things of their own imagination, which they had worked up from some vague inspiration into a sketch of artistic effect...into drama as limitless and lawless as life itself, owing no allegiance to plot submitting to no rule or canon, but going on gaily into nothingness as human existence does...

William Dean Howells
Harper's Monthly
*Magazine*¹ April, 1903

The comic sketch has always been with us. Scholars have claimed that the sketch has its origins in the Renaissance Commedia Dell'arte routines, as well as Medieval farce,² but it probably existed in some form or other since man first acted out stories for an audience. In ancient Athens and Rome there were huge open air markets which had variety entertainment - jugglers, musicians - and most likely, amusing sketches of some sort.³ Alas, unlike the work of Aristophanes and Plautus, these were never written down and are lost to posterity.

¹Howells, William Dean, "On Vaudeville" *Harper's Monthly Magazine* (106 April, 1903): 811-15

²Neale, Steve and Krutnik, Frank. *Popular Film and Television Comedy*. (Routledge: London and New York, 1990): p. 182

³ William Dean Howells postulated this in his *Harper's* article.

A similarly lamentable situation existed in American and British variety theater in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Sketches existed there but, unlike the plays of "legitimate" theater, were rarely discussed or studied. This despite the fact that they were seen by far more people than their well respected relatives uptown.⁴

In the television age, sketch comedy has been a staple ever since Uncle Milte first put on a dress in 1948. Comedy variety shows, the habitat of the TV comedy sketch, have been among the most successful formats in television history; in fact there have been, almost without pause, wildly popular shows featuring sketch comedy since the inception of television.*

The nineties show no sign that the sketch will cease to be a means of comedic exploration. So far in this decade, there have been at least twelve shows produced on network and cable television which featured sketch comedy as an integral part of their format,** not to mention the dozens of sketch comedies making their rounds in reruns across the cable spectrum.

American and British publics have enjoyed these short playlets of slight structure and huge laughs, and that popularity alone makes the sketch important to study. Television shows containing sketch comedy have been lauded with awards for their writing (*Your Show of Shows*, *Smothers Brothers and*

⁴DiMeglio, John E. *Vaudeville USA*. (Bowling Green University Popular Press: Bowling Green, OH, 1973): p. 11

* *The Milton Berle Show*, *Your Show of Shows*, *The Steve Allen Show* and *The Jackie Gleason Show* in the 50's; *Laugh In* and *The Smothers Brothers* in the 60's, *Saturday Night Live* and *Carol Burnett* in the 70's, *SCTV* and *SNL* in the 80's; *In Living Color* and *SNL and The Kids in the Hall* in the 90's.

** *Almost Live*, *The Ben Stiller Show*, *Carol and Company*, *Def Jam Comedy Hour*, *The Edge*, *Four on the Floor*, *The Kids in the Hall*, *In Living Color*, *Saturday Night Live*, *Random Acts of Variety*, *Short Attention Span Theater*, *T.L.C.*, *The Unnaturals*.

Saturday Night Live all received Emmys for writing), yet little scholarly work has been done in regards to this unique art form.

Through the years comedy in general has received short shrift from academicians. This work will, it is hoped, continue a recent trend in the exploration of comic forms by analyzing the narrative structure of sketch comedy, something which has been done in earnest only in *non*-comedic forms for thousands of years.

SCOPE AND PURPOSE

This study will examine the structure of sketch comedy and will treat the comic sketch as a unique narrative form with its own rules and conventions. It will stray no farther in subject matter than the sketch itself and the comedy variety shows where the sketch is found.

Comedy is being examined by scholars more than ever before, but there is still a dearth of research with regards to the comic sketch. Therefore, this study will stay broad in scope. Chapter one provides method and review of pertinent literature, chapter two gives a brief history of the venues in which the comic sketch appeared; chapter three analyzes the structural conventions of the comic sketch, chapter four examines the superstructure of the variety show and chapter five summarizes findings.

The work will be peppered with examples of television sketches, as well as material culled from vaudeville and burlesque lore. After forms have been defined, examples will be taken from both contemporary and historical sources as needed, selectively traversing the two hundred years that the sketch has existed as a distinct form. Though a brief history is delineated and much discussion is necessarily couched in a historical framework, this work does not attempt to be the definitive history of the form.

The primary purpose is to examine structural conventions existing in sketch comedy, while a corollary of this is the examination of historical antecedents. Examples were chosen because they represent typical narrative constructs, and the analysis of these is not meant to be exhaustive, only deep enough to provide explication.

There will also be no attempt to answer the eternal question: "what is funny?," which has been vexed over since the first joke was uttered. Examples used here are often quite funny, but they do not necessarily represent the funniest of sketch comedy. That a given sketch is funny is considered axiomatic for the purpose of this work.

Both British and American sketches are discussed at length, but they are not compared or contrasted in any significant way. That approach is fertile ground for future studies; for purposes here though, there appears no need to differentiate between sketches found in either country. Both the United States and Britain inherited the sketch from a rich history of variety theater occurring in both countries, which many times traded acts.⁵ In their book, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, Steve Neal and Frank Krutnik discuss film and television comedy from both sides of the Atlantic interchangeably. Certainly, there are stylistic differences in the comedy of each country, but, as with Neal and Krutnik, stylistics is not the focus of this work.

Also, while forms of sketch comedy exist in other countries, only American, British and Canadian examples will be used. Cross-cultural studies would be fascinating, but this study

⁵Bailey, Peter., ed. *British Music Hall, The Business of Pleasure*. (Open University Press: Milton Keynes, Philadelphia, 1986): p. xiv. See also: Gilbert, Douglas. *American Vaudeville, Its Life and Times*. (Dover Publications, Inc.: New York, 1940): pp. 135-36

will focus only on the sketch comedy found in the English speaking world.

METHOD

This work is a structural analysis that will reveal the poetics of sketch comedy. The conventions of sketch comedy will be labeled, defined and categorized with brief analysis. The result will be more descriptive than analytical in nature, and is intended to shed light on the fundamental structural principles underlying the form.

Jonathan Culler argued and demonstrated in *Defining Narrative Units*⁶ that plot and structure can be understood on an intuitive level; and sensible folks can agree on what constitutes important aspects of plot, and whether or not a plot summary is correct. It is with this notion that this work will proceed.

The analysis will be practical, which is to say that there will not be elaborate attempts to “synthesize” the text of sketches for analysis, as was fashionable in linguistic-based continental forms of narrative analysis. Analytical approaches such as semiotics, and especially deconstructionism tend to bog down in the minutia of their own arduous systems of classification,** therefore, using wholesale any one of these approaches will be avoided. Instead, this work will stay at the

⁶Culler, Jonathan. *Style and Structure in Literature, Essays in the New Stylistics.*, Ed. by Roger Fowler. (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, New York): pp. 124-131

** Chomsky himself, as Culler points out (See: *Style and Structure* pp. 125-126), seemed to have concerns that many linguistic analysts were justifying their analyses merely by displaying that they were the result of some protracted, explicit procedure. See: *A Transformational Approach to Syntax, in The Structure of Language.* Fodor and J. Katz., ed. (Prentice-Hall: Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1964): p. 241. For major works in Russian Formalism see: Vladimir Propp; French Structuralism see: Roland Barthes; Noam Chomsky, Tzvetan Todorov.

general level of classification and isolation of forms, which is appropriate for initial inquiry.

Certain narratologists will be called forth and their theories applied where appropriate, but there will be no "metalanguage" used to explicate sketches. A paragraph or two summarizing a sketch is exhaustive enough for the purpose of this work, for the narrative of most sketches never spans more than a few minutes. Novels and films require more extensive systems of plot synthesis because of their length; but given the brevity of sketches, it is possible to reproduce the entire text of some sketches for analysis. This is a level of exhaustiveness only dreamed of by literature and film narratologists.

This study will utilize much of the language and systems of classification used by the very writers of sketch comedy themselves. Writers such as Al Franken, Mel Tolkin and Walter De Leon have been sought to provide a theoretical, although many times informal, framework for the sketch. Some terminology will come from the vocabulary of the writers and practitioners of sketch comedy, some will be borrowed from the classical works of narratologists, and some will be invented for the purpose of discussion and analysis.

A byproduct of this will be the generation of a nomenclature which could be useful to future scholars who wish to further pursue the sketch, or aspects of sketch comedy and variety shows. This, it is hoped, will provide a springboard for future studies of this comedy form.

PREVIOUS WORK

Though the successive changes in Tragedy and their authors are not unknown, we cannot say the same of comedy: its early stages passed unnoticed, *because it was not yet taken up in a serious way.*

Aristotle, from *Poetics*
(italics added)

Aristotle mused about the lack of attention paid to forms of comedy 2,400 years ago. It is unfortunate that most of his work on comedy was lost, for the study of comedy as an art form has improved only slightly, and only recently, since his time.

While intellectuals always praised comedy in the abstract, unlike tragedy and historic works, they rarely studied it for its poetics. Great philosophers such as Aristotle, Cicero, Hegel, Freud, Emerson, Bergson, and Hobbes,⁷ to name but a few, have examined comedy. They paid homage to comedy as an essential part of life, and spent great (and usually banal) attempts to understand just exactly what it was that made people laugh, but the poetics and history of comic forms were largely ignored.*

⁷See: Cooper, Lane. *An Aristotelian Theory of Comedy*. (Kraus: New York 1969), *Poetics*. Trans. S. H. Butcher. 4th ed. (London: Macmillan, 1980); Cicero. *On Oratory and Orators*. Trans. J. S. Watson. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1970); Hegel, G.W.F. *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*. Trans. T. M. Know. 2 Vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975); Freud, Sigmund. "Humor." Vol. 21 of Standard Edition of *The Complete Psychological Works*. 24 vols. Trans. James Strachey. (London: Hogarth, 1961); Emmerson, Ralph Waldo. "The Comic." *Letters and Social Aims*. Vol 8 of *Complete Works*. 12 vols. (Boston: Houghton, 1883); Bergson, Henri. *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. Trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell. (New York: Macmillan, 1911); Hobbes, Thomas. *Human Nature, or the Fundamental Elements of Policy*. Vol. 4 of *English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*. Sir William., ed. Molesworth. 11 vols. 1840. (Darmstadt: Scientia Verlag Aales, 1966)

*For an excellent overview of comedic theory see: *Theories of Comedy*, ed. Paul Lauter; (Anchor Books Doubleday & Company, Inc. Garden City, New York, 1964) See also: *Comedy, an Introduction to Comedy in Literature, Drama, and Cinema* by T.G.A. Nelson (Oxford University Press, 1990)

Bernard Schilling observed this situation in his book *The Comic Spirit*:

The theory of the comic, blurred as it is by psychological analyses of laughter, remains one of the permanently unsolved problems of literary study.⁸

The comedy of the Greeks and Shakespeare has been studied,⁹ albeit not as extensively as the tragedies. But it seems that a comedy must be many hundreds of years old, its references lost to the general population, before there is any scholarly interest in it. In the last 150 years, the years of vast innovation in burlesque, vaudeville, radio, film and television comedy, there are but a few notable breaks in the academic silence toward comedy.

There has been modest improvement in the study of comedy since Aristotle's time though.* During that time of fledgling academic inquiry, each study began with an obligatory, sometimes apologetic, defense for its low subject matter.

There remains much to be done however, and the relative lack of scholarly focus on comic forms still presents frustration. As any scholar who has chosen the study of comedy well knows,

⁸Schilling, Bernard. *The Comic Spirit*. (Wayne State University Press: Detroit 1965)

⁹Greeks: Lever, Katherine. *The Art of Greek Comedy*. (London: Methuen, 1956); and Legrand, Ph. E. *The New Greek Comedy*. Trans. James Loeb. (London: Heinemann, 1917). Shakespeare: Berry, Ralph. *Shakespeare's Comedies: Explorations in Form*. (Princeton University Press: Princeton NJ, 1972); and Bonazza, Blaze. *Shakespeare's Early Comedies: A Structural Analysis*. (Mouton: The Hague, 1966)

* There are other branches of academe which have taken to the study of comedy. Psychology and health sciences have opened up a whole branch of therapeutics in which comedy - or its effect, laughter - is studied for physical and psychological benefits (See *Handbook of Humor Research* Vols. 1&2) There have been reams written on "comedic theory," asking the dogged question of what is funny and why. But, it is those who study literature and history, those who could best give comedy artistic respect who have snubbed it most.

the sources that can be found to support such work are often maddeningly superficial. Peter Bailey commented in the introduction to *British Music Hall* that "...in few fields is one obliged to read so much that seems of stunning inconsequence."¹⁰ Therefore, the sources in this work vary from the popular to the scholarly press.

Books

Anatomy of Criticism,¹¹ by Northrop Frye contains one of the few analyses of comedy which does not get mired into theories of laughter. Frye's analysis of the plot structure of Greek New Comedy is an anomaly for this reason. This genre study establishes formulas found in the comedies of Platus and Terence which can be applied to modern works, and his five phases of comedy could prove invaluable to future scholars doing genre work in comedy.

*Vaudeville USA*¹² was a seminal work in the history of comedy. In 1973 John E. DiMeglio interviewed aging vaudevillians (and none too soon), documenting the movements, ownership, and behind-the-scenes careers in the Vaudeville age. This work is especially important because DiMeglio approaches the subject matter with the rigor of an academician (something rarely done before) and at the same time writes with an approachable style. *Selected Vaudeville Criticism*¹³ and *Vaudeville, as Seen by its Contemporaries*¹⁴ make excellent companions to DiMeglio. Each is an anthology of writings about Vaudeville from that time, and they offer several complete articles to which DiMeglio referred. *American Vaudeville, Its*

¹⁰Bailey, Peter. *British Music Hall, The Business of Pleasure*. (Open University Press: Milton Keynes, Philadelphia, 1986): p. xxi

¹¹ Frye, Northrop. (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1957)

¹² DiMeglio, John E. (Bowling Green University Popular Press: Bowling Green, Ohio, 1973)

¹³Slide, Anthony., ed. (The Scarecrow Press, Inc.: Metuchen, N.J., & London, 1988)

¹⁴Stein, Charles W., ed. (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1984)

*Life and Times*¹⁵ by Douglas Gilbert is an informal yet informative account of vaudeville. Gilbert, a vaudevillian himself, recreates a vivid image of vaudeville and gives interesting insight into the style and content of vaudeville sketches in the early part of this century.

*Horrible Prettiness, Burlesque and American Culture*¹⁶ by Robert C. Allen takes a somewhat sociological approach to covering burlesque history. He focuses on the role of women in burlesque and the social functions inherent on the venue. A much more personal book is *Minsky's Burlesque*¹⁷ by Morton Minsky. It is told through the eyes of Morton Minsky, whose family name was synonymous with that bawdy form of variety entertainment. It is valuable because it contains hard to find scripts of sketches from that era.

All these works provide valuable insight into the era in which the sketch came in to its own. They make occasional broad swipes at the form but none focus on the sketch and give indepth analysis.

Histories of television sketch comedy shows are few. *Your Show of Shows*¹⁸ by Ted Sennett offers many laurels but little documentation of the most important sketch comedy ever, though there are excerpts and descriptions of sketches for those without access to the show. *Saturday Night, A Backstage History of Saturday Night Live*,¹⁹ by Doug Hill and Jeff Weingrad offers a comprehensive history of the other most important sketch comedy. It focuses on the interrelationships and behind the

¹⁵Gilbert, Douglas. (Dover Publications Inc.: New York, 1940)

¹⁶Allen, Robert C. (The University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill and London, 1991)

¹⁷Minsky, Morton., and Machlin, Milt. (Arbor House: New York, 1986)

¹⁸Sennett, Ted. (Collier books: Div. of Macmillan Publishing, New York, 1977)

¹⁹Hill, Doug., and Weingrad Jeff. (Beech Tree Books: William Morrow, New York, 1986)

scenes action of the characters who made the show. Both of these books seem to be star struck, and there is scant attention paid to the sketches or writers.

The Second City, A Backstage History of Comedy's Hottest Troupe,²⁰ by Donna McCrohan gives a history of Second City from its origins in Chicago in the late fifties through 1986. This work gives occasional insight into the creative process of improvisation and the formation of material, especially in the early treatment of the Compass. A far better history of Second City can be found in Jeffrey Sweets *Something Wonderful Right Away*,²¹ which is perhaps the best work done on that subject. *Going Too Far, The Rise and Demise of Sick, Gross, Black, Sophmoric, Weirdo, Pinko, Anarchist, Underground, Anti-Establishment Humor*²² by Tony Hendra devotes several chapters to the Compass and Second City and gives an incisive historical analysis in the process. Hendra covers the post World War II humor except for television, which he self-consciously avoids save for a treatment of the *Smothers Brothers* and a swipe at *Saturday Night Live*.

Roger Wilmut's *From Fringe to Flying Circus*²³ documents television sketch comedy on the other side of the Atlantic. In discussing the innovation of *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, Wilmut and the Pythons themselves, provide perhaps some of the clearest insight into the structure of the sketch. While the discussion is brief, and always from the perspective of contrasting the Python sketches from earlier forms, it is very illuminating indeed. *The First 200 Years of Monty Python*,²⁴ by Kim "Howard" Johnson is equally important for the same reasons, it provides candid insight from the Python crew

²⁰McCrohan, Donna. (A Perigee Book: Putnam Publishing Group, 1987)

²¹Sweet, Jeffrey. (Limelight Editions: New York, 1987)

²²Hendra, Tony. (Dolphin Book: Doubleday, New York, 1987)

²³Wilmut, Roger. (Fakenham Press Limited: Fakenham Norfolk, 1980)

²⁴Johnson Kim "Howard." (St. Martins Press: New York, 1989)

discussing the structure of *Flying Circus* and some of its predecessors and influences. *The Complete Monty Python's Flying Circus, All The Words*²⁵ contains complete scripts for all forty five shows which aired on the BBC between 1969 and 1974. Roger Wilmut meticulously organized the scripts into a readable form with helpful descriptions of the visual aspects of the show, except the cartoons, to which he understandably only gives necessary elements. This is an excellent reference since it numbers and summarizes each show in the table of contents.

Perhaps the single most detailed work on the sketch thus far is contained in Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik's *Popular Film and Television Comedy*.²⁶ They look at every form of comedy from stand-up to the full length motion picture. If there is any single work that this study would like to follow in approach to subject matter, it would be this. Neal and Krutnik do a short, but incisive analysis of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* which is perhaps the best yet done. Their analyses are primarily structural, but they avoid the pitfall of simply "applying" any one theoretical perspective to comedy forms. At the same time their approach is scholarly, and instead of simply doing historical tabulation, or singing praises, they actually get into fairly deep analysis of their subject matter. This study will attempt to do with the sketch what they did with the whole of comedy; that is, to do a brief historical treatment and create definitions of various forms.

A surprisingly unhelpful source is the "general reader" books on the writing of comedy such as *Comedy Secrets for Beginning Writers* and *Comedy Techniques for Writers and Performers*²⁷ by Melvin Heilitzer, *The Craft of Comedy Writing*²⁸ by Sol Saks *How Great Comedy Writers Create Laughter* by

²⁵ Wilmut, Roger. (Pantheon Books: New York, 1989)

²⁶ Neale, Steve., and Krutnik, Frank. (Routledge: London and New York, 1990)

²⁷ Heilitzer, Melvin. (Lawhead Press: Athens Ohio, 1984)

²⁸ Saks, Sol. (Writers Digest Books: Cincinnati, Ohio)

Larry Wilde and *How to be Funny*²⁹ by Steve Allen. Ironically, these books not only avoid an in-depth treatment of the sketch, but there is scant mention of sketches in any of them. They may provide insight into comedic devices which affect the structure of sketches, but their ignorance of sketch comedy can only be considered a flaw.

Articles, Dissertations, etc.

The Ziegfeld Follies, Form, Content and Significance of an American Revue by Geraldine A. Maschio is further evidence that variety entertainment is becoming more important to study. Ms. Maschio, who completed the work as part of her doctoral thesis at the University of Wisconsin, does a thorough and comprehensive treatment of the Ziegfeld Follies.

Judine Mayerle did the same for the television variety show with *The Development of the Television Variety Show as a Major Program Genre at the National Broadcasting Company: 1946-1956* as part of her Doctoral work at Northwestern University. Ms. Mayerle did a focused and intensive study of ten of the fledgling years for NBC, and it can be hoped that some day there will be many such focused works covering the whole spectrum of electronic media.

"The Invisible Artist," by George M. Plasketes,³⁰ examines Lorne Michaels career and the contrasting writing environments he encountered on shows like *Laugh-in*, *The Smothers Brothers*, and *Saturday Night Live*. Sketches themselves are not discussed, but the power structures and artistic constraints involved in turning out a creative product are closely examined.

²⁹Allen, Steve. (Mcgraw Hill: New York, 1987)

³⁰Plasketes, George M. *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, (Vol. 16 #1 Spring, 1988): pp. 23-31

INDICATIONS

Historical work on venues in which the sketch existed is strong. We know about the business aspects, and the organizational structures of variety theater. General history is perhaps the strongest area done in the study of comedy, though it is usually only peripheral to the actual entertainments which took place on the stages.

There is a great deal of work done in comedic theory. First there are the philosophical works dealing with the *why* of humor; and second, there are the writers manuals which deal with the *how* of humor. Both tend to focus on jokes and the laughter invoking elements of humor.

Finally, there is the work done on the sketch itself. This is quite possibly the weakest area of comedic study, for the significant works can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Further, there has been no systematic examination of the workings of the sketch done thus far. While we know much about the venues from which the sketch came, we know little about the development of the sketch itself. And, while we know about the jokes which occur within sketches, and the reasons they make us laugh; we know little about the sketches themselves.

The field is ripe for study which leaves the humor in comedy and focuses on the poetics and structure of comic forms. It is hoped that eventually there will be no hint of apology in studies of the "low" arts, and that academic inquiry into comedy will be considered as natural as any other inquiry. This would be an important achievement in the study of storytelling since the time of Aristotle.

CHAPTER II HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The first time a comedic performance was referred to in print as a sketch was in 1789 by playwright William Dunlap. The title page of his *Darby's Return* carried the description "A comic sketch."³¹ The piece ran as an interlude between acts of other plays, providing comic relief.

Interludes were quite common before variety theaters came into their own. Some interludes, like *Darby's Return*, even became popular in their own right. This is likely how the sketch emerged: as an interstitial form of entertainment between acts of serious theater or opera.³²

By the late 1800's the term sketch had gained currency in the halls of burlesque and vaudeville. While the sketch enjoyed enormous popularity there, and later on radio and television, it was sneered at by critics and scholars.³³ In fact, Dunlap referred to *Darby's Return* in later writings as "a trifle."³⁴

³¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, Expanded Version. Fourth citation under "sketch." Dunlap discusses *Darby's Return* in: *The History of American Theater*, (Burt Franklin Press: New York, 1963): pp. 160-61

³² Wilde, Larry postulates this in *How Great Comedy Writers Create Laughter*, (Nelson Hall Chicago, 1976): p. 2. See also: Sobel, Bernard. *A Pictorial History of Vaudeville*, (Citidel Press, New York, 1961): pp. 17-18

³³ See: "The Decay of Vaudeville," Anonymous, *American Magazine* 69 (April 1910): pp. 840-8; Davis, Acton, "What I Don't Know about Vaudeville," *Variety* I, no. 1 (December 16, 1905): p. 2; Harrison, Louis Reeves, "Is 'Vodeveal' Necessary?" *The Moving Picture World*, (Vol.8, No. 14, April 8, 1911.): pp. 758-760; and *American Vaudeville, as Seen by its Contemporaries*, Charles W.

VENUES

Early Forms

It is difficult to discern exactly when and where the sketch originated. It likely had its immediate origins in carnivals, showboats, honky-tonks, saloons, minstrel shows and town halls in the eighteenth century. All these various venues served as the birthplace of variety entertainment.

For a time legitimate theater accommodated variety as a sidebar. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, an evening at the theater included songs and such “dumb” (non-verbal) acts as acrobatics or pantomime culminating with a comedy or tragedy as the main bill.³⁵

During the mid-nineteenth century popular entertainment drew away from legitimate drama and emerged as its own theater form - a set of varied entertainments without the confines of an overall plot structure or conventions of serious theater - called “variety.” By the 1850’s every major city had theaters devoted exclusively to variety entertainments.³⁶ Eventually, these entertainments became standardized into vaudeville, burlesque and, in England, music hall. What follows is a brief summary of each venue and how the sketch relates to each.

Stein., ed.(Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1984): Preface, p. xi See also: *Comedy, the Critical Idiom* by Moelwyn Merchant (Methuen: London & New York) Ch. #1, “The Status of Comedy” pp. 1-12

³⁴Dunlap, William. *History of American Theater*. (Burt Franklin: New York, 1963): p. 160

³⁵Maschio, Geraldine A. *The Ziegfeld Follies: Form, Content, and Significance of an American Revue*. (Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison) p. 3

³⁶Ibid, p. 10

British Music Hall

Beginning in the 1830's and '40's in small pubs which provided a variety of popular entertainments such as dancing, singing and sing-alongs, British music hall had entities called sketches.

Originally introduced into music hall around the end of the nineteenth century to attract a more respectable clientele,³⁷ these sketches were sometimes dramatic in nature and much longer than burlesque, vaudeville and modern day television sketches. They also varied in style, according to Peter Bailey in *Music Hall, The Business of Pleasure*, "the character of such pieces ranged from raucous knock-about to revue-style sophistication."

Sketches were not officially allowed in British music hall until the halls received a dramatic licence under Lord Chamberlain's Jurisdiction, a result of the Theatres Act of 1843. A Lord Chamberlain's licence permitted presentation of drama but simultaneously forbade drinking in the theater. This was prohibitive to small saloon theaters who gave up theatrical aspirations and operated under a magistrate's music and dancing licence, although some still performed sketches clandestinely while others built breweries next door.³⁸

Minstrelsy

Minstrel shows, which relied heavily on blackface stereotypes for their humor, were an enormously popular form of variety in America during the first half of the nineteenth century.

³⁷Bailey, Peter., ed. *Music Hall, The Business of Pleasure*. (Open University Press: Milton Keynes Philadelphia, 1986): pp. xii

³⁸ *Music Hall, The Business of Pleasure*, pp. 4-5 Sketches stirred quite a controversy; for a complete documentation of this see: "The Sketch Question," *Era*; (Apr. 8, 1911): p. 21; Also: (Aug 27, 1910): p. 16; & (Nov 19 1892.): p. 16; & (Nov 26 1892): p. 16; & (Dec. 3, 1892): p. 17; & "The Sketch Question Again" (May 10, 1890): p. 15

An evening of minstrelsy consisted of three parts: in the first, blackface comedians would do a “tambo and bones” setpiece consisting of tamborene and banjo songs in which the actors would sing and trade topical jokes. The middle act or “olio” was a succession of variety acts performed by members of the troupe. The third act was a farce or parody of some legitimate play or literature. These farces were done in blackface and were many times set on a plantation.³⁹ This part of the minstrel show was an early form of sketch comedy.* Minstrelsy founded conventions which would later be incorporated into burlesque and vaudeville.

Burlesque

Emerging as a distinct form in the 1870's,⁴⁰ burlesque was originally a parody of legitimate theater.⁴¹ To “burlesque” something was to send it up. Shakespeare, operas were made light of in the early form, but in 1868 with *Ixion, or the Man at the Wheel*, burlesque introduced “leg art” as one of its conventions.⁴² Shortly thereafter, burlesque leg shows featuring scantily clad females and risqué songs became the fare, making what was originally a family entertainment strictly for adult males. Burlesque was to become, essentially, a much bawdier version of vaudeville. While vaudeville would make attempts to appeal to a mass audience, burlesque targeted a

³⁹Toll, Robert C. *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America*. (Oxford University Press: New York 1974): pp. 51-57

* Robert C. Allen does call the minstrel show's third act “a piece of sketch comedy” in *Horrible Prettiness, Burlesque and American Culture*. (Univ. of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill and London, 1991): p. 165. Robert C. Toll calls it a “one act skit” in *Blacking Up The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America*. (Oxford University: Press New York, 1974): p. 56

⁴⁰Allen, Robert C. *Horrible Prettiness, Burlesque and American Culture*, (Univ. of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill and London, 1991): p.178

⁴¹Maschio, Geraldine. *The Ziegfeld Follies, Form, Content, and Significance of an American Revue*,. (Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin- Madison, 1981): p. 198

⁴² Ibid.: p. 25

male audience, with much of the humor being scatological and double entendre.

The blackout is the great innovation with which burlesque is usually attributed. Blackouts are short comedic scenes with a strict economy which have a punch-line at the end, often they are the literal enactment of a joke. Burlesque *sketches* were extended blackouts, or a series of blackouts strung together. Burlesque writers placed great emphasis on the punch-line. Their sketches nearly always ended with a punch-line and a comic mugging for the audience.

Vaudeville

Vaudeville emerged as a separate entertainment just after burlesque.⁴³ Like British music hall, sketches were introduced into vaudeville in order to appeal to a more uppercrust audience, and at first they were often condensed versions of popular plays of the day.⁴⁴

Eventually sketches became a successful part of vaudeville, but in their early days the audiences were not accustomed to such theatrical fare and policemen had to be stationed in the galleries to compel respectful attention.⁴⁵ In early critical reviews they were sometimes referred to as "dramatic sketches," "one-act farces"⁴⁶ or "one act sketches."⁴⁷ Since

⁴³According to Douglas Gilbert in *American Vaudeville, Its Life and Times*, (Dover Publications Inc.: New York, 1963): p.4, the term "vaudeville" was used no earlier than 1882; whereas, burlesque was official in 1868 according to Robert C. Allen in *Horrible Prettiness, Burlesque and American Culture*. (Univ. of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill and London, 1991): p. 3

⁴⁴B.F. Keith discusses the condensed version of *Muldoon's Picnic* in "The Vogue of Vaudeville," *National Magazine*, (Nov. 9 1898): 146-153. See also: *American Vaudeville as Seen by it's Contemporaries*, Charles Stein., ed. (Knopf: New York, 1984): p. 18

⁴⁵ Royle, Edwin Milton, "The Vaudeville Theater," *Scribners Magazine*, (October, 1899): pp. 485-495. See also: *Selected Vaudeville Criticism*. Anthony Slide., ed. [The Scarecrow Press Inc.: Metuchen, N.J., & London, 1988] p. 210

⁴⁶Ibid, *Scribners*, pp. 485-495. [*Selected Vaudeville Criticism*, (207-209)]

vaudeville was the most popular - and populist - form of variety, it is likely that vaudeville sketches were the most varied in length and style of the pre-television venues.

Broadway Revue

The Broadway revue was probably the most lavish of variety entertainments ever presented for the stage. It was a synthesis of elements drawn from burlesque, minstrelsy, extravaganza and musical comedy.⁴⁸ Of all the variety entertainments, the revue was the most high-brow. Unlike vaudeville or burlesque, the revue was considered legitimate theater. As a result, revue sketches were longer and more traditionally structured.

Early on in the formation of the revue, parodies of legitimate plays of the day were done extensively. This may have influenced the narrative structure of revue sketches. Since these sketches began by mimicking the style (and naturally, the structure) of traditional "legitimate" drama, they probably remained somewhat traditional even when the sketches became productions in their own right.

Radio

Humor was a mainstay across the radio spectrum in the 30's and 40's. Radio absorbed comedians from all the variety venues. Radio's appetite for material made it advantageous to retrieve and repeat premises. Radio took the structure of the one-act plays that were being done in revue and vaudeville stages and coined it, inventing a formula that could be repeated each week. This was the beginning of the situation comedy.

⁴⁷Beuick, Marshall D., "The Vaudeville Philosopher" *The Drama*, (Vol. 16, No. 3, December, 1925): pp. 92-93 & 116 [*Selected Vaudeville Criticism*, p. 229.

⁴⁸Maschio, Geraldine A. *The Ziegfeld Follies: Form, Content and Significance of an American Revue*. (Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison Aug. 1981): pp. 1-3

Single-premise disposable sketches were not done as much on radio because the nature of the medium made it difficult for exposition. A much easier way to get radio laughs was to establish durable characters with recognizable traits, like Jack Benny with his awful violin playing and miserliness. Running gags such as Fibber Magee and Mollie's closet, which emptied its contents each time it was opened, were highly effective on radio.

Television

Sketch comedy can take at least partial credit for selling television to the American people in the form of Milton Berle and *The Texaco Star Theater*, a show whose premier contained two sketches. During the shows first season the number of television sets in use went from 175,000 to 750,000, which has primarily been attributed to Berle's popularity.⁴⁹ The November 8, 1948 show set an all time Hooper rating record of a 94.7 percent share, the largest for any television or radio program in history.⁵⁰ There were dancers, musical guests, jugglers and other fare, but it was Uncle Milte doing incredibly silly stunts, gags and bits with his guests which brought the television into the American living room.

Standards of structure and cadence were relaxed or ignored as a result of the time demands of television. Sketches became less structured than they were in vaudeville and burlesque. Punch-lines were no longer feasible for every sketch and sometimes situations were retrieved and repeated. Sketches were merged with parodies of other television formats such as talkshows and talking heads; thus blurring the line between narrative and non-narrative. What was already an anarchic structure became more lawless.

⁴⁹Mayerle, Judine. *The Development of the Television Variety Show as a Major Program Genre at the National Broadcasting Company: 1946-1956* (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1983): p. 8

⁵⁰Ibid: p. 8

The sketch remained a television staple throughout the fifties and into the present day. Sketches were an important part of variety shows which had their heyday from televisions inception until the early seventies. When the variety show died the sketch suffered lean times, but still existed on shows like *Carol Burnett*, *SCTV* and the lone surviving variety show, *Saturday Night Live*. This decade shows signs that the sketch is having a renaissance with shows like *In Living Color*, *Kids in the Hall* and others doing well without the variety show format as a vehicle.

WHAT'S A SKETCH?

A sketch is about three to eight minutes of comedy.
 Al Franken, Head Writer
Saturday Night Live

The term *sketch* had been around for over a hundred years before Dunlap used it to refer to a comical work.⁵¹ The original meaning, still used today, refers to a rough, hasty drawing which outlines major features without giving detail. It was likely this lack of detail to which Dunlap and the early sketch writers were metaphorically referring when they employed the word.

When one consults several dictionaries and compares their entries for "sketch," two characteristics are universally agreed upon: structural simplicity and brevity. *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a sketch as "...a short play or performance of slight dramatic construction and usually of a light or comic nature." *Random House Dictionary of the English Language* gives a similar definition with an added reference to its venue: "A short play or slight dramatic performance, as one forming

⁵¹*Oxford English Dictionary*, Expanded version, fourth citation under "sketch"

part of a vaudeville program.” *The Grolier International Dictionary* does the same with an added note on its tone, “A short scene or play, often satirical in tone, in a revue or variety show; a skit.”* *Websters Unabridged Third New International Dictionary* goes farthest:

A slight theatrical piece having a single scene; esp. : a comic often burlesque variety or vaudeville act typically developed around a mishap or misunderstanding and involving a small cast or a single performer.

Therefore, for the purposes of this work, the sketch will be defined as: A fictionalized comic playlet of slight structure and slight characters, usually found in variety venues such as burlesque, vaudeville, revue and television variety.

While the definition of a sketch stipulates that it be short, just how long a sketch should last has changed since its beginnings. Vaudevillian Joe E. Brown commented that a vaudeville sketch had to be conveyed “with a punch” in the brief time of fourteen to thirty minutes.⁵² Since the advent of television, that time frame has shortened considerably. *Your Show of Shows*’ (1951-54) longest sketches barely reached Brown’s shortest time limit; and *Saturday Night Live* (1975-), while having a few fifteen minute oddities during the first five years,* has kept within the constraints of “three to eight

* The term skit is not as old as sketch (OED lists it’s origin at around 1840), but their definitions are interchangeable. Marshall D. Buick uses both terms when referring to the same performances in *The Drama*, (Vol. 16, No. 3, December 1925,): pp. 92-93 and 116. Sid Caesar used both terms as well. *The Carol Burnett* show used the term skit, which is one reason the *Saturday Night Live* team decided to use the term sketch; Al Franken remarked that a “skit” sounded like something you do in high school. For the purposes of this work though, the two terms are synonymous.

⁵²DiMeglio. p. 16

* And one 26 minute monster “The Raging Queen” during a show Michael Palin guest hosted.

minutes.”⁵³ While general guidelines for time limits have always existed, veteran comedy writer Gary Belkin (*Your Show of Shows*) sums it up best by stating a utilitarian law of sketch comedy: “A sketch should last as long as it’s funny.”⁵⁴

Perhaps one reason for the simplicity of sketch narrative, time constraints aside, is that it is written for the sole purpose of making people laugh. No other theatrical form can claim such singular purpose. The brevity and lack of detail is the result of utility. The plot is necessarily thin because anything too elaborate would require exposition, which risks boring the audience; or, in a carnival environment, risks losing them to the dog act in the next tent.

This has made sketch comedy far more utilitarian than other theatrical art forms. Al Franken, in responding to an article by Sid Caesar that criticized *Saturday Night Live* sketches for lacking structure and ignoring rules of form, stated succinctly the utilitarian rule of sketch comedy: “The only rule is that it be funny, that’s the *only* rule.”⁵⁵ For the modern sketch writers, literally the only requirement is to be consistently funny within the given time frame of three to eight minutes, and even those limits are flexible. Perhaps Caesar was being a bit pious, since *Your Show of Shows* also tested rules of the sketch established in vaudeville, burlesque and revue.

Borderline Cases

There have been entities which occurred on TV sketch comedy programs which do not qualify as sketches. It is important to remember that comedy does not necessarily need narrative to be delivered and appreciated.

⁵³ Franken, Al. taped interview, (April 1991)

⁵⁴ Heilitzer, Melvin, *Comedy Techniques for Writers and Performers*. (Lawhead Press: Athens Ohio, 1984): pp. 115

⁵⁵ Franken, Al. taped interview, (April 1991)

A stand-up routine composed of separate one-liners could not constitute a narrative in any traditional sense, but audiences laugh nonetheless. A commercial parody is usually not a sketch, especially if it clearly matches the format of its target (30 seconds to a minute long and making claims about a fictitious product throughout). Interview sketches vary, some are fully developed narrative, but others appear to be a string of jokes. Some consist merely of an interviewer setting up the interviewee for jokes (or vice-versa) with no linear relationship and no order except, perhaps, that laughs are strategically spaced throughout.

Steve Neal and Frank Krutnik refer to what is called the “double-act,” the cross talk that comedy teams do.⁵⁶ When Rowan and Martin or the Smothers Brothers appear on a stage, as themselves, and engage in cross-talk it is not narrative - and not a sketch. But when they attempt to create characters and interact in a fictional setting it becomes a sketch. Neal and Krutnik give their succinct criteria for a sketch:

Characters, fictional settings (a specified ‘elsewhere’), dialogue and some kind of causal event to set a conversation or action in motion, are the differentiating hallmarks of the sketch.⁵⁷

Therefore, when Tom and Dick Smothers are announcing a guest and inevitably get side tracked into an argument, it is not a sketch. They are playing themselves and are involved in presenting their show, playing to an audience and camera. This is “cross-talk” - not a sketch. Cross-talk has a long history on television sketch comedy: the “Expert on Everything” from *Your Show of Shows*, “Wayne’s World” and “Hanz and Franz” from *Saturday Night Live*, “Men on Film” and “Home Boy Shopping

⁵⁶Neal, Steve and Krutnik, Frank *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, (Routledge: London and New York, 1990): pp. 14-15

⁵⁷Ibid, p. 192

Network” from *In Living Color* are but a few of the cross-talk features from television comedy programs.

Neal and Krutnik discuss a *Morcambe & Wise* piece which they argue exists as a middle ground between sketch and double act.⁵⁸ They emphasize that, while it appeared as a cross-talk much like the routines done regularly on *Morcambe & Wise*, there was a table, which established diegetic parameters, and instead of addressing the audience they sit in profile. This establishes mechanical indicators for determining whether a routine is cross-talk or a sketch. It also illustrates that the line between the two is sometimes not so clear.

There exists another middle ground between the double-act and the sketch different from Neal and Krutnik’s example. The classic “Who’s on first?” routine by Abbot and Costello, on its face, feels like a sketch. Unlike the banter of Rowan and Martin or the sibling rivalry of the Smothers, it is a full routine. A premise is explored: Bud’s inability to understand that the name of each player on Lou’s baseball team is a pronoun. The routine even has a punch at the end. Unlike cross-talk, it couldn’t be interrupted. It is not merely trading lines, but is going somewhere.

There is, however, no attempt to create diegetic parameters and Abbot and Costello are playing themselves without costume - much like cross-talk. This establishes that the criteria for a sketch are not merely mechanical; there exist conceptual elements as well.

The “causal event” to which Neal and Krutnik refer is the premise. The premise, what would be called a storyline in larger works, is some tracing of a situation along a consistent

⁵⁸Ibid, p. 191

pattern. So, the hallmarks of the sketch are twofold: diegesis and premise.

*

*

*

For nearly two hundred years there have been entities called sketches playing to wide ranging audiences in vastly different venues. These things called the sketches have ranged in style from the one-act plays of revue to the mere extended jokes of burlesque. The sketch, it would seem, is as nebulous and indistinct as its name implies. Are there different categories of sketch? Are there conventions in sketch comedy which can be defined and examined? The following chapter will address these questions.

CHAPTER III STRUCTURE

All Comedy is storytelling, from the pratfall to the full-length play or feature picture. All comedy, as all drama, has conflict, and all comedy, as all drama, is based on the *three-act construction*.

Sol Saks, *The Craft of Comedy Writing*⁵⁹
(italics in original text)

Sol Saks states categorically that all comedy, including the sketch, is based on the three act construction; but this is not useful when trying to understand the nuances of the sketch and its differences from other narratives. It implies that the sketch is not fundamentally different from other forms of narrative, which may be misleading.

CATEGORIES

Throughout various stages in the development of the sketch, new forms were invented while old forms were still used, altered or expanded. The sketch, as it exists today, has evolved into three basic types: the **classic sketch**, the **revue sketch** and the **modern sketch**.

⁵⁹Saks, Sol. *The Craft of Comedy Writing*, (Writers Digest Books: Cincinnati, Ohio, 1985): p.35

The **classic sketch** is a singular narrative line leading to a punch. It probably originated in burlesque theaters, and was likely the predominant form of sketch found there. The **revue sketch** is a simple yet conventional plot with a beginning, middle and end, much like a short story. It is more complex than a classic, and rather than end in a punch, it usually has a resolve of some sort. The revue sketch was found in great numbers in Broadway revue, while both revue and classic sketches could be found in vaudeville theaters. The **modern sketch** has the freest form, its line of demarcation is the advent of television. Most modern sketches have the narrative singularity of classic sketches, but they do not end with a punch. Instead they use an array of techniques for ending, which will be explored in this chapter.

The Classic Sketch

The classic sketch is the most rigidly structured of sketches. It is, in most basic terms, a funny premise which leads to a punch-line. Neal and Krutnik refer to this as the “‘well made’ sketch,”* which they describe as:

...the sketch that sets out consistent diegetic parameters, introduces a cause or premise, and develops to end in a climax and punch-line.⁶⁰

This type of structure, the classic sketch, probably developed in burlesque theaters since it is found most often there. The classic sketch may have evolved from burlesque entities called blackouts. Blackouts usually involve two people and many times are just a single exchange, like this one from *Minsky's Burlesque*:

* referring to dramatist Eugene Scribe (1791-1861) who pioneered the concept of the “well made play” which had certain elements occurring and specific times according to a rigid model.

⁶⁰Neal, Steve and Krutnik, Frank. *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, (Routledge: London and New York, 1990): p. 202

Straight man: (running his hand over the bald comic's head): Ya know, Charlie, your head feels exactly like my wife's backside.

Comic: (running his hand over his own head): Ya know? You're right! - BLACKOUT⁶¹

The spotlight blacks out and finds another area of the stage where actors are waiting to do another blackout. There were usually a string of these in a row which made up a segment between two other acts. Many blackouts could easily be told orally as a joke, like this one from *Sex Over 40*, a modern Las Vegas show done in burlesque tradition:

Wife: I went to the doctor and he gave me a clean bill of health. He said my bones are strong, my eyes are good, my skin is healthy too.

Husband: What did he say about that fat ass of yours?

Wife: He didn't mention you. BLACKOUT⁶²

This is a traditional joke with a set-up and punch that is acted out for an audience. It could easily be told "this lady says to her husband..." and it would have the same comedic impact with little change in the basic narrative. Blackouts have a strict economy of style, and must always end with a punch-line. The Burlesque *sketch* is really an extended blackout. It has a singular line of narrative which leads inexorably to the punch-line. In the classic burlesque sketch called "paid in full" a man is arguing with his boss because he hasn't been paid for a year.⁶³

Comic: I don't care what you say, I worked for you and I want my money!

Straight Man: Now don't get excited. I'm going to pay you.

⁶¹ Minsky, Morton., and Machlin, Milt. *Minskys Burlesque*. (Arbor House: New York, 1986)

⁶² London, Dave. (Producer of *Sex over 40*.) Phone interview: June '92

⁶³ Ibid. : pp.304-305

Comic: I know dam well you're going to pay me. I've waited a year for my money and I'm not gonna wait any longer!

Straight Man: Well, how much do you think you've got coming?

Comic: Well, there are three hundred and sixty-five days in the year and I get five dollars a day.

Straight Man: In other words, you want five dollars for each day. That makes it three hundred and sixty-five times five. I'll figure out just how much you have coming to you. How many hours a day did you work?

Comic: Every day I worked eight hours.

Straight Man: Well, there's twenty-four hours in each day, and you worked eight hours a day, which means you worked one third of each day, which makes one third of each year in other words you worked one third of three hundred and sixty-five days. Now three goes into three, once--three into six, twice--and three into five goes once. That means you have one hundred twenty-one days coming to you. Now, you didn't work on Sundays, did you?

Comic: I should say not. I wouldn't work on Sundays.

Straight Man: Well there are fifty-two Sundays in the year, so I will have to deduct fifty-two from one hundred and twenty-one. Which means that you have sixty-nine days coming to you.

Comic: Yes, I know, but...

Straight Man: Oh, yes, I almost forgot something else, we close for half a day on Saturdays, do we not?

Comic: Sure we do but...

Straight Man: That makes fifty-two half days or twenty-six whole days that we stayed closed. Now, deducting twenty-six from sixty-nine is...six from nine is three and two from six is four. That makes exactly forty three days you have coming to you.

The sketch continues with the boss deducting for cumulative lunch hours, vacation, and holidays until finally...

Straight Man: ...Which leaves one day you have coming, and here's your five dollars. (Gives comic a bill and starts to exit.)

Comic: Say, wait a minute.

Straight Man: What do you want?

Comic: (handing bill back): You forgot Social Security!
BLACKOUT

This example follows a classic model in which all action leads to the punch-line, which is the comic handing back the last

five dollars for a years work. The premise exists to reveal the punch.

The structure of a classic sketch is revealed very nicely in a piece from *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1970-73) which was actually parodying the classic form.⁶⁴ In this sketch a middle class couple [Grahm Chapman and Carol Cleveland] are in a nice restaurant ordering their food. The husband points out a spot of dirt on his fork and a hilarious escalation ensues. The waiter [Terry Jones] apologizes profusely as the husband assures him that it is really no problem. He gets the head waiter [Michael Palin] who continues the pitiful apologies. The manager [Eric Idle] then enters and gives a rambling and tearful explanation for the horrible transgression on their fork. Then the cook arrives [John Cleese] carrying a meat cleaver and delivers an impassioned diatribe directed at the couple for the harm they have done to his boss. The cook then lunges toward the couple while the head waiter tries to restrain him. The manager commits *hara-kiri* with the fork to which the cook shouts "they killed him," and he and the head waiter struggle, falling over the table.

At this point, a caption appears reading: "AND NOW, THE PUNCH-LINE." Grahm Chapman leans into the camera and says "Lucky we didn't say anything about the dirty knife," to boos of disgust from off camera.

This exhibits all the characteristics of a classic sketch, save the self-consciousness of the Python style. The situation is singular, a clear premise is followed without deviation; a tracing of skewed logic. It ends with a punch-line that makes us see the preceding sketch from a different point of view: All that

⁶⁴See: *Monty Python's Flying Circus, All the Words* (Vol. 1) Show # 3 pp. 36-37

commotion over a dirty fork, yet there was a dirty knife all along.

The Pythons were using the structure of a classic sketch while simultaneously sending it up. The python's came from an era when all sketches ended with punch-lines and the announcement before and the boos after the punch served to let the audience know that they were aware of the conventions they were using.

For at least fifty years these types of sketches were done - *without* tongue in cheek - in burlesque and vaudeville houses across the country. The sketch which follows a single premise for several minutes, culminating in a punch-line is truly the classic sketch.

The Revue Sketch

The revue sketch has the most traditional narrative structure of the three categories. This is probably because early variety sketches were condensed versions of popular plays of the time. Sketches were initially introduced in this way to appeal to a more upscale audience, and it is very likely that the Broadway revue sketches - since they were written for the most upscale of variety audiences - were more structured along traditional lines than the standard vaudeville and burlesque sketches. Revue was considered legitimate theater and so the sketches reflected more the other plays on Broadway than the slight whimsical indulgences of burlesque and vaudeville fare.

A revue sketch has a beginning, middle and end structure, and usually resolves a conflict for the main character. Unlike classic sketches there is not necessarily a punch at the end and unlike modern sketches there is usually no attempt to make it into a parody of a television format. Revue sketches are simple,

short stories in the traditional sense, and usually resemble situation comedies in their complexity and narrative style.*

The revue sketch is alive and well in modern programs like *Saturday Night Live*. A recurring sketch from the 70's with Bill Murray playing Todd Delemucha and Gilda Radner as Cindy Lubner is a good example of the revue style. In one sketch, from the show hosted by Kate Jackson, Cindy is love sick because Todd has fallen in love with a nurse (played by Jackson) who is taking care of his sprained arm. Cindy tells her mother that Todd doesn't love her anymore because he hasn't given her "noogies" in over a week, then Todd enters sporting a tan, which prompts Cindy to call him "toast face." The nurse then arrives and we see Todd's nerdy attempt to woo her by saying that he is going into medicine. When Todd finds out that the nurse is engaged he is dejected momentarily, but then goes over to Cindy and begins playful banter culminating in his giving her the noogies she so desired at the beginning.

This is a simple narrative, but it could be described in terms of plot and story rather than premise and situation. This is what makes it a revue sketch; it is simple, but still more complex than the classic and modern sketches. Cindy is a protagonist with a goal, which eventually gets fulfilled in the end. The sketch lasts nearly twelve minutes, much longer than classic and modern sketches. This is another characteristic of the revue sketch, they are longer; revue sketches are usually ten to twelve minutes rather than the standard five to seven minutes for classic or modern sketches.

* While this work will not attempt to trace the origins of the situation comedy, there is a certain amount of circumstantial evidence that the revue style sketch was a precursor to the sit-com. Situation comedies were a staple of radio, which drank thirstily from the stream of comedy flowing from vaudeville and revue houses. On television, a recurring review-style sketch called *The Honeymooners* from *The Jackie Gleason Show* so resembled a situation comedy that later it was lifted, packaged and sold as one.

“The Poker Game” from *Your Show of Shows* exhibits the same traditional style of narrative as the previous example. The sketch begins with “the guys” arriving for the weekly poker game. Sid Caesar gives a speech about how great it is to be with the guys and away from the women while the camera pans the worried faces of his fellow poker players. The phone rings, Caesar answers and shouts “We’re playing poker!” to the person on the other end. All agree that his firmness was good, until Sid points to Howie Morris and reveals that it was *his* wife who called. Howard objects, saying “What if I said that to Doris?” Sid looks into space and repeats “Doris” several times as if trying to remember something.

We then see Imogene Coca, as Doris, waiting in the rain for the date Sid had forgotten. The sketch then shifts back and forth between the two storylines: Sid losing - Imogene calling the hospital emergency room - Sid inventing a game that he can win - Imogene at the police station - and Sid winning. Finally, an officer at the station asks, “What about his friends?” and Imogene gets a cold hard expression of realization on her face, (to a very long laugh).

Back to the poker game where Sid is winning big. The door flies open and Imogene enters soaking wet. Amid dramatic flashes of lightening and thunder she demands that Sid leave with her. Sid objects and looks to the guys for support, but they bow their heads. An argument ensues and suddenly Howie Morris’s wife enters with more thunder and lightning. She literally picks up Howie and carries him out of the place. Amid all the confusion Sid sheepishly relents and they leave also, thus ending the sketch.

Its traditional narrative style and length (16 minutes) qualify “The Poker Game” as a revue sketch. The two diverging storylines could never be contained in a classic or modern sketch and the characters are much fuller.

Revue sketches follow the structure of a three-act play more rigidly compared to the other sketch categories. "The Poker Game" and the Lubner sketches are far more expansive than the "Paid in Full" sketch, both have a series of interrelationships which appears to be a genuine plot line. Unlike the earlier classic examples and the modern examples to follow, the revue sketches are complex by comparison. Instead of one singular line of escalation, there are a series of interrelated events. The characters are deeper as well. In fact, revue sketches tend to be character oriented while classic and modern sketches tend to be situational.

The Modern Sketch

The modern sketch was developed in the era of the weekly television show. While burlesque and vaudeville performers had years, even lifetimes to perfect the same routines;* television demanded new material each and every week. Trying to stick to the rigid structure of the classic and revue sketches was particularly trying on such oppressive time limits. In 1949 Max Liebman commented on the pressure this new medium created after he produced the short run of the *Admiral Broadway Revue*, the precursor to *Your Show of Shows*:

Television is the toughest, back-breakingest, ulcer-bleedingest, entertainment medium in existence--a fascinating monster that devours material, tortures talent, sears souls, and paralyzes the participant.⁶⁵

It is probably for this reason that structures were relaxed, and the modern sketch has a much freer form than any of its predecessors. When asked why *Your Show of Shows* did not

* Hartley Davis said in "In Vaudeville," *Everybody's Magazine* (13 Aug 1905): pp. 231-40 that vaudeville writers changed their sketches every four or five years, but audiences still requested old favorites. See also: *American Vaudeville As Seen by its Contemporaries* (Knopf: New York, 1984): p. 104

⁶⁵Liebman, Max. *TV is Such a Challenge*. *Variety*, (July 27, 1949): p. 40.

end all their sketches with a punch-line as in burlesque and much of vaudeville, Mel Tolkin reacted:

We had to write five sketches a week, we couldn't have a punch for *all* of them. We tried to have a punch if we could, otherwise we would resolve a conflict or even end in a rave-off [a big commotion]. But we always followed the three-act construction, each sketch had a beginning, middle and an end.⁶⁶

This was the beginning of the modern sketch, the structures were relaxed somewhat because of the incredible demand for new material, but there was still some concept of a three-act structure. Even this restriction later dissolved. When Al Franken was asked whether *Saturday Night Live* writers kept the three-act structure in mind he replied with a brief "no."⁶⁷

The modern sketch resembles the structure of classic sketch. In fact, the modern sketch could be termed a direct descendant of the classic sketch because both propel their narrative through escalation. The singularity of narrative and level of complexity of the modern sketch is similar to the classic sketch, but without reliance upon the punch-line.

Saturday Night Live even dispensed with the idea of closure, resolve or even logic in some of their sketches. Producer Lorne Michaels, who was influenced by *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, felt that a sketch did not have to follow the traditional beginning/ middle/ end structure; the point was to tell the joke and get on with the show.⁶⁸ This approach culminated with such non-sequitur and facile endings as

⁶⁶Tolkin, Mel. Telephone interview: (May 1992)

⁶⁷Franken, Al. personal interview: (April 1991)

⁶⁸Hill, Doug., and Weinograd, Jeff. *A Backstage History of Saturday Night Live*. (Beech Tree Books: William Morrow, New York) pp. 135

dropping a cow to end a sketch⁶⁹ and pulling out to a long shot of the studio when the sketch exhausted its laugh potential.

SKETCH = PREMISE + ESCALATION

The Premise

Robert A. Stebbins reveals in his book on stand-up comedy, *The Laugh Makers*, the kind of ambivalence most writers have when referring to sketch narrative. He stated that sketches were different from stand-up because sketches "have plots of some sort - seldom complex..."⁷⁰ By saying plots "of some sort" he seems to indicate a hesitancy in using a word like *plot*, which connotes a complex structure of interrelationships. One can discuss the "plot" of a sketch, but the strand of narrative is usually so singular and the length so brief that the term seems too formal. "Premise" is the word of choice for most sketch writers, probably because it doesn't have all the weighty baggage of plot. To ask, "what is the premise?" of a sketch is to ask "what is the plot?" of a novel.

Rhetoricians refer to a premise as the basis or first proposition of an argument. There may be a useful metaphor implied by using the term in the this sense. A rhetorician would define a premise as: "A proposition or statement from which reasoning proceeds and from which a conclusion is drawn."⁷¹ In the language of a sketch writer it refers to the initial situation introduced in a sketch which sparks a chain of comedic escalation that leads ultimately to a punch or other variant sketch ending.

⁶⁹Cow dropping is discussed in both *A Backstage History*, p. 135; and "Live for Fifteen Years, it's 'Saturday Night'!", Bill Zehme, *Rolling Stone*, (Oct 5th, 1989): p. 65

⁷⁰Stebbins, Robert A. *The Laughmakers, Stand-up Comedy as Art, Business, and Life-Style* (McGill-Queen's University Press: Montreal & Kingston, London, Buffalo, 1990): p. 5

⁷¹Hairston, Maxine. *A Contemporary Rhetoric*. (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982): Glossary of Terms, inside leaf.

The premise is literally a proposition from which comedy proceeds. It establishes a humorous situation, usually along some incongruity or flawed logic, and follows that line of reasoning. In a classic sketch the reasoning leads to the sum of a punch-line, the answer to the initial equation introduced in the premise.

The sketch, in the jargon of informal logic would be called an "if/then conditional." The premise is the "if," or the "what if" that a sketch writer is posing in a sketch. To ask "What if Spartacus could fly?" is to give the premise for a sketch which took place on a show hosted by Kirk Douglas in 1978. That sketch had Spartacus in a Piper Cub hurling debris onto helpless Romans below, which is the "then" - the working out of the premise introduced by the question.

In the classic sketch "Paid in Full," the premise is "What if an employer is so miserly he deducts every non-working minute from his workers paycheck?" What follows is the working out of this comedic premise - the deductions, the employees objections and the punch-line - his handing back the fiver for a years work which is the conclusion of the argument. Classic and modern sketches have a unified structure which lend themselves to the argument/equation analogy.

Escalation

Once a premise is established in a sketch, the narrative must keep moving in order to stay funny. The most widely used narrative construct in all of sketch comedy is the escalation sketch. This is when a sketch introduces a funny premise and it escalates - becoming funnier and funnier. Roger Wilmut described an escalation sketch as: "to take an idea, and

then allow it to get wildly out of hand, so that absurdity builds on absurdity.”⁷²

A textbook escalation sketch took place in the 1991-92 season of SNL on the show hosted by Christian Slater.* The sketch takes place at “Ron’s Wings and Things” with Scott [Slater] and his girlfriend ordering food. Scott orders some “super fire hot wings.” The waiter [Rob Schneider] gets a tentative expression on his face and tells him that those wings are very hot. (Here is the premise: “what if the wings are so hot that the help tries to dissuade the customers from ordering.”) Scott assures him that he wants the super fire hot wings, but the waiter warns that they are “really hot.” Scott is adamant. The head waitress arrives [Ellen Kleghorn] and she and the waiter offer an order medium wings instead, with Scott’s girlfriend concurring that it would probably be best (a further escalation of the premise). Scott gets angry and states defiantly that he wants the super fire hot wings.

The waiter and waitress leave and moments later the restaurant manager [Phil Hartman] arrives (more escalation) and continues pushing the medium wings because they are “plenty hot enough.” At this point Scott is furious and demands the super fire hot wings be brought. The manager motions to the kitchen crew, which is assembled outside the kitchen door watching, to bring the wings.

When Scott bites into a wing and comments that it is not as hot as he thought it was going to be, the manager reveals that he took the liberty of ordering the medium wings for Scott’s

⁷²Wilmut, Roger. *From Fringe to Flying Circus*. (Fakenham Press Limited: Fakenham, Norfolk, 1980) p. 199

* This sketch was wrongly panned by Steve Hiltbrand in *People Magazine*, (Feb. 7, '92). His contention was that the quality was slipping on SNL, perhaps a valid notion, though not original since it has been repeated ever since Chevy Chase left the show in 1976. In this author’s opinion, he missed the quality of this sketch while using it to fulfill his agenda.

own safety (more escalation.) Scott gets angrier. The manager says that he was just making sure and he motions for the super fire hot wings; but when Scott bites into one he realizes that they are, yet again, medium wings. Scott pounds the table and demands that he be brought the super fire hot wings, to which the manager motions to one of the staff to bring several forms releasing the restaurant from any responsibility (further escalation). Scott signs and the wings are brought. Just as he bites into a wing the picture freeze-frames while the ominous prelude to *Thus Spake Zarathustra* plays in the background. A voice-over continues the escalation:

As Scott Hanson bit in to the chicken wing his head turned a bright beet red and large amounts of smoke began to billow from his ears. Within seconds his eyes had become slot machine tumblers which spun around until both landed on the symbol for chili peppers. Next, bolting up from his chair and shouting “woo-woo,” Scott chugged around the room like a locomotive - finally, shooting through the roof of Ron’s Wings and Things and exploding high over the Buffalo night sky. In an ironic footnote to this story, the chicken wing Scott had eaten was only a hot wing, and not the super fire hot wing he had ordered.

This sketch mimics the structure of the earlier classic Python sketch in that both are escalation sketches which end with a similar punch-line. The fact that they are both restaurant sketches is coincidental; they resemble each other structurally as well. In the Python sketch the revelation that there was a dirty knife makes us see the preceding sketch in a different light - all that commotion over a dirty fork - yet there was a dirty knife all along. In the hot wings sketch the revelation that Scott never even ate a super fire hot wing, makes us see the sketch in a different light - Scott’s violent reaction, yet it was just a hot wing - not a super fire hot wing - all along.

An important consideration is how long to escalate the premise. The common complaint heard of sketches back to vaudeville and burlesque, is that they "go to long," which explains certain techniques that were developed to end escalation sketches before they became tiresome.

Exposition - "These two guys walk into a bar..."

A sketch, like a joke, needs set-up. It needs exposition, which is whatever will set up the premise and get to the funny part as soon as possible. "You hope the exposition is funny, is conveyed in a funny way," states Al Franken.⁷³ The exposition, however, is not dispensable. Franken stresses that "You need the set-ups. You need the boring part, there's a reason that it's there." Many times the exposition - or set-up - is not funny, but it serves to create tension which is released through laughter when the jokes do arrive. Without set-up, jokes and sketches would not make sense.

Vaudeville writers were allotted about a quarter of an hour to develop their sketches. Television sketches are usually half as long. These time constraints required sketch writers to adopt a shorthand exposition. Unlike a three-act play, in which it is expected that there are points - sometimes whole scenes - without laughs, a sketch must be consistently funny. Sketches have little time for exposition since nearly every word must progress toward a laugh. Thirty seconds without laughter and a sketch is considered "dying." In 1905 journalist Hartley Davis commented that:

a successful vaudeville sketch concentrates in one act as many laughs and as much action as are usually distributed over a three-act comedy.⁷⁴

⁷³ Franken, Al. Taped interview, (April, 1991)

⁷⁴ Davis, Hartley. "In Vaudeville," *Everybody's Magazine* (Aug. 13, 1905): pp. 231-240 Also: *American Vaudeville as Seen by its Contemporaries*, Charles W. Stein., ed.: p. 104

Marian Spitzer, who worked public relations for The Palace Theater in the twenties, commented on the economical style required of vaudeville sketch writers. She contrasted the style required of sketches as opposed to legitimate theater and remarked,

The author has no time for exposition; he must establish his premise...in the first line. Every word, from the beginning, must advance the story. He can't be too subtle, either. Everything must be quite clear and concise, and it must have a good strong punch at the finish.⁷⁵

Like a short story is to a novel - the sketch, compared to a full-length play - must be far more economical. A flaw which would be missed in the larger work can derail the shorter.

ENDINGS

Sketch writers, after inventing a sufficiently funny premise to explore, are then obliged to end it before it wears on the audience, because a situation which is initially funny can become tiresome after a few minutes of exploration. This "premise fatigue" is a hazard because of the thinness of sketch narrative.

The punch was the required ending for sketches in the burlesque and vaudeville theater and this convention was carried over into television. This construct of tracing a premise to its end result, the punch, was unified and clean. These structurally perfect sketches were honed over many years in hundreds of cities across the country.

⁷⁵Spitzer, Marian, "The People of Vaudeville" *Saturday Evening Post* 197 (July 12, 1924): 15ff; Also: *American Vaudeville, As seen by its Contemporaries*; Charles W. Stein., ed. (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1984): pp. 231; (Note: Ms. Spitzer used the term "one-act play" which, at the time, was more synonymous with sketch than it is today.)

With the advent of television came an insatiable appetite for new material. The pressures of weekly deadlines demanded that old conventions be relaxed and new ones invented to explore comedic situations. Moreover, with competition from other channels, those situations had to be exited before they started to wear.

Thus, while the punch was still retained and used whenever possible, a whole gambit of endings evolved with television. Some endings are more prestigious than others, but if the situation was humorous enough, it many times warranted a less than perfect ending. The following discussion begins with the punch, then examines the various endings found in modern sketch comedy.

The Punch

The classical Hollywood cinema demands a narrative unity derived from cause and effect. The ending, as the final effect in the chain, should resolve the issues in some definite fashion.

David Bordwell⁷⁶

Like the classical Hollywood cinema, classic sketches also demand a certain narrative unity. The final effect in the chain of cause and effect, to use Bordwell's words, is in the form of the *punch*.

A punch, in most basic terms, is a laugh point at the end of a sketch. It can be a *punch-line* - an uttered joke - or a sight gag of some sort, but the reasoning behind it is the same. Mel Tolkin said the rationale was to "leave 'em laughing,"⁷⁷ an old

⁷⁶ Bordwell, David. Happily Ever After Part Two. *The Velvet Light Trap* (No. 19, 1982): p. 2

⁷⁷Tolkin, Mel. Telephone interview: (May, 1992)

show business axiom, which points to the utilitarianism underlying much of sketch comedy.

The punch, in its strictest form, is the end result of the action in the sketch. As in "Paid in Full," the punch-line is the result of the preceding action. For this reason, and because it is spoken, it could be labeled a "hard" punch. This ending was nearly a requirement in the days of variety theater. A "soft" punch is a laugh point concluding a sketch that is not the direct result of the preceding action, or is not spoken.⁷⁸

"The garbage sketch" on *Your Show of Shows* exhibits the characteristics of a soft punch. This courtroom sketch has a landlord [Sid] as the plaintiff trying to evict a woman [Imogene] for throwing garbage out her window. A bag of garbage is presented as evidence, and funny argument ensues with much ranting and accusation exchanged. Finally, the judge becomes fed up and delivers an eloquent speech on the need for community, dismissing the case and all the people from the courtroom. After everyone has left, the judge tosses the bag of garbage out the window behind him.

This is a punch because it evokes a laugh at the end of a sketch and relies upon the previous narrative for its humor. Since the sketch was an argument about garbage being thrown out a window, the last joke - the garbage being tossed out by the judge - takes on special significance.

As a general rule, until the late 1960's, television sketch comedy was intrinsically tied to the burlesque/vaudeville format where every sketch needed to end with a strong joke

⁷⁸Neal and Krutnik discuss the concept of "hard" and "soft" punch-lines in *Popular Film and Television* (p. 203)

with punch-line intact.* This was especially true in England. Roger Wilmut said in his *From Fringe to Flying Circus*, a history of British television comedy, that *all* English sketches had to end with a punch until innovators like Spike Milligan and *Monty Pythons Flying Circus* disposed of this convention.⁷⁹

English sketch writers complained of the tyranny of the punch-line. Peter Cook, veteran "fringe" comedian and sketch writer of numerous British shows wondered why one should have to lose a perfectly good sketch simply because it did not have a strong punch.⁸⁰ *Monty Python's Flying Circus* eliminated the need for a punch-line by linking their sketches with animation provided by an American animator named Terry Gilliam, who had done some bizarre stream-of-consciousness cartoons on an earlier show called *Do Not Adjust Your Set*.

John Cleese reveals the general mood of writers at the time who felt the punch was becoming tiresome. He explained:

We thought it would be better to [link the sketches] than to keep on stopping everything with that dreadful business of the punch-line with the camera zooming on a fellow who holds a startled expression or scratches the top of his head for eight seconds, applause, fade to Black, come up on the next item.⁸¹

While the Pythons had agreed to do "something completely different," they were not actually the first to dispose of the punch-line. They were scooped by an excellent, but little

* There were revue style sketches (some without a punch) on American television, especially on *Your Show of Shows*, which sprung from *Admiral Broadway Revue*.

⁷⁹ Wilmut, Roger. *From Fringe to Flying Circus*. (Fakenham Press Limited: Fakenham Norfolk, 1980): p. 197

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* : p. 197

⁸¹ Owen, Peter. *The Laughmakers*. (Bristol Typesetting Co.: Barton Manor St. Phillips, Bristol, 1971): pp. 185

remembered show called Q5 done by the creator of the radio *Goon Show*, Spike Milligan.⁸² (This show was followed in later years by Q6, Q7, Q8, and Q9.) While negotiations for the Python show were taking place, Q5 aired. It was a revelation to the Python members. Terry Jones remembers:

We had been writing quickies or sketches for some three years and they always had a beginning, middle and a tag line [punch-line]. Suddenly, watching Spike Milligan, we realized that they didn't have to be like that.⁸³

Milligan's sketches did not have punches. According to Jones, "Milligan started a sketch, and then it turned into a different sketch, then it turned into something else." Frequently sketches on Q5 would end with Milligan walking off the set muttering "Did I write this?"⁸⁴

This was the beginning of a new era. After Q5 and Python, sketches did not require punch-lines, nor did they require closure. This is still the era in which we live. In the post-Python era the punch line is avoided unless done self-consciously, and the laugh potential is a determining factor in whether a sketch is done, not whether it can end with a punch.

While a certain resolve at the end of a sketch is desired, there is now no set way to end sketches. There are, however, some conventions used often on modern television which are discussed on the following pages of this chapter. These conventions all relate to the third category of sketch: the modern sketch.

⁸² *Fringe to Flying Circus*, pp. 197

⁸³ *The Laughmakers*, pp.187

⁸⁴ *Fringe to Flying Circus*, pp. 197

The Turn

Escalation sketches usually develop in a rather orderly fashion. The points of escalation are clearly defined. In the “Super Fire Hot Wings” sketch, each escalation is built upon the last. A common ending for escalation sketches is called a turn. This is when the escalation takes on a new dimension, taking a *turn* immediately before the sketch terminates. Al Franken explains that, “Very often the end will be just elevating the premise to a little different dimension.”

A popular running sketch from the 1990-91 season featured a character named Richard Laymer [Rob Schneider] whose only apparent job responsibility is to do endless variations on the names of his co-workers as they make copies. Richard’s character trait is the premise of the sketch. A co-worker enters and begins making copies and Richard begins his routine: “Steeve, makin’ copies, Steveorino, the Stevemeister...” The name variations become more and more bizarre each time a new co-worker enters to use the copy machine.

A Laymer sketch in an episode hosted by Kevin Bacon ends with a typical turn. This sketch develops as the others before with the name variations, but this time the copy machine breaks down and Rich’s co-worker, Steve, [Phil Hartman] explains that it will be at the shop for a week. The machine is wheeled out as Steve comforts Richard. Steve exits and Richard is left in quiet desperation staring at the bare floor where the copy machine once sat. After a few seconds he runs into an adjoining office and returns pushing a coffee maker into the place where the copier once was. Another employee enters and begins pouring coffee. Richard begins doing the name variations again, this time substituting “coffee” for “copies.”

A turn is a change in the escalation moving it to a different plane. The turn in this sketch is typical of many in that it implies the escalation of the same premise on a different level.

We see the whole process starting over with the coffee maker instead of the copy machine.

An escalation sketch from *Your Show of Shows* has Sid Caesar as a tourist visiting the Empire State Building who happens upon a woman [Imogene], trying to commit suicide. Sid tries to keep her talking. She tells her life story which culminates in a tirade against her husband, at which point she gets emotional and starts knocking Caesar around. Each time Caesar stops her, only to have her begin another tirade, succeeding in completely shredding his suit to pieces. Finally, she decides that life is worth living and leaves Caesar alone in complete tatters. At this point, another suicidal woman enters and begins a monologue about the cruelties of life. Caesar gasps and jumps over the ledge himself.

The turn occurs in this sketch when the second woman arrives, which escalates the premise onto another level, beginning the whole premise over. As in the Richard Laymer sketch the ending implies a new beginning of a slightly altered premise.

A sketch from the Canadian sketch comedy *Kids In The Hall* mirrors both these previous examples. This sketch has two business executives in a meeting, one indicates to the other that he has a piece of food on his lip which he tries to casually brush off but misses. What begins amiably enough escalates into the afflicted exec frantically pacing back and forth, patting down his entire body while the other tries to direct him to remove the food particle. Finally, he leaves the room and returns soaking wet, the piece of food finally gone. As the meeting resumes the first exec points to a spot on the other exec's shirt. As before, he begins obsessively patting down his whole body. The sketch ends here, like the others, just as the premise begins over on a different level. In this sketch, as with the previous two, the

turn results in the premise starting over, creating circular, or spiral pattern of narrative.

Modern shows use the some variant of the turn to end sketches quite often. In the television era, the turn has eclipsed the punch as the most utilized exit for a sketch premise. This is probably because it provides closure without the restrictiveness as its predecessor, the punch.

FACILE ENDINGS

A suitable ending which unifies and provides closure for a sketch cannot always be found. If the premise is especially funny though, it could warrant what may be called a *facile* ending, an ending which is generic and provides an out for the premise and which is applicable to almost any sketch. Again, these endings exemplify the utility of sketch writing and its obedience to the laugh potential of a premise, however sloppy the ending might be. Three well worn facile endings are the non-sequitur, the rave-up and the death ending.

The Non-sequitur - Cow Droppings

The term non-sequitur - Latin for "does not follow" - in the discipline of informal logic means that the conclusion does not follow logically from the premises presented in an argument.

During the first few seasons of *Saturday Night Live* the writers used the term "cow drop" to refer to what Al Franken called "a desperate end." Chevy Chase describes how the term originated:

Gilda [Radner] and I were playing a typical WASP couple who go to tag team wrestling with Belushi and his bees. We didn't have an ending, but we did have, for some unknown reason, a prop: a stuffed cow. I think it was Lorne [Michaels] who said, 'maybe we ought to drop the cow.' So when the sketch could go no farther, we actually, actually did. And although

we never physically dropped the cow again after that, it's happened in theory over and over.⁸⁵

When a sketch can "go no farther," meaning that the premise has been exhausted and is fast becoming tiresome, the sketch is ended - sometimes without finesse.

This technique merely introduces some unexpected element into a sketch for shock value, following a long comic tradition of using surprise to evoke laughter. This serves to punctuate the sketch for the ending. It also serves as a false turn in that the newly introduced element derails the premise being traced by the sketch. Chase and Radner are staring agape at the cow; the earlier premise is changed, like a turn, except without any logical connection to the original situation. This disorients the viewer and negates the lack of closure, the sketch doesn't seem unfinished because some element has so changed it as to make a unified ending unnecessary.

The Rave-Off

Sid Caesar wrote an article for *TV Guide* in which he derided the state of situation comedies in the early eighties by saying,

...they reminded me of when I was 13 years old and worked at a Catskill resort with a comic, Jackie Michaels, who ended a skit by pushing a ripe tomato in my face.⁸⁶

What he was describing, ending a sketch with a big physical gag or activity, is known as a "rave-off."

⁸⁵Zehme, Bill, "Live for Fifteen Years it's...Saturday Night!," *Rolling Stone*, (Oct. 5, 1989): p.65

⁸⁶Caesar, Sid. "How to Make Television Funnier," *TV Guide*, (Nov., 1983): pp. 8-12

Al Franken describes the rave-off:

You end with a fight, or you end up with people screaming at each other, or some big physical activity. That's a rave-off. It's getting out by raving off, getting out by making a lot of noise, a lot of commotion, yelling and running around.⁸⁷

While this technique may not be particularly prestigious, the pressures of live television result in it being used occasionally. Franken muses, "we try not to end that way if we can help it, but there's got to be a million of them." And there are quite a few. If one watches SNL or YSOS there is usually at least one rave-off per show.

Ending a sketch with some significant physical action is not new. The rave-off as a facile device for ending a sketch may have come into its own in minstrelsy. Robert C. Toll describes the typical ending of minstrel show sketches as:

Nearly always ending in a flurry of inflated bladders, bombardments of cream pies, or fireworks explosions that literally closed the show with a bang.⁸⁸

In vaudeville, performers strove for what was called the "wow finish," described by veteran vaudeville performer Walter De Leon in a 1925 article for the *Saturday Evening Post* as "an added kick at the finish of an act..." He gave the most reasonable explanation why all acts aspired to the wow finish:

It is the finish of an act which does, or does not, start an audience palm whacking. The measure and quality of this applause reveal the degree of pleasure received from the act. The acts that afford the most pleasure to the largest number of different audiences

⁸⁷ Franken, Al. Taped interview, (April, 1991)

⁸⁸Toll, Robert C. *Blackening Up, The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974): p. 57

are the acts that play most steadily and continuously.⁸⁹

He was speaking of all vaudeville acts, including sketches, but he mentioned one sketch in good detail. In 1913 vaudeville sketch writer Ed Hayes spent six months in various venues trying to work out the end of a sketch. His problem was that the sketch was hilarious up until two minutes before the curtain fell. The sketch involved two mangy piano movers in an uptown apartment; one six-foot 200 pounds, the other a five-four flyweight. The big mover slouches on a gold and silk settee and issues instructions while the silent bozo does all the work. The little guy manages to pull the piano over on top of himself and the big guy continues shouting directions to the distraught lady of the house in order to extricate him. The end never worked until Hayes introduced "A compressed air tank connected up with a heavy, strident toned factory whistle" which signaled quitting time. The two bozos gather their tools to knock off for the day, ignoring the ladies entreaties as the curtain falls.

Both De Leon and Hayes were sure that the introduction of the loud horn was what made the ending of the sketch more successful. The sketch was "screamingly funny" according to De Leon for the first 12 minutes, but until the horn was introduced, it died before the curtain and didn't get the deserved response.

"Making a lot of noise" at the end of a sketch has quite a long tradition in sketch comedy. The reasons are twofold: First, the rave-up is functional as De Leon explained, serving to generate excitement and applause. Second, it provides punctuation in that the commotion signals an end point, making it clear that the sketch is over.

⁸⁹De Leon, Walter. *Saturday Evening Post* 197 (February 14, 1925): 16ff

Death

A technique which ends sketches tidily and certainly qualifies as facile is to kill the characters in the sketch. Dan Ackroyd performed in a sketch as Julia Childs, host of host PBS cooking program, the point of which was to do a funny impression of her. After a short time Julia cuts her finger and gushes enormous amounts of blood while maintaining her typical decorum. This bit ends with her fainting on the table as the blood continues to gush. John Belushi did monologues during *Weekend Update* in which the point was to get him to display his enormous talent for manic ranting. These monologues always ended with him convulsing, flailing momentarily, and flinging himself out of sight behind the news desk.

A bit developed in Chicago's Second City involved a sword fight. After working through the sketch many times, a rather bloody conclusion was found. The sketch involved three characters. After the first character was run through with a sword, the other two characters stood together as the impaled actor backed into them with the sword.⁹⁰ Thus, a bit was ended by conveniently killing off all the characters.

Python had a penchant for death ending; characters were blown up, sixteen ton weights were dropped on people, all as a way to terminate a sketch. One job interview sketch progressed until John Cleese pulled a gun out of his desk and killed the interviewee for making an offending remark. These endings are usually non-sequitur in that they merely provide an exit which is not the result of a cause-effect chain, and are facile since they are easily applied to most any sketch premise.

⁹⁰McCrohan, Donna. *The Second City, A Backstage History of Comedy's Hottest Troupe*. (Perigree Books: The Putnam Publishing Group NY, 1987): pp. 87, 88

THE FRAME - Conceptual Bookends

In the world of television comedy, a funny situation practically justifies itself. Still, a humorous interaction between characters cannot be presented without *some* kind of context. If the situation lacks narrative unity - a beginning and end which are related to the middle - it can appear unfinished, and a string of these can appear quite disjointed.

This problem gave rise to a device called a “frame” which can make useful nearly any funny situation, giving it an *in* and an *out*, a generic context if you will. As the term implies, the frame puts borders around something to be presented, like a painting or photograph.

When a sketch, situation, or humorous fragment is introduced and exited with a jingle, talkshow or talking head it is called a frame. A frame is a generic beginning and end that provides a bed, or context, into which any bit of business can be inserted. The frame provides conceptual bookends for a piece of comedy.

The “What if” sketches created by SNL writer Jim Downey are an example of a frame. These sketches began and ended with a talk show which framed the bit in between. Several experts would discuss a question posed, such as: “What if Spartacus had a Piper Cub?” This technique provided an intro and extro for the piece and a chance for humorous characterizations. The body of the show consisted of an exploration of the premise, shown as if it were a clip. When the premise was fully explored the talk show would return and provide closure. Al Franken said this construct was valuable because,

It allows you to explain the premise...provides an *in* and an *out* so that you can get out at a certain point and not have people say ‘hey, that didn’t end.’

As a narrative device the frame is a valuable tool in the age of weekly television. Its ability to contain and unify almost any shred of a sketch premise makes it indispensable. Nearly any gag or comedic situation can be explored with little exposition.

The *Kids in the Hall* displayed the utility of the frame extremely well in one sketch. Mark McKinney introduces himself and explains to the audience that each of the troupes members write at least one sketch per show and that, this week, his work is not very good. His sketch, he explains, doesn't have any beginning or end; it is all middle. He also explains that his standing in the show is quite tenuous since he hasn't been coming up with any good material. He adds that he may be fired from the show depending on how the following sketch goes over.

At this point, he introduces an elderly lady as his mother. He says that she is very ill and in need of financial support. After making this appeal to pity he introduces his all-middle sketch. It consists of a man in a tutu slapping another man in a wet suit with a fish, then a cowboy enters and fires pistols in the air and a little dachshund dressed as a sheriff is lowered down in a harness at the end of a rope. We then return to McKinney who manages to milk a great amount of pity-applause for the ludicrous bit, thus ensuring his place on the show.

The meaningless bit is introduced and exited - framed - by McKinney's monologue. His all-middle sketch was given a beginning and end by his presence before and after it. This inane bit is proof that absolutely anything can be contained with a frame.

A simple, and well-worn frame is the use of music at the beginning and end of a sketch. Usually, these are jingles which

parody television formats and movies that also begin and end with some form of music, ("It's Pat" and "Toonces" are but two examples from SNL). But this convention pre-dates television. A possible early form of the technique was discussed by Brett Page in 1915. Page described the "parody two-act":

This sort of act opens and closes with parodies on the latest song hits, and uses talk for short rests and humorous effect between the parodies by which the act makes its chief appeal.⁹¹

As with a talk show, music at the beginning and end of a sketch gives the narrative between solid borders.

The frame, in any form, provides a generic first and third act within which nearly any middle act can be contained. By starting and ending with the same thing anything interspersed is automatically given context. Even purposely meaningless bits of humor, such as the previous *Kids In the Hall* example can be contained. While the frame, as a device for narration, has been used elsewhere, it has shown up in great abundance in modern sketch comedy due to its utility.

Linearity?

Marx Brothers writer George Seaton, (whose movies were a series of vaudeville sketches), referred to a "clothesline concept," which he defined as:

"One event follows the last more or less logically, with a readily discernible place in the scheme of things."⁹²

⁹¹Page, Brett. "Writing For Vaudeville," *The Home Correspondence School*. (Springfield, Mass.: 1915): pp. 134-36 Also: *American Vaudeville, as Seen by its Contemporaries*. Charles W. Stein., ed. (1984): p.182

⁹²Admanson, Joseph. The Seventeen Preliminary Scripts of "A Day at the Races." *Cinema Journal*, (8:2 spring, 1969): pp. 2-9

This definition sounds quite similar to David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's definition of linearity:

The clear motivation of a series of causes and effects that progress without significant digressions, delays, or irrelevant actions.⁹³

Up until the sixties when Spike Milligan and the Python's in England, and Earnie Kovacs in the U.S. experimented with non-linear forms, sketch comedy mostly followed a linear formula. If sketches did not follow the classic format of premise/punch, they at least followed the traditional three-act structure. *Your Show of Shows* writer Mel Tolkin says "all our sketches had a three-act structure with a beginning, middle and end, like a short story."⁹⁴ Sid Caesar criticized a 1977 *Saturday Night Live* sketch by saying,

The sketch did not have a beginning, a middle or an end. Everything was done for shock value, which we call "off the wall." In off-the-wall humor, which prevails today, you can use any non-sequitur for shock value though it has nothing to do with the story your sketch is trying to tell.⁹⁵

While sketch comedy did not rely on linear forms as much after the sixties, most sketches remained, and still remain, very linear. Even the sketch which Caesar was criticizing (a lampooning of the Nixon white house with guest host Dick Cavett playing John Dean) unfolded in a basically cause-effect pattern, but with a non-sequitur ending which is what probably ruffled Caesars feathers.

⁹³Bordwell, David., and Thompson, Kristin. *Film Art, An Introduction*, Second Edition. (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1986): p. 386

⁹⁴Tolkin, Mel. Telephone interview; May, 1992

⁹⁵Caesar, Sid. "How to Make Television Funnier," *TV Guide* (Nov., 1983): pp. 9-12

There are non-linear forms on modern TV sketch comedy. This is largely because such segments are parodies of non-linear genres from commercial television such as interview programs and commercial parodies. Though a mock interview is still called a sketch, many have the disjointed narrative of stand-up act. The jokes are arranged so that the laughs are well spaced out, but there is usually no reason why one joke should follow another, because there is no storyline. Al Franken discussed a topical segment from the '91 season which made fun of the Kennedy family in which there was "no story to tell, just three jokes."⁹⁶ Though these entities are called sketches by their writers, they do not fall under the strict definition of a sketch, which is a linear phenomenon.

⁹⁶Franken, Al, personal interview: April, '91

CHAPTER IV

THE SUPERSTRUCTURE OF VARIETY

A comedy sketch, a dog act, a singer and a ballet troupe are quite dissimilar entities to experience within the space of one program. It would seem that such a hodgepodge of entertainments could never keep people returning week after week. How could something so lacking in continuity be given a seeming overall structure?

Some vaudeville circuits made more money than others, and some variety shows in the early days of television were vastly more successful than others. There must be certain techniques which were responsible for these successes. The variety show, the sketch comedy show, the talk show and even the nightly news all use similar techniques in their presentation. They all belong to a class of entertainments which has its immediate roots in variety theater of the 1700's and probably going back much further.

The structure found in variety entertainment, if it is to be called a structure, does not have a narrative line which runs throughout. It lacks *linearity*,⁹⁷ a clear motivation of a series of causes and effects. Therefore; if you rearranged the parts - switched the dog act and the comedy sketch - it would not

⁹⁷ The definition of linearity is from David Bordwell and Kristen Thompson's' *Film Art: An Introduction* (Alfred A. Knopf: New York): p. 386

affect the logic of the overall show. This is unlike most motion pictures, plays, and novels where if you switched the first and second acts they would cease to make sense because these narratives are linear: a chain of cause-effect relationships which logically follow one another.

Variety could also be classified as a non-narrative form.⁹⁸ The parts of the show do not relate to each other through a series of causally related events; no act is integral to the logic of the overall show.

A suitable name for the structure of a variety, vaudeville, or burlesque show would be *discursive*. *Websters New World Dictionary* defines discursive as “wandering from one topic to another; skimming over many apparently unconnected subjects; rambling; desultory; digressive.” This seems to fit the type of format found in variety entertainments - dealing with an act, then moving on to another act and so on.

The lack of logical relationship between acts can make an evenings entertainment rather disjointed. This disjointedness is something that needs to be smoothed over. If a narrative line could not run throughout an hour-long show, certain conventions were used to create the illusion of continuity. These conventions were probably not invented outright for variety, but often they were borrowed from traditional narratives and used almost as a placebo, delivered to the audience as a substitute for linear entertainment.

Narrative and Variety in Symbiosis

The nineteenth century was a period of great experimentation in theater. The circus was a popular form, and the sheer spectacle of its variety was providing competition to

⁹⁸ Ibid.: p. 387 (as opposed to “narrative form”)

the droll of age-old story-bound theater. So much so that theater managers considered adapting circus elements into the theater.⁹⁹

In 1798 a play called *America and Elutheria; or, A New tale of Genii* catered to the growing demand for variety and spectacle.¹⁰⁰ This allegory on American liberty incorporated equestrian and acrobatic feats and spectacular staging as part of its poetic imagery; thus, elements of circus variety were weaved into a narrative for the first time.

Tom and Jerry; or, Life in London (1823) created a formula by which variety entertainments could be presented logically within a narrative.¹⁰¹ The play was about Tom and Jerry, two lower class characters and their travels about London. This storyline allowed the two protagonists to witness and participate in various sights and scenes which were actually variety acts that had surely been booked for the show. Tom and Jerry's travels integrated the disparate acts into a loose storyline and provided cohesion. This technique became known as the "touring plot"¹⁰²

In this fashion, the narrative itself provided the glue which held together the whole of the show. The narrative was segmented and various acts placed in between. The linear plot provided cause-effect relationships to follow, and something to look forward to during the variety acts. Between each act the story would progress somewhat and another act would be interjected and so on, providing cohesion to the elements of the show which, on their own would not be cohesive at all.

⁹⁹Maschio, Geraldine A. *The Ziegfeld Follies*. (Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1981): p.7

¹⁰⁰Ibid. : pp. 4-5

¹⁰¹Ibid.: pp. 7-8

¹⁰²Ibid.: p. 7

By the early part of this century use of the touring plot diminished and often other means were used to provide cohesion. In the *Ziegfeld Follies* of 1908 there was only slight attempt at plotting. In this production, there was a prologue device which suggested the relationships between the various acts. At the beginning of the show Adam and Eve were presented as responsible parents discussing the future of the race, worrying about the follies mankind would commit. Subsequent acts would then serve as examples of these follies.¹⁰³

This thematic link was broad enough for any bit of entertainment to apply. Though the link was merely thematic, it was still an attempt to use narrative elements to provide cohesion to non-narrative entertainment. Perhaps the diminishing use of the touring plot as a linking device was because it was discovered that such an elaborate means were not needed.

Using narrative to encapsulate non-narrative elements is quite significant, and using non-narrative elements to separate and punctuate narratives is equally relevant. Both techniques have endured and been adapted to other forms of entertainment, particularly sketch comedy and variety show programs.

The 50's comedy variety show, *Four Star Revue/All Star Revue*, developed touring plots for Danny Thomas. According to Judine Mayerly in her study of the early television variety show Thomas hosted the show several times, evolving a format in which:

¹⁰³Ibid. : p. 52

...sketches and music tied together with a thin continuing thread, such as Thomas and his crew taking a train ride to Miami.¹⁰⁴

The touring plot has been used so frequently because of its ability to achieve cohesion among non-narrative elements. Television absorbed it from the variety venues because of the abundance of non-narrative elements in the medium. Its use is evidenced in nearly every sketch comedy, and many variety shows, since television's inception.

Dynamics of Variety Entertainment

...there was no better psychologist than the vaudeville manager, who showed not only the best acts but *in such a combination as to create a unified whole.*

From *Vaudeville USA*¹⁰⁵
(Italics added)

Another method of giving variety entertainment the feel of a narrative form, without going through all the business of the touring plot, was to manipulate the order of the various acts into peaks which mimicked that of traditional narratives. The order and pacing of a standard vaudeville show was almost of mystical significance to the producers because it set the mood and flow, and ultimately the success of the show. Geraldine A. Maschio discusses how mere pacing and placement of acts was used to give the impression of continuous action:

The skillful arrangement of the various acts was necessary in vaudeville and in the revue to impose order and to ensure the efficacy of each individual performance and thus of the show as a whole. Fast

¹⁰⁴Mayerle, Judine. *The Development of the Television Variety Show as a Major Program Genre at the National Broadcasting Company: 1946-1956* (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1983): p. 223

¹⁰⁵DiMeglio, John E. *Vaudeville USA*. (Bowling Green University Popular Press: Bowling Green, Ohio, 1973): pp. 34-35

pace and clearly defined rhythmic patterns helped to maintain a sense of *continuity*.¹⁰⁶ (*italics added*)

The standard bill for a vaudeville show was usually what "bigtime"* theater circuit owners B.F. Keith and E.F. Albee offered: an eight act bill.¹⁰⁷ The following is a summary of a discussion of the ordering of acts in John E. DiMeglio's *Vaudeville USA*, mostly from the impressions of George A. Gottlieb, booker for New York's Palace Theater:¹⁰⁸

First act: A "dumb act" which required no talking, dancers, jugglers, acrobats, or bicycle riders, and sometimes animal acts were assigned to the first spot. This act had to accommodate the constant interruptions of latecomers.

Second act: Must provide more entertainment than the first act. According to George A. Gottlieb, "This position on the bill is to 'settle' the audience and prepare it for the show."

Third act: This act must "wake up" the audience. This was where Gottlieb placed a comedy sketch. Others placed a magician, a sister act, dancers or a comedy team.

Fourth act: A "corker" of an act. This act usually had a big name or something elaborate to offer for "The first big punch of the show."

Fifth act: Another big act, perhaps a star equal to that in the fourth act. This act immediately preceded the intermission so it needed to be something to generate enthusiasm. This act was usually a headline act which reached the highest peak so far in the show.

INTERMISSION

¹⁰⁶Maschio, Geraldine. *Ziegfeld Follies, Form, Content*, (Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin - Madison, 1981): p. 36

* Circuits were divided into "bigtime" and "smalltime" circuits with respective status and pay. The biggest of the bigtime theater owners was the Keith-Albee combine. See: *Vaudeville USA*: pp. 19-27

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.* : p. 29

¹⁰⁸ For more detailed information regarding the organization of the vaudeville show see: Gottlieb, George A., "Psychology of the American Vaudeville Show from the Manager's Point of View," : *Current Opinion* 60 (April, 1916), pp. 257-258; Also: *American Vaudeville as Seen by its Contemporaries*, Charles W. Stein., ed. (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1984): pp. 179-181

Sixth act: Since the show had peaked right before the intermission, this act had to sustain the audiences appreciation, but it couldn't be so big as to overshadow the following act, the most important one on the bill.

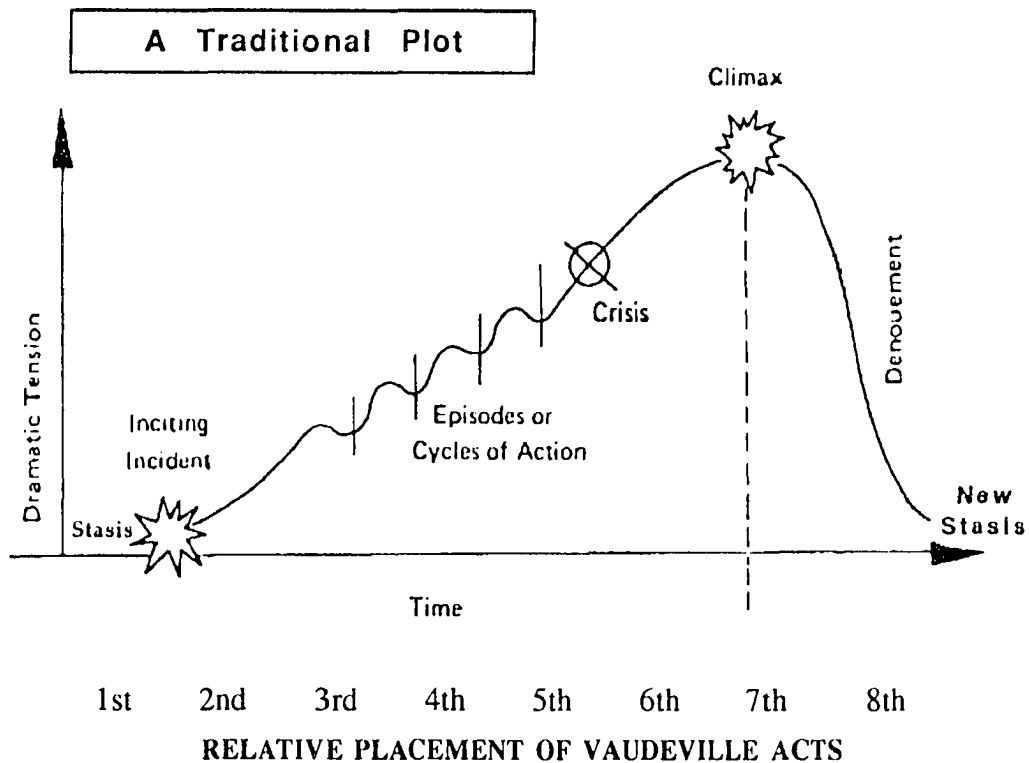
Seventh act: The next-to-closing act was the most important act in the whole show; the biggest name on the bill. This act was the peak of the entire show.

Eighth act: This act was universally referred to as the "chaser." One designed to clear the house, but entertain those who remained seated. One circuit owner even had orchestras to "play the last person out" so nobody left a silent theater.¹⁰⁹

This discussion takes a major concern with the viscera of the audience watching the show. The placement of the acts was calculated to "settle," "wake up" or "generate enthusiasm" in the audience. Though the whole of the show is non-linear - without any relationships between the acts - there is mention twice of "peaks" in the entertainment, which would indicate some pretense of a superstructure.

When one examines the strategic placement of acts a fascinating correlation emerges: The superstructure mimics the dynamics of a traditional plot. It is apparent when one looks at the following graph representing the traditional plot:

¹⁰⁹ This discussion occurs on pp. 34-36 specifically.



In comparison to a traditional plot, first and second acts of a vaudeville show provide the same function as backstory: to “settle” an audience, establish a stasis, and prepare them for the show. The third fourth and fifth acts raise the level of excitement to the first big peak of the show, occurring right before intermission. The fifth and sixth acts sustain the excitement to the final climax of the show in the seventh act. The eighth act serves as the anti-climax, or denouement.

Timing

An ethereal yet very real technique for providing continuity is the timing of the show. In revue, a fast pace was key in creating what was described as “a constant swirling of action, sound, and spectacle for ‘kaleidoscopic’ effect.”¹¹⁰ By

¹¹⁰Maschio, Geraldine A. *Ziegfeld Follies, Form, Content*. (Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1981): p. 2

spacing acts close together and providing a musical link, a disjointed display was made into continuous action.

The Master of Ceremonies

The whole business of the touring plot was an attempt to *link* together, or provide continuity between, all the disparate parts of a variety show by couching it within the framework of a plot. A much simpler and cheaper way to do this is to dispense with the pretense of plot and have a person provide the continuity between the acts by the mere familiarity of his presence.

Neil Postman, in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* titled a chapter "Now...this" and made a case for the fragmentation of discourse in the age of entertainment. He calls that common television news segue:

...a new part of speech, a conjunction that does not connect anything to anything but does the opposite: separates everything from everything.¹¹¹

He even makes a case that television news is theoretically aligned with vaudeville¹¹² and even packaged similarly.¹¹³ The master of ceremonies, whose purpose is to provide the "Now...this" between the acts of a vaudeville show did essentially the same thing as news anchors do now. This form may have originated in vaudeville and it would be interesting to trace. Whatever its origin, there is no contesting its success.

While a master of ceremonies does not truly connect the show together, only providing a buffer between the acts, he does give the *illusion* of cohesiveness, which is what is

¹¹¹Ibid. : p. 99

¹¹²Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves To Death, Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. (Elizabeth Sifton books: Viking): p. 105

¹¹³Ibid. : p. 111

important. In fact, the mere presence of a master of ceremonies does not guarantee that the show will be cohesive, but a *popular* host seems to be important in providing that illusive continuity, as was proved by the *Texaco Star Theater*.

Milton Berle was not originally supposed to be permanent host of the *Texaco Star Theater*. He hosted the first four episodes and other vaudeville stars such as Henny Youngman, Morey Amsterdam, Jack Carter and Peter Donald were rotated over the summer of 1948. Berle was not only considered the best host by critics, but also given credit for giving continuity and cohesion to the show. A variety critic commented on Berle's absence over that summer:

The spontaneity and show-wise *continuity* that gave it the needed production values when Berle tied it together were lacking on last week's stage...the show cried out for good pacing and *cohesion*." ¹¹⁴ (italics added)

Berle's absence not only effected the entertainment value of the show but, for ethereal reasons, also affected the integrity of its superstructure. This could be explained by Berle's personal magnetism, which kept people hopeful during any low points in the show. Like a cause and effect plot, in which the audience is trying to anticipate, or is looking forward to the next twist, the audience is anticipating what Berle's next move will be.

NBC caught on to Berle's popularity and he was made permanent emcee in September of 1948, and at the start of the fall season, even changed the format to include more of Berle. Berle was now not just the emcee, but the star. Not only did he provide cohesion by introducing each act, but sometimes popped up during the acts. This technique worked well as is

¹¹⁴ Variety, (July 21 1948,): p. 43

testified by this review from *Variety* for the premiere show of the 1948 season:

Texaco's production men put together what on paper seemed a fair list of vaude and notery entertainers, of the past and present, paced them smartly, added a good script, and flavored it all with Berle. And what a flavor he proved to be. He tied the 60 minutes into a package so tight there wasn't room for even an extra giggle on top of the deep belly laughs he pyramided, with the acts as a springboard for his own foolery... There's nothing to which the guy won't stoop for a laugh; he was in and out of every act on the bill...

Not only was he in every act, but he also showed up in the midway commercial. His popularity was so great in fact that people insisted on calling the show the "Milton Berle show," long before it carried that monicker.

Other comedy variety shows used personalities to tie their shows together. Not only did *Your Show of Shows* have a stable cast, but there was a guest star for each show, a well known person who would emcee the show, and perform in a comedy sketch as well. This is the same format *Saturday Night Live* successfully used twenty years later. The *Colgate Comedy Hour* had less a master of ceremonies than a headliner around whom the show was built. The star carried the whole of the show with only a limited number of guests.¹¹⁵

Recurring Characters

Another way to achieve continuity without linear narrative is to have a stable of characters which show up successively in the various acts. This is a technique which has been used since

¹¹⁵Mayerle, Judine. *The Development of the Television Variety Show as a Major Program Genre at the National Broadcasting Company: 1946-1956* (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1983): p. 211

the beginnings of variety entertainment, Geraldine A. Maschio discusses:

The minstrel show's olio and the farce-comedy presented the same performers in a variety of specialties; this use of "cast" rather than just an aggregate of talents formed the basis for the revue's cohesiveness.

Unfortunately, this technique was not transferred to television's first variety show. *Hour Glass* was unsuccessful for this and other reasons. Bernard Sobel produced *Hour Glass* and felt that the use of separate specialty acts hampered continuity:

Do not use them as just a string of acts. In the night club [sketch] the juggler can be a waiter, for instance, the tumbler a drunken customer, etc.

Sketch comedies have always done best with a troupe or company performing many different roles. The fact that *Saturday Night Live* had the "Not Ready for Prime Time Players" may have been one of the keys to its success. Monty Python purposely cultivated an ensemble feel, despite urgings from the BBC to call it *John Cleese's Flying Circus*.¹¹⁶

MONTY PYTHON'S FLYING INNOVATIONS

"And now for something completely different..." was one of the catch phrases created by *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, which is an apropos description of this odd program.

This show didn't have the clunky apparatus of a master of ceremonies, nor did it present any musical guests. It was pure sketches, though not in the traditional sense, but truncated versions of classic sketches unique to the Python format. This

¹¹⁶Redhead, Mark. *The Life of Python*. Television documentary produced by Mark Redhead for BBC TV (Devillier Donegan Enterprises, 1988)

show seemed completely manic, zanier than anything before, more off-the-wall; a textbook example of non-stop comedy.

Where the Pythons innovations lay was in taking techniques and conventions created over a hundred years before and integrating them into their sketches, or changing them on their face in order to give the show its non-stop feel.

While the show was made to look as if the writers were flying by the seat of their pants, there was a great deal of consideration given to its format. All of the Pythons were seasoned sketch writers from earlier British television shows like *Do Not Adjust Your Set* and *The Robert Frost Report*, but with *Monty Python's Flying Circus* they decided to try a format which had only been experimented with occasionally in the earlier shows. Python member Terry Jones discusses the structure of the show:

Terry Gilliam [cartoon animator] had done some animation which was stream-of-consciousness on *Do Not Adjust Your Set* and we decided that we could create a whole show which was stream-of-consciousness, something which hadn't been done previously.¹¹⁷

It is probably no coincidence that the term "stream-of-consciousness" also refers to a turn of the century literary movement started by writers like James Joyce, William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. The Python crew were classically educated at Oxford and Cambridge, quite literate, and probably borrowed the term from literary critics. In fact, one Python show included a "summarize Proust" contest. Proust was one of the vanguards of stream-of-consciousness writing; and this lends support to the idea that the term, and quite possibly the

¹¹⁷ *The Life of Python*, a television documentary produced by Mark Redhead for BBC TV. (Devillier Donegan Enterprises, 1988)

inspiration for the style, was borrowed from turn of the century literature.

Stream-of-consciousness is defined by C. Hugh Holman as:

...a flow of words, images and ideas similar to the unorganized flow of thought... an unending flow of sensations, thoughts, memories, associations, and reflections.¹¹⁸

This is an accurate description of Python, but the term also implies that everything is being told through a narrators mind. One could say that the show is the thought process of a fictitious character named Monty Python, who is *thinking* the show, but that does not help reveal the structure. When one examines the overall structure of the Python show, many elements from the variety show emerge, which makes a good case for calling Python discursive.

Even though the Python show was composed entirely of sketches, which are a narrative form, overall the show was non-narrative. Like vaudeville and variety the Python show is not linear. It does not move foreword, but instead shuttles from sketch to sketch with only thematic, or associative relationships rather than cause-effect throughout the entire half hour.

¹¹⁸Holman, Hugh C., Addison, Hibbard and Thrall, William. ed. *The Stream of Consciousness Novel, A Handbook to Literature*. (Odessey Press, rev. ed., 1960): pp. 471-72

Superstructure

We decided to shape the show [beforehand.] The show would be linked...there would be no stop/starts, no punch lines and all that.

Eric Idle¹¹⁹

Each *Monty Python's Flying Circus* was unique, nothing was set in stone. Even such institutional devices as the shows open and final credits were toyed with; the opening cartoon was extended or not shown, and final credits were run halfway through. The Pythons showed disdain for anything which smacked of television's stable, hackneyed conventions.

But, there was a concept behind each of the Python shows, something which provided glue to hold together the many bizarre and disparate sketches, and provide some sense of cohesion. In most shows, sketches were grouped according to theme and cemented together with recurring links. "Authority" or "Physicians" was enough of a theme to warrant a string of linked sketches.

By far the most important link used by *Monty Python* is the cartoon animation of Terry Gilliam. The cartoons are too bizarre to be described in words, but their function was to link the various sections of the show. Most shows would divide into three sections, each a series of linked sketches along a theme. These were, in turn, linked together by Gilliam cartoons. Often one sketch would run out of steam and a Terry Gilliam cartoon would take the show from that point and bring it to a point where they could link the next sketch.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹*The Life of Monty Python*. A documentary produced by Mark Redhead for BBC TV (Devillier Donegan Enterprises, 1988.)

¹²⁰*Ibid.* This description is a paraphrase of Terry Gilliam's comments regarding his role in structure of the show.

Serial Links

Python used linking devices between the sketches of each show. These were recurring bits which held the show together and gave it fluid structure. Some links were sketches in themselves, while others were mere phrases like “and now for something completely different...,” but all served as conjunctions between the main sketches presented in the show. Repetition of the links provided a sense of cohesion without storyline. These various types of linking devices fall under the umbrella of *serial links*. A serial link is any link which is repeated several times in a show.

Though the Pythons did not have a flesh-and-blood master of ceremonies, they used elements inherent in the convention. The duties of the emcee were distributed to a stable of bizarre characters. News anchors, game show hosts and colonels would pop in and give comment on a previous sketch, sometimes introducing the next.

One show had John Cleese doing exactly what a master of ceremonies does, introduce each of the segments in the show.¹²¹ It begins with Cleese in a snack bar, who explains that he has been hired to introduce each sketch. Several times the show returns to Cleese in the snack bar doing an awkward and confused job. At one point he gets in a spat with the waitress because he gets tea instead of coffee. At the end of the show a sullen Cleese is riding atop a double-decker on his way home. He explains that he was not asked to come back because they did not like the work he did. The show ends with him weeping and sniveling over his poor performance.

This linking device is a narrative in itself used much like a touring plot. It is the story of a befuddled announcer who gets

¹²¹See: *Monty Python's Flying Circus, All the Words*, show #18 pp. 235-248

hired and fired from his job in the same day. His comments on the various sketches helps to link and punctuate the show and softens the disjointedness involved in the presentation of so many disparate sketches. Making the job of introducing sketches into an ongoing narrative provides cohesion. His presence throughout the show serves to unify and frame each segment, and the show as a whole.

The Python linking technique is discussed in Neale and Krutnik's *Popular Film and Television Comedy*. They cite a linking segment involving some "gumbies" (brainless sub-humans with rolled up trousers, braces, steel-rimmed spectacles, small moustaches, and handkerchiefs with the corners knotted as headpieces¹²²) who introduce a sketch by yelling "The Architect's Sketch!" repeatedly.¹²³ After the sketch begins we still hear the gumbies screaming in the distance. A character in the architects sketch [Grahm Chapman], throws a bucket of water out a window. The scene cuts to the gumbies soaking wet, then to back the sketch, which proceeds.

Neal and Krutnik assert that Python has taken the convention of a linking segment normally given to the master of ceremonies and turned it into a mini-hybrid sketch, and by using diegetic and functional overlap cementing the show together very well. A point Neal and Krutnik failed to mention was that this link returns several times with the gumbies shouting "the insurance sketch" and "the chemist sketch" at the appropriate times. Bringing back the same link gives even more cohesion, as well as giving an opportunity for more laughs.

Continually Developing Sketches

Another serial link on the Python show is the continually developing sketch. With this technique a sketch begins, but is

¹²² *From Fringe to Flying Circus*, p. 202

¹²³ See: *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, All the Words, Show # 17 pp. 220-234

interrupted, only to return every so often. The development of the sketch is tracked throughout the show. One show features an Icelandic saga written in the thirteenth century, which was recently rediscovered and produced.¹²⁴ It is ended very soon after it begins because the main character cannot say his opening monologue. It returns after the opening sequence, a short sketch and some animation. It stops soon after because of funding problems. It returns again, newly sponsored by the London borough of North Malden. The documentary progresses slightly when suddenly there is a blatant plug of North Malden. A Nordic Warrior is poised to throw a spear, but instead throws off the animal skin he is wearing, revealing "Visit North Malden" printed across his chest in bold letters.

Neal and Krutnik discuss this technique and call it "the interrupted sketch,"¹²⁵ which does not stress the linking advantages inherent in the device. It is linearity which is most cohesive and by dividing a linear sketch and spreading its segments throughout the show, more overall cohesion is achieved. The momentary disjointedness of the interruption is a sacrifice for the overall cohesion gained in the show. The linear progression of a sketch is usually interrupted for a digression into several bits of non-linear, non-narrative comedy, but the sketch is returned to later, thus keeping the disjointedness of the bits between to a minimum. The segmented sketch provides blocks of cause-effect narrative which frame the non-linear digressions.

Often, shows have several continually developing sketches with bits and pieces in between. An early sketch in one show involves a man and his wife waiting for the fire brigade. The sketch is then linked to several others, some of them

¹²⁴Ibid, show # 27 pp. 45-59

¹²⁵Neal, Steve and Krutnik, Frank. *Popular Film and Television Comedy*. (Routledge: London and New York, 1990): pp 199-204

interrupted, some tied up, and some left hanging. The last sketch on the show is an interview which ends with the interviewer walking off the set and - with the camera following him - entering a previous sketch that had been left hanging. At this point the show merges into one super rave-off with other characters from earlier sketches also entering, including the fire brigade. The show fades to black with the sketch characters and fire brigade mulling about in confusion.

The Thematic Link

Thematic links are more tenuous than most serial links because they are usually mere recurring elements. A good example of a thematic link comes from the show entitled "How to Recognize Different Types of Tree From a Quite Long Way Away."¹²⁶ This show begins with a dead pan voice-over which says that we are to learn about all the types of trees in the world, but the projector malfunctions and sticks on a slide of a larch tree. The announcer keeps repeating "the larch" as the same slide reenters the screen. This bit occurs four times throughout the show and acts as a marker, signaling that the last bit has ended and a new one is about to begin, acting as a shorthand for a master of ceremonies.

One show entitled "How to Recognize different Parts of the Body" begins with a voice-over lecture on human anatomy illustrated with arrows pointing to each named anatomic part.¹²⁷ Subsequent sketches begin with the same narrator, a close-up and an arrow pointing to a bodypart of a sketch character. A sketch lampooning Australians begins as a close up of a knee with an arrow pointing to it and the announcer giving a brief explanation. Once the link has been established, the camera then pulls out and the sketch proceeds until there is need of another link.

¹²⁶See: *Monty Python's Flying Circus, All the Words*, Show # 3 pp. 29-41

¹²⁷See: *Ibid*, show #22 pp.294-307

The Serial Ending

The fact that many of the Python sketches are interrupted before there is any closure is minimized by using a recurring interruption, ending each sketch the same way. With this device each sketch is given a generic ending. In one show, all the sketches end with cops busting in and arresting sketch characters for some comedic infraction.¹²⁸ The last sketch in the show ends in this way, but a second policeman barges in and begins arresting the first one for ending all the sketches the same way, at this point another cop arrives and starts doing the same, but another hand grabs his shoulder (presumably another cop) and the show fades to black.

In another show, each sketch ends with one of the characters saying, "I didn't expect the Spanish Inquisition."¹²⁹ With that, several thugs dressed in red priests garb come crashing in and shout "No one expects the Spanish Inquisition!" and the next sketch begins. Another show has an irritating little character played by Eric Idle who walks into sketches and promises he will leave if someone pays him money. He ends several sketches this way and in one sketch the lights go out and we hear his voice saying he'll turn the lights on again for money. At the end he reads the credits because the BBC paid him a small fee.

Ending each sketch with the same interruption adds cohesiveness. It also utilizes the convention of the running gag, an old comedic technique of repeating something for added laugh value. Using an interruption as a recurring theme also gives the added advantage of being able to extinguish a sketch before the premise becomes tiresome.

¹²⁸ See: Ibid, Show #29 pp. 76-90

¹²⁹ See: *Monty Python's Flying Circus, All the Words* Vol. 1, show # 15 pp. 192-204

Lateral Cohesion

Most of this discussion has one overriding element in common, the idea that if something familiar is brought back, whether it be a master of ceremonies, a recurring character or sketch, a running gag or a segmented narrative, it gives cohesiveness to the show.

When linear works provide a sense of cohesion through a chain of cause-effect one calls this linear continuity. But, when non-linear works such as *Monty Python's Flying Circus* and *Kids in the Hall* provide a sense of cohesion without a cause-effect chain what does one call that? A suitable name for this phenomenon would be *lateral cohesion*.

Variety shows do not move forward as a cause-effect storyline does. They shuttle horizontally between many different recurring bits, hence the term lateral. Cohesion is achieved through the repetition of elements. As with the frame discussed in the previous chapter, the bits which fall in between the repeated elements are given context. A show which successfully repeats the many different elements with minimum disjointedness can be said to have achieved lateral cohesion. Lateral cohesion has always been the goal of variety entertainments, by examining the elements involved in its creation a better understanding can be achieved.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS & SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

CONCLUSIONS

This study makes several conclusions about the comic sketch. First, that the sketch falls into three structural categories: classic, revue and modern. These are not indisputable, but any alternate divisions will necessarily use some form, or hybrid, of the three defined here.

Second, despite the intrinsic lawlessness of sketch comedy, there are a few definable conventions which characterize the art form. The *punch*, the *turn*, the *rave off* and the *non-sequitur* are all concepts which provide a nomenclature for further inquiry into sketches. Each could be a springboard for a complete study.

Third, the conventions of variety entertainment have been examined and concepts developed which could help further understand this relatively new form of presentation. New light has hopefully been shed on the still relatively understudied *Monty Python's Flying Circus* as well.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study, if it accomplishes its goal, will create more questions than answers. The sketch and the variety show could

provide fruitful ground within and beyond the structural investigation in this study.

The three categories of sketch defined in this study are not meant to be final. One could explicate these categories further, or create sub-categories of each, which would be an excellent extension of this study. One could do a historical investigation to discover exactly when and where these types originated. The following are a few areas which could be fruitfully explored.

Genre Studies

In the whole of sketch comedy, there are certain themes and situations which have been done over and over. The restaurant sketch, the domesticity sketch, the job interview sketch, can all be examined as genre. Past examples can be compared and contrasted to recent, and themes can be distilled and analyzed. Such a study could call in concepts scantily mentioned here, such as satire and parody.

Character Studies

Mel Brooks remarked that characters for situation comedies required a completely different method to create than sketch characters because "sketch characters are just there for a moment, series characters have to be durable."¹³⁰ What are the implications of this? Sketch characters appear to be flatter, more two-dimensional than movie, or even sit-com characters. How does the concept of sub-text apply to sketch characters? Does a sketch actor ask "What is my motivation?" as much as a movie or stage actor? What common archetypes (stereotypes) are to be found in sketch comedy? This could be viewed from the realm of theater arts, as well as narrative analysis.

¹³⁰Wilde, Larry. *How Great Comedy Writers Create Laughter*. (Nelson Hall: Chicago, 1976): p. 48

Quantitative possibilities

There is no reason why quantitative work cannot be done in regard to sketch comedy. As a sub-set of a qualitative study quantitative analysis could provide some interesting information. Just how long is the average sketch, and has that changed over the years? What percentage of sketches on a given show actually parody other television formats and how many are stories in themselves? The possibilities for content analysis are virtually limitless.

*

*

*

AFTERWORD - (A SLIGHTLY NON-SEQUITUR END)

A significant element in comedic appreciation is the element of surprise. If an audience can see a punch-line coming, the laughter is squelched. Instead of the crash of laughter that comes from seeing a situation from a new angle, the unsurprising punch brings a hollow chuckle.

This is a plausible explanation for the rapidity with which conventions have been created, discarded and deconstructed in sketch comedy. It also makes it ludicrous to stipulate rules of comedy. If comedy becomes formulaic, it is no longer funny.

The barrage of books which try to crack comedy, to figure it out can be damaging to the appreciation of comedy. These works, in the hands of the comedy consumer, serve to dampen the comedy and can turn raucous laughter into an insiders chuckle. It is ironic that these books purport to give comedy reverence, as if revealing a magicians tricks gives reverence to magicians.

This study has avoided attempts to decode humor. To do that is to violate the comedy, and is the height of disrespect.

There has always been a certain ambivalent obsession about comedy by academicians. It has been considered a lesser art than legitimate drama, thus it was rarely studied for its poetics. Yet, since levity is a desired quality, comedy was frisked for its ability to make people laugh.

The single most ethereal aspect of comedy, its ability to invoke laughter, is the aspect that has been monomaniacally pursued. Meanwhile, historians have largely ignored comedy and thousands of years of comic works are lost forever. Philosophers have made protracted attempts to explain why things are funny. This is as futile as endeavoring to discover why something is sad, suspenseful, or terrifying, and it ignores specific works, missing the forest for the trees.

Just how much comedy ought to be revered should be questioned. Comedy requires something essentially serious to play off. Satire, the highest form of comedy, is essentially a parasitic art form; for it requires a host to subvert. Irreverence is necessary to comedy. Therefore, to say that comedy does not get the respect that it deserves is contradictory; it gets as much as it needs - if it gets laughs.

To legitimize comedy is to risk making it pompous. Pomposity is the antithesis of comedy, and the enemy of comedy. It becomes a sad state of affairs when comedians take themselves too seriously, for they are charged with exposing pomposity in society.

To end a study of comedy with reservations about comedic study may seem ironic. By all means, any study is better than none at all. But this serves as a plea that we should study comedy for its poetics, its history and its structure, and leave the question of what is funny to the comedians.

To the despots and tyrants of the world, the comedian is more feared than the editorialist or philosopher. A philosophical attack can be thwarted with rhetoric, but a satirical assault renders a tyrant a laughing stock. No one, absolutely no one, wants to be a laughing stock. Therefore, if only as a force for social good, comedy should be held in high esteem. That comedy is such an efficient safety valve is reason to say that it deserves all the more respect, but it should not be placed at the pinnacle of the arts. Rather, it should exist just below - within firing range of the legitimate people at the top, keeping them humble. And comedy should be laughed at. After all, with due respect, it is comedy.

WORKS CITED

- Allen, Robert C. *Horrible Prettiness, Burlesque and American Culture*. (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill and London, 1991)
- Allen, Steve. *How to be Funny*. (Mcgraw Hill: New York, 1987)
- Aristotle. *Poetics*. Trans. S. H. Butcher. 4th ed. (London: Macmillan, 1980)
- Bailey, Peter., ed. *Music Hall, The Business of Pleasure*. (Open University Press: Milton Keynes Philadelphia, 1986)
- Bergson, Henri. *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. Trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell. (New York: Macmillan, 1911)
- Berry, Ralph. *Shakespeare's Comedies: Explorations in Form*. (Princeton University Press: Princeton NJ, 1972)
- Bonazza, Blaze. *Shakespeare's Early Comedies: A Structural Analysis*. (Mouton: The Hague, 1966)
- Bordwell, David., and Thompson, Kristin. *Film Art, An Introduction* 2nd ed. (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1986)
- Chomsky, Noam. *A Transformational Approach to Syntax, in The Structure of Language*. Fodor and J. Katz., ed. (Prentice-Hall: Englewood cliff, N.J., 1964)
- Cicero. *On Oratory and Orators*. Trans. J.S. Watson., (Corbondale: Southern Illinios UP, 1970)
- Cooper, Lane. *An Aristotelian Theory of Comedy*. (Kraus: New York, 1969)
- DiMeglio, John E. *Vaudeville USA*. (Bowling Green University Popular Press: Bowling Green, Ohio. 1973)

WORKS CITED, CONTINUED

- Dunlap, William. *The History of American Theater*. (Burt Franklin Press: New York, 1963)
- Emmerson, Ralph Waldo. "The Comic." *Letters and Social Aims*. Vol 8 of *Complete Works*. 12 vols. (Boston: Houghton, 1883)
- Freud, Sigmund. "Humor." Vol 21 of Standard Edition of *The Complete Psychological Works*. Trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1961)
- Fowler, Roger., ed., *Style and Structure in Literature, Essays in the New Stylistics*. (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, New York)
- Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism*. (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1957)
- Gilbert, Douglas. *American Vaudeville, It's Life and Times*. (Dover Publications Inc.: New York, 1963)
- Hairston, Maxine. *A Contemporary Rhetoric*. (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982)
- Heilitzer, Melvin. *Comedy Writing Secrets For Beginning Writers*. (Writers Digest Books: Cincinnati Ohio)
- Hegel, G.W.F. *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*. Trans. T. M. Know. 2 Vol. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975)
- _____. *Comedy Techniques for Writers and Performers*. (Lawhead Press: Athens Ohio, 1984)
- Hendra, Tony. *Going Too Far, The Rise and Demise of Sick, Gross, Black, Sophmoric, Weirdo, Pinko, Anarchist, Underground, Anti-Establishment Humor*. (Dolphin Books Doubleday: New York 1987)

WORKS CITED, CONTINUED

- Hill, Doug., and Weingrad, Jeff. *Saturday Night, A Backstage History of Saturday Night Live*. (Beech Tree Books, William Morrow: New York, 1986)
- Hobbes, Thomas. *Human Nature, or the Fundamental Elements of Policy*. Vol. 4 of *English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*. Sir William Molesworth. ed., (Darmstadt: Scientia Verlag Aales, 1966)
- Holman, Hugh C., Addison, Hibbard and Thrall, William., ed. *The Stream of Consciousness Novel, A Handbook to Literature*, (Odessey Press: Rev. ed., 1960)
- Johnson, Kim "Howard." *The First 200 Years of Monty Python*. (St. Martins Press: New York, 1989)
- Lauter, Paul., ed. *Theories of Comedy*, (Anchor Books Doubleday & Co. Inc.: Garden City NY, 1964)
- Legrand, Ph. E. *The New Greek Comedy*. Trans. James Loeb (London: Heinemann, 1917)
- Lever, Katherine. *The Art of Greek Comedy*. (London: Methuen, 1956)
- McCrohan, Donna. *The Second City, A Backstage History of Comedy's Hottest Troupe*. (A Perigee Book: Putnam Publishing Group, 1987)
- McGhee, Paul E., and Jeffrey, Goldstein. *Handbook of Humor Research*. 2 Vols. (Springer Verlag: New York, 1983)
- Merchant, Moelwyn. *Comedy, The Critical Idiom*. (Methuen: London & New York,)
- Minsky, Morton., and Machlin, Milt. *Minsky's Burlesque*. (Arbor House: New York, 1986)

WORKS CITED, CONTINUED

- Neal, Steve., and Krutnik, Frank. *Popular Film and Television Comedy*. (Routledge: London and New York, 1990)
- Owen, Peter. *The Laughmakers*. (Bristol Typesetting co. Barton Manor St. Phillips: Bristol, 1971)
- Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death, Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. (Elizabeth Sifton Books: Viking, 1986)
- Redhead, Mark. *The Life of Python*. Television documentary produced by Mark Redhead for BBC TV. (Devillier Donegan Enterprises, 1988)
- Saks, Sol. *The Craft of Comedy Writing*. (Writers Digest Books: Cincinnati Ohio, 1985)
- Schilling, Bernard. *The Comic Spirit*. (Wayne State University Press: Detroit, 1965)
- Sennett, Ted. *Your Show of Shows*, (Collier Books, Division of Macmillan Publishing: New York 1977)
- Slide, Anthony., ed. *Selected Vaudeville Criticism*. (Scarecrow Press: Princeton, 1957)
- Sobel, Bernard. *A Pictorial History of Vaudeville*. (Citidel Press: New York, 1961)
- Stebbins, Robert A. *The Laugh-Makers: Stand-up Comedy as Art, Business, and Life-Style* (McGill-Queen's University Press: Montreal & Kingston, London, Buffalo)
- Stein, Charles W., ed. *American Vaudeville, As Seen by its Contemporaries*. (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1984)
- Sweet, Jeffrey. *Something Wonderful Right Away*. (Limelight Editions: New York, 1987)

WORKS CITED, CONTINUED

Toll, Robert C. *Blacking Up, The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America*. (Oxford University Press: New York 1974)

Weingrad, Jeff., and Hill Doug. *A Backstage History of Saturday Night Live*. (Beech Tree Books: William Morrow, New York)

Wilde, Larry. *How Great Comedy Writers Create Laughter*. (Nelson Hall: Chicago, 1976)

Wilmot, Roger., ed. *The Complete Monty Pythons Flying Circus, All the Words*. (Pantheon books: New York 1989)

_____. *From Fringe to Flying Circus*. (Fakenham Press Limited: Fakenham/Norfolk, 1980)

ARTICLES:

Admanson, Joseph; "The Seventeen Preliminary Scripts of 'A Day at the Races,'" *Cinema Journal* (8:2 spring 1969): pp. 2-9

Beuick, Marshall D., "The Vaudeville Philosopher," *The Drama*, (Vol 16, No. 3. December, 1925): pp. 92-93 & 116

Bordwell, David; "Happily Ever After Part Two," *The Velvet Light Trap* (No. 19, 1982): p.2

Caesar, Sid; "How to Make Television Funnier" *TV Guide* (Nov. 1983): pp. 8-12

Davis, Acton "What I don't Know About Vaudeville," *Variety* I, no. 1 (December 16, 1905): p. 2

Davis, Hartley, "In Vaudeville," *Everybody's Magazine* (13, Aug. 1905): pp. 231-240

"The Decay of Vaudeville," Anonymous, *American Magazine* 69 (April 1910): pp. 840-8

DeLeon, Walter; "The Wow Finish," *Saturday Evening Post*, 197 (Feb 14, 1925): 16ff

Gottlieb, George A.; "Psychology of the American Vaudeville Show from the Managers Point of View," *Current Opinion* 60 (April, 1916); pp 257-258

Hiltbrand, Steve; *People Magazine*, (Feb. 7, 1992)

Howells, William Dean, "On Vaudeville" *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, 106 (April 1903): 811-15

Keith, B.F. "The Vogue of Vaudeville," *National Magazine*, (Nov. 9, 1898); pp. 146-153

Liebman, Max; "TV is Such a Challenge," *Variety*, (July 27, 1949): p.40

ARTICLES, CONTINUED

- Mayerly, Judine. *The Development of the Television Variety Show as a Major Program Genre at the National Broadcasting Company: 1946-1956* (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1983)
- Maschio, Geraldine A. *The Ziegfeld Follies: Form, Content, and Significance of an American Revue*. (Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison)
- Page, Brett; "Writing For Vaudeville," (Springfield Mass.: *The Home Correspondence School*, 1915): pp.134-136
- Plasketes, George M., "The Invisible Artist," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* Vol. 16, No. 1 spring 1988
- Reeves, Harrison Louis, "Is "Vodeveal" Necessary?" *The Moving Picture World*, (Vol.8, No. 14, April 8, 1911) pp. 758-760
- Royle, Edwin Milton, "The Vaudeville Theater" *Scribners Magazine*, (October 1899): pp. 485-495
- "The Sketch Question," *Era*, (Apr. 8, 1911) p. 21 Also under same title: (Aug. 27, 1910, p.16; Nov. 19, 1892; Nov. 26, 1892; p. 16)
- "The Sketch Question Again" *Era*, (May 10, 1890): p. 15
- Spitzer, Marian; "The People of Vaudeville" *Saturday Evening Post* 197 (July 12, 1924): p. 15 ff
- Zehme, Bill; "Live for Fifteen Years, it's 'Saturday Night'!" *Rolling Stone*, (Oct 5, 1989): p.65