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No Pain: No Gain – the provocation of laughter in slapstick comedy

This article explores the relationship between danger and laughter in the work of a number of what might be defined as slapstick or physical comedians. The notion of physical comedians risking life and limb in order to generate laughter from an admiring audience has a long history. The article establishes a model for analysing the provocation of laughter through which examples of slapstick comedy can be analysed. To what extent do we laugh because we understand that this is the response the performer desires? When we laugh at a comedian taking what we perceive to be physical risks, what are we laughing at? Is our laugh mingled with relief when the perceived threat is past? Are we responding with laughter as a pleased response to the performer's skill? Louise Peacock is a lecturer in Drama and Director of Undergraduate Studies at the University of Hull in England. In 2009 her monograph Serious Play – Modern Clown Performance *was published by Intellect.*

The purpose of this article is to explore the nature of laughter provocation through the performance of pain and danger, particularly in performance forms which can be recognised as slapstick comedy. The reason for focussing on this particular sub-genre of the broader area of comedy is that slapstick has a rich and fertile tradition of performers who take physical risks (or what the audience perceive to be physical risks) in order to provoke laughter. In this instance slapstick might usefully be defined as any kind of broad, physical comedy "based around the infliction of physical punishment which is painful only for comic purposes and never truly life-threatening."[1]   The over-arching question to be answered is, therefore, what makes an audience laugh in the performance of pain? This question immediately suggests a chain of lesser questions which will need to be answered: what encourages us to laugh at the performer's pain or risk? What discourages us from laughing? To what extent are the answers to these two questions linked to the established body of theory around the perception and reception of comedy? As the article progresses each of these questions will be explored more fully in order to establish just what it is that makes an audience laugh when we perceive a performer to be running the

risk of or experiencing actual or performed pain. The intention is to posit a model for analysing the performance of pain in a comic context. The model will identify the various judgements made by a viewer of slapstick comedy, suggesting primary and secondary decisions which are made in deciding whether or not to laugh at the performance of pain.

Whilst a consideration of theory in relation to comedy, humour reception and kinds of laughter will be helpful, a detailed consideration of examples of pain in performance is vital. I have chosen a way of working which allows both for my interpretation of the material and for the reader's direct and personal response to the material. As each example of pain in performance is considered I will offer first a description and then an analysis of the elements of the performance. I am aware though that attempts at objective description will, inevitably, be coloured by my subjective response to the performer and the performance. Therefore, I will also provide YouTube links so that the reader may experience the material at first hand. For this reason, my examples are drawn from television and from film. There is of course a rich theatrical tradition of slapstick (in Commedia dell'arte, in 18th and 19th century pantomimes, in circus clowning to name but a few), but the difficulty presented by the ephemerality of live performance does not allow for measuring a shared experience of the presentation of pain. In order to test the usefulness of the model I am suggesting it is necessary that both I and the reader are able to share common source material. The three examples have been chosen because they offer the opportunity to consider very obvious slapstick (*Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em[2]),* slapstick in which narrative context is important (*Liar, Liar[3])* and what might be considered the very limits of slapstick (*Jackass[4]* and *You've Been Framed[5])* within a context of comic genres: the sit-com (*Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em),* comic film (*Liar, Liar),* and two examples of reality comedy performance as exemplified by *Jackass* and *You've been Framed.*

So – what makes us laugh?

In the last decade or so a growth in the academic area which might be defined as Comedy Studies has seen an increase in the currency of the comic theories of relief, incongruity and superiority. It is not my intention to offer detailed explanations of each of these here. Such summaries are readily available elsewhere (see Stott,[6] Critchley,[7] and, for a more independent reworking of the existing theories, Morreall[8]). Rather, the existing theories will be used as a basis for considering what provokes laughter and appreciation in each of the physical sequences analysed. Particular consideration will, however, be paid to Bergson's notions of physical humour which centre on the principle that rigidity in the human body is intrinsically humorous. "Automatism, *inelasticity*, habit that has been contracted and maintained, are clearly the causes why a face makes us laugh."[9] Bergson's notions of what we respond to in relation to potentially humorous incidences involving physical incompetencies and accidents have long been considered a foundation stone when assessing physical comedy. Indeed Wright in *Why is that so Funny* explores Bergson in some detail generously reinterpreting Bergson in the following way "your actions are mechanical in the sense that they are automatic and not in the sense that they are machine-like ...It's the impulse to move that's the vital component in physical comedy and not

the movement itself."[10] However, Bergson's assessment of what it is that we laugh at, for example, in witnessing someone slip on a banana skin is overly simplistic and in a performance context fails to take into account the multiplicity of signals that a viewer instinctively reads in the moments prior to responding.

Types of laughter

In watching comedy laughter can be expressed in a range of ways.   I intend to make use of the definitions suggested by Wright. His terms of *the Recognised Laugh, the Visceral Laugh, the Bizarre Laugh and the Surprise Laugh[11]* are particularly useful, because in defining them, Wright pays attention not to the tonal quality of the laugh but to the nature of the event which has provoked the laughter. Thus the term *Recognised Laugh* is used to describe laughter provoked by typicality, by situations which we recognise. "We laugh because we understand and because we can share that understanding."[12] The opposite of the *Recognised Laugh* is, according to Wright, the *Bizarre Laugh* because it "comes out of nowhere. It defies conventional logic."[13] Both of these can be readily applied to slapstick humour but the *Visceral Laugh* has a particularly close connection to slapstick because it is provoked by "an accident, like a trip, or a near miss... Hits, acts of aggression or violence."[14] Finally *the Surprise Laugh,* as described by Wright can be found more readily in the theatre than in mediatised performance, relying as it does on catching the audience out, often with a scenic device. However it can also be present in combination with the other forms of laughter. Indeed "sometimes we laugh at all four elements at the same time, sometimes individually and sometimes in sequence." [15]

Analysing the Humour Response

Emanating from a psychology perspective, Jennifer Hay[16] offers a sensible model for analysing joke and humour competencies. Her three stage model,

1. Recognition   2. Understanding   3. Appreciation

offered in "The Pragmatics of Humor Support" provides a useful basis for the creation of an expanded model which addresses the competencies required for 'getting' a physical rather than linguistic joke. There is obviously some overlap in the reception of linguistic and physical jokes. The first step in recognising that what is being seen or heard is intended to provoke laughter is common to both. In each case the audience interprets certain signals which cue what follows as humorous. A joke teller can signal the joke verbally (for example, "I know this really good joke"); by laughter; by employing a speaking tone which clearly conveys that they are joking. Similarly a comic performer uses a variety of techniques to establish a comic frame. These might include relying on the audience's foreknowledge of the performer or director's reputation to give an indication of genre before the performance begins. In this way recognition can be established for both linguistic and physical jokes. However, moving beyond the question of recognition, Hay's model is too limited to be applied usefully to slapstick performance involving pain. I therefore suggest the following schema which addresses some of the gaps in Hay's model:

1. Recognition 2. Embodied Understanding 3. Evaluation of Pain 4. Appreciation

As Hay suggests, there is an entailment relationship[17] between the elements. Entailment as used here simply suggests that each step relies on the previous one. Thus, step two cannot occur until step one has been achieved. Recognition has to occur before understanding can happen, and, in her model, once these two steps have occurred, appreciation may or may not follow. In my own suggested model I would argue that there is an entailment relationship between the first three elements. Recognition must occur first (usually through the establishment of a clear comic frame); once this has been established the viewer will go on to make decisions in relation to embodied understanding which will also involve an assessment of the level of performance skill. Following that, the viewer can form a decision about the nature of the pain involved. When we watch a comic performance these judgements occur swiftly, instinctively and without, for the most part, the viewers being aware of the steps they are taking. It remains the case, however, that these instinctive decisions will be made, and the nature of the decisions will determine whether or not we appreciate the physical humour, and to what extent we demonstrate our appreciation through laughter.

Step 1: Recognition

So, in terms of comic performance, recognition relies on the firm establishment of a comic frame. If we witness someone falling over we may or may not find it funny. If we witness a known comic performer falling over in a film which has been advertised as a comedy, there is a much greater chance that we will laugh because clear signals have been given indicating that laughter is the desired response. A key element in the recognition of a comic performance frame occurs in the identification of both genre and performer. All of this requires a certain amount of cultural knowledge in providing a context in so far as the viewer's response to the material will be affected by how much knowledge they have of the director, writer and performers. More specific context and further clues to the recognition of the comic frame can be provided by performance and filming techniques which are strongly associated with comedy. These clues include techniques such as close-ups on facial grimaces, the inclusion of sound-effects to reinforce moments of physical impact and the use of commentary and music. For example, in *Jackass* the performers sometimes offer a commentary on what is happening. The use of music to emphasise comedy has its roots in silent film comedy but is used very effectively in *Liar, Liar*. As the sequence begins with Reede trying to see a solution to his problems the music being played is gentle and sombre in tone. As he bangs his head against the wall it increases in pace. The moment at which he has the idea of beating himself up is emphasised by a glissando and the violence which follows is supported by a pastiche of the kind of music often found in action films. In this way the comic content is supported by non-diegetic sound. These examples are more fully explored later in the article.

Another significant element of the way in which we respond to comic violence is the presence of an onscreen audience whose responses manipulate

our reception. The onscreen witness models a reaction and reinforces the performative nature of what we are seeing. So, an important element of the exchange of pain (or perceived pain) for laughter is the manner in which we are given 'permission' to complete our part of the exchange.

The physical realisation of comic characters also helps to establish the comic frame through a portrayal of 'otherness.' . The quality of 'otherness' in this context means not only a seeming difference in physical ability but an 'otherness' which sets the performed character apart from the average person. This may be indicated through costume which marks the character out as different by not matching societal norms, or by being either too big or too small. Another indication may involve the stance and movement patterns of the character. These may differ from commonly accepted behaviour in a number of ways including speed of movement, rhythm of movement and exaggeration of facial expressions. Vocally, a character may be presented as markedly comic, often with a repeated phrase which enhances character recognition. For example, in *Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em* Crawford employs a high-pitched, hesitant voice for Frank Spencer and there is the repeated phrase of 'oooo Betty!' every time he is shocked by something.

Step 2: Embodied Understanding

In terms of the suggested model, once the comic modality has been recognised and the level of skill has been assessed, the next step is understanding. In Hay's original model, understanding is a single element. The audience either *gets* the joke or it does not (though she does also suggest that they may get the joke but withhold appreciation, particularly in a social context; for example in a home setting a teenager may 'get' a joke with sexual content but may choose not to reveal this through laughter). Responses to physical and visual comedy are more complex, involving what I have termed *embodied understanding*. When audience members view a physical joke, I would suggest that it is likely that they go through an instinctive process of matching their body to the performer's body. Swiftly a judgement is made as to whether their body *could* do what is being done and, following on from that, a judgement is made as to whether they *would* do what is being done. What occurs then is an instinctive attempt (which will be more or less successful from person to person) at physical empathy. Depending on the level of physical empathy achieved, the audience reaches a state of either *identified* embodied understanding or *unidentified* embodied understanding. In the first, the viewers recognise the actions and believe that their own bodies could match them. In the second the viewers recognise the actions as possible for some but believe that their own bodies could not match them. For Clayton, the question is "How do I know the pain of another is genuine or that it is anything like the way in which I experience pain?"[18]

The first part of this question – the issue of the reality of the pain will be dealt with in the next step of my model. It is the second half of the quotation which is of real interest here, raising as it does the notion of matching the experience of another to our own in the moment of viewing. Clayton goes on to

suggest the idea that the performer's body may be in some way 'other' than our own: "rubbery and numb rather than fleshy and sensitive."[19] In the suggested model the viewers' ability to experience embodied understanding is key to influencing the nature of their response to the humour. Over-identification, which might occur when watching a performer fall off a chair and bang their head when the viewer has recently had a similar experience, would be likely to reduce the level of laughter in response to the pain. Similarly under-identification, where the viewer rejects the action as physically impossible or extremely unlikely, is also likely to reduce the laughter response. Between the two lies the optimum level of embodied understanding. Within the recognised comic frame, viewers are able to understand how a human body could carry out the action being performed and can even see how they too might perform all or part of such action. Whether or not the actions suit the situation is a further variable, and the degree of incongruity which is likely to be acceptable will be affected by the nature of the comic frame already established.

In assessing the extent to which our own bodies are capable of doing what the performer is doing we are simultaneously assessing the performer's skills. If the viewers are skilled physical performers they are likely to set the bar much higher before being impressed by the performer. If they have reached a position of identified embodied understanding (both recognising and owning the actions), they are less likely to have the joyous surprise response of less skilled viewers. In assessing skill the viewers will take into account elements such as physical strength, physical flexibility, the ability to control facial expression and other specialised skills. The most obvious example of a specialist skill in the sequences of slapstick considered in this article is Michael Crawford's roller-skating ability, as demonstrated in the sequence described below. He has enough skill to make Frank Spencer appear completely incompetent while remaining in control when carrying out all his own stunts. In such cases admiration and an element of relieved joy contribute to our desire to laugh.

Step 3: Evaluation of Pain

What becomes subsequently important in the third stage of the model is the extent to which the viewers assess the level of pain involved for the performers. Of particular importance at this stage of the model is the viewers' awareness of the duality of performance. As we watch, we are aware that the action is simultaneously real and not real. We see both the performer's body and the character's body and the latter may appear to experience pain without that pain necessarily being felt by the performer. So just as we make empathic judgements about what the body is doing in step two of the model, so in step three we make judgements about the nature of pain depicted in the slapstick sequence. As we watch a slapstick sequence we can simultaneously enjoy the physical outcome while assessing the rehearsal necessary and the precautions that are likely to be in place. We look, for example, for the wires supporting the performer or judge where the crash mats must be just out of frame as the performer makes a spectacular fall. As a result of this process we are able to come to one of three decisions: that real pain must be involved; that there is rehearsed or performed pain involved; that there is no pain involved (this can

also appear as what might be defined as 'near-miss pain' where the anticipation of pain is built up but where it is avoided at the last moment).

Step 4 : Appreciation

The most obvious way of showing appreciation for any kind of joke, linguistic or physical is laughter. Ideally such laughter is a spontaneous reaction; the viewer cannot help but laugh at the antics of the performer. Wright's types of laughter are useful at this point in the model because they help in analysing the range of responses provoked by each of the examples.

Some Case Studies

What remains is to take a number of performances as case studies to test the model's usefulness in providing a framework by which comic performance of pain can be analysed.

Some Mothers Do Ave 'em

The rollerskating sequence considered was first aired in December 1973 as part of Series Two, episode 5. The plot in this episode is concerned with Frank Spencer helping his wife, Betty, to look after two children whose mother is in hospital. As part of their attempts to keep the girls entertained, Frank and Betty take them to a roller-skating rink. The girls do not skate, preferring to watch Frank who is clearly not a very experienced skater.

Description of Frank Spencer sequence[20]

Frank is roller-skating around a rink. He is being watching by his wife and her two nieces. They say how funny he is. He falls over and trips other people over. He joins onto the end of a line of skaters and, without being able to stop himself, he crashes through a pair of double doors and out of the building. He skates in an ungainly way down a sloping path, narrowly avoiding hitting a bollard. He skates down a concrete spiral staircase to get down from a bridge. As he reaches the end of the stairs, he is thrown into the road. He grabs the back rail of a passing London bus and is pulled along behind it. The conductor asks for his fare and he rummages with one hand to try to find some money. The bus turns one way and Spencer spins off the other way. He skates across a crossroads at speed, narrowly avoiding being hit by a car. He skates down the middle of a main road and, to avoid being hit; he skates underneath the body of an articulated lorry. The sequence ends when he crashes through the door of a shop, landing in a baby's cot as other items crash around him.

The first step of the model requires the viewer to recognise that that this is a comic show. For those who viewed the show when it originally ran in the 1970s, the reputation of both the show and the performer would have established this clearly as a comedy, as would the show's title. For the contemporary viewer, however, who comes to this sequence with no prior knowledge of the character of Frank Spencer, there are still some clear indicators of the comic frame. A laughter track is used at appropriate points to reaffirm that

laughter is the desired response. In particular, at the beginning of the sequence, our responses to Spencer's situation are also governed by the presence of an onscreen audience (a term used to describe characters within the comedy who model an audience response for the real audience). Also Crawford's characterisation of Spencer reinforces the comic frame. Spencer's clothing seems a little too tight for him. His physicality is more clumsy and awkward than might be expected from an ordinary person. When he speaks, his voice is very light and squeaky and, perhaps most importantly, his facial expressions are hugely exaggerated. It is likely, therefore, that recognition of the comic frame will occur very rapidly. Crawford's physicality makes it tempting here to turn towards Bergson and his notion that we find humour in the human body when it becomes rigid like a machine. In *Laughter* Bergson states "The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine."[21] There are points in the sequence where Crawford's body appears rigid, his arms flailing like the sails of a windmill. What makes us laugh are the ridiculous shapes Crawford's body makes as he constantly adjusts his posture to stay upright. So, while at times his arms or legs appear rigid, in fact he is showing the utmost flexibility during the skating sequence. The strange shapes his body makes and his facial expressions in response to them provoke laughter because both are outside the norm. In a sense we are responding to a double incongruity: the situation he is in is absurd and the way he reacts to it physically is also absurd.

In terms of assessing Crawford's skill, it is clear that his roller-skating ability is far beyond the usual. He is able through his prowess to make the character appear incompetent. We begin with a level of identified, embodied understanding. We can match our body to the idea of roller-skating and even to the idea of falling. It is highly unlikely that the viewer can imagine him or herself in a similar situation even though they are witnessing such a situation in a fictional frame. We laugh safe in the knowledge that we would never put ourselves in the same situation. However incompetent we are at roller-skating, we would never allow events to escalate in the way that they do for Frank Spencer. We recognise the situation, we understand that in those circumstances it is possible that a body might react in the way Crawford's does, but we are not likely to acknowledge that our own bodies might be placed in such a situation. Ultimately then we are likely to reach a position of unidentified understanding. It may well be that such distance is crucial in giving us the freedom to laugh, given the apparent severity of the risks which Crawford undertakes. If as viewers we recognise the risks being taken and empathise too closely with the potential pain, this may in fact inhibit our laughter.

Firstly, we laugh through a combination of relief and admiration. As the sequence goes on, our perception is that the risks that Crawford takes increase, and thus tension increases as to whether or not he will pull off the stunt safely. As each stage of the sequence is successfully negotiated we laugh, relieved that Crawford is unhurt, and admiring of the physical skill required to escape from the stunt unscathed. Therefore, in the third stage of the model (evaluation of pain) we identify the action as being performed or rehearsed pain. Indeed, most

of the pain could be equally defined as near-miss. There is a constant threat of pain but very little actually occurs. So in the laughter there exists both relief and delight. When he roller-skates down the hill and narrowly escapes smashing into the bollard, we wince at the potential pain and laugh, in relief, at the avoidance of it. In relation to Freudian relief theory, the nature of the pain so narrowly avoided raises the affect-level. Clearly then there is tension relief in our laughter at this point.

Initially as Spencer falls repeatedly we give a laugh of recognition. As the action intensifies, the laughter moves to the visceral. According to Wright, the visceral laugh occurs when the viewer is taken on a journey. At the beginning of such a journey they see that the performer is terrified. They then watch the performer "develop the physical rhythm of terror to a point that [he] looks as if [his] body is out of control."[22] Finally they are able to see the connection between the action and the drama but "recognise that this is preposterous behaviour so...feel free to laugh."[23] The final sequence of Spencer crashing into a baby's cot provokes a surprise laugh because it is an unanticipated climax to the sequence.

Liar, Liar

The next case study provides an example of a fictional character, Fletcher Reede, who inflicts physical pain on himself deliberately. His situation is contextualised by the narrative of the film in which Reede finds himself incapable of lying as a result of a wish made by his young son. Reede consistently lets his son down and, on his birthday, the child wishes that his father could only tell the truth. For the following 24 hours, Reede can only tell the truth, no matter how harmful the truth might be to him. This absurd plot forms part of the context which helps to establish the comic frame. Without it the viewer would be likely to dismiss Reede's actions as those of a madman.

Description of Liar Liar sequence[24]

The sequence opens with Fletcher Reede relieving himself in the men's toilet, asking himself how he is going to get out of the situation he finds himself in. He bangs his head three times on the wall in front of him. The third time hurts. This gives him an idea. He rushes across to the mirror and looks at himself. He then punches himself in the jaw three times. Next he pumps soap onto his hands and rubs it into his eyes. This makes him scream and grimace. As he is screaming another person enters the restroom and watches him. Reede rips his suit jacket and pulls his hair hard. He kicks his leg into the radiator and falls to the floor, groaning. He empties the bin onto his head, rolls across the floor until his head hits the toilet bowl. He lifts the toilet seat and bangs it down onto his head, crushing his face. The spectator looks on in bewilderment. Reede's nose is bleeding. He comes out of the cubicle. The spectator asks him what he is doing. Reede responds with "I'm kicking my ass, do you mind?" He grabs hold of his own tie and uses it to bang himself into the wall. The spectator leaves. Reede throws himself at the wall twice more, landing in a crumpled heap on the floor.

Recognition here relies heavily on Jim Carrey's reputation as a comic performer. Equally the film's publicity firmly established it as a comedy. The film techniques of close-ups on Carrey's face at key moments emphasise the comedy as does Carrey's physical characterisation. The viewer is likely to reach a state of unidentified embodied understanding: while we may be able to empathise with elements of the pain performed by Carrey, we are extremely unlikely to have been in a situation where we have inflicted such pain on ourselves. The character, Reede, chooses to injure himself rather than tell the truth in a way which will damage his career. Clayton's notion of 'other' bodies applies very clearly to Carrey whose body seems to be more rubbery than normal, particularly as he bounces off the wall. It is clear that this is performed pain. Make-up is used to enhance the effects of Carrey's violence but an experienced film-watching audience is not inclined to believe that his nose is really bleeding or that he has really put soap in his eyes. The fictional frame provides a safe distance from which we can laugh at the seeming effects of the pain without really believing Carrey to be in any danger. The combination of unidentified embodied understanding and the knowledge that the pain is performed facilitates laughter. The laughter provoked combines the visceral and the bizarre.

Jackass

The performers in the next example, however, provide the opportunity to assess the extent to which the model can be applied to performances where the danger is real. The performers in *Jackass* perform a series of stunts or pranks which are likely to result in one or more of them experiencing pain. Earlier it was suggested that we laugh whilst we perceive the pain to be performed, and stop laughing when we perceive that the performers have taken a risk they did not set out to take. The *Jackass* performance situation is quite different. The performers court danger and injury. The injuries they suffer cause real pain and on occasions, they show their wounds and bruises to the camera after a stunt. Yet they still seem to be taking these risks for the audience's entertainment, and as the performers become increasingly well-known, their reputation might be said to constitute a frame which signals to us how we are expected to respond. Although the performances here are at the limits of what might be defined as slapstick, comparisons can be drawn between some of their physical sequences and those found in the Keystone Cops films and in the work of Buster Keaton.

Description of Jackass sequence[25]

At the beginning of the sequence two golf carts, are raced down an incline. They drive across an open area of tarmac and deliberately crash head-on into each other. The riders' pained reactions can be heard. The two carts are driven at speed around a mini golf course which has large models of wild animals. The carts are crashed into a number of these models. Then one cart rams into the side of the other. One cart crashes through the fence and drives away from the mini golf course with the large model of a polar bear on its roof. The two carts drive around a real golf course bumping into each other. One cart is knocked over onto its side by the other. At the end of the clip one cart is driven over the raised edge of a bunker where a large pig from the mini golf has been left. The

cart hits the pig and crashes onto its roof then its side. The driver is thrown clear. The passenger lies unconscious in the crumpled wreck of the cart.

Crucial here is the first stage of recognition. As suggested above, *Jackass* now has a reputation for creating stunts which are likely to inflict pain but which are intended to provide comic viewing. For viewers unfamiliar with their work, this intentionality is foregrounded through the performers' laughter and joking behaviour prior to and during the stunt. Their performance style is not a readily recognisable one in so far as what they do is not situated within a sitcom, a comic film or a sketch show. It is equally difficult to define it, but its heavy reliance on physical action and violence which is framed as comic justifies its inclusion here as slapstick. The programme cannot rely on the audience's recognition of the comic frame in the way that an audience will recognise a sit-com or comic film. Indeed this problem of identifying comic intention is precisely why their material is included here. The performers use a variety of techniques in an attempt to make the frame clear to their viewers. They rely heavily on the inclusion of laughter when they are filming, either that of the performers or those who are watching the event live. They sometimes offer commentary either as part of the stunt or direct to camera as soon as the stunt is over. As well, situational understanding of their work can present further difficulties. The viewer may recognise *what* is taking place without being able to identify *why*. In the sequence in which the performers crash a golf cart, the viewer understands what is taking place and may have the beginnings of identified embodied understanding. If they have not driven a golf cart they can probably imagine what it might be like to do so. However, it is likely that the majority of viewers will not be able to identify with the motivation to crash the carts.

Furthermore our empathic ability to imagine the level of pain which could be provoked by the crash together with the knowledge that the pain is real (and to some extent uncontrolled), militates against an appreciative laughter response. On a simple level, the model (1. Recognition 2, Embodied Understanding 3. Evaluation of Pain 4. Appreciation) can be fulfilled as follows. First, the comic frame is recognised; next, the viewer reaches unidentified embodied understanding and then identifies that real pain is involved. At the beginning of this research I would have assumed that such a route through the model would result in the lack of appreciative laughter. Some empirical research needs to be carried out in this area but my tentative conclusion is that viewers in their early twenties who are of a similar age to the performers in this series are impressed by the risks taken and laugh from a combination of relief (that the stunt has worked without apparent serious injury) and admiration. The release of the series initially on MTV suggests that it was aimed at an audience in their late teens or early twenties. As Wright suggests, "People laugh at these things, and the team members laugh at each other, but it's more bravado than comedy that we're looking at here."[26]

You've been Framed

Pain here is often unintentionally self-inflicted and is then framed as comic after the event. The clips are potentially rendered comic by their inclusion

in shows like *You've been Framed*, where certain conventions come into play which establish a comic frame. First, the convention of such shows, though undeclared, is that no one whose clip is being shown has been killed or seriously injured. The show is normally held together by some form of comic commentary, and this, together with the sound of the studio audience's appreciative laughter (a type of onscreen audience), convince the viewer that what they are watching is intended to be funny.

Description of You've Been Framed Sequence[27]

This sequence includes a series of clips which have been rapidly edited together. The sequence begins with a voiceover stating "music and adrenalin junkies it's time for your fix". In the first clip a man runs towards a wooden beam held at chest height by two assistants. A crowd of people watches whilst he runs into it and falls backwards onto the floor. The next clip shows a man trying to do a motorcycle 'wheelie' along the middle of the road. As he begins the action, he loses control of the bike and is dragged a short distance on his bottom before regaining control of the bike. The third clip shows a man swinging on a rope over a river. He launches himself from a high point, swings into a tree and then spins round and round.

Each of these clips is short so an escalation effect is achieved by playing a number of them in swift succession. The host groans audibly at each crisis point which helps to guide the audience response. The first step of the model, recognition, is easily attained. The likelihood of identified, embodied understanding is increased by the fact that the clips show ordinary people. There is a greater chance that the viewer will have been in or witnessed a similar situation. Here it is the very ordinariness of the individuals and the situations which is likely to make the viewer laugh. In terms of assessing the nature of the pain involved and engaging in an empathic response, the viewer knows that this is accidental, real pain. Where the sufferers of pain suffer because of an error made by someone else, we can regard them as innocent victims. When someone swings on a rope into a tree we know that the pain was not intended. In terms of the model this example is recognised as comic only once it has been re-framed though one of the television 'blunder' shows. The viewer is likely to experience a strong degree of embodied understanding. We view an ordinary person slamming into a tree. We match their ordinary bodies to our own. Perhaps we have experienced something similar – almost certainly we will have experienced being bumped into or falling over. We reach a position of identified, embodied understanding, but we do not have to assess skill because we are aware that this was not a performance. When it comes to appreciation, we may laugh or we may not. If we do laugh, it is likely to be a visceral one. It is also possible that the response will be a gasp or a groan. The more strongly we identify with the incident the less likely we are to laugh, particularly if the pain looks to be significant.

Given the nature of the rope swinging incident, pain, if not sought, will always be a possible outcome. The subject must have been aware that they were engaging in a risky activity which might well lead to pain. This affects the degree

to which we are likely to identify with the action. If, for example, we have engaged in the activity ourselves we will have a much swifter response to matching our body with the subject's body. The notion of skill may well feature too. So, as above, the comic frame is provided by the programme; embodied understanding is reached (either identified or unidentified, dependent on our experience level of the activity). We realise that the pain is real, and embodied understanding can resurface at this point as we imagine what that pain would feel like in our own body. If we over-identify at this point the laugh will be killed. What helps us to laugh is the knowledge that any individual engaging in such an activity would have realised from the outset that some risk might be involved. As a consequence, we are less inclined to see them as a victim and more inclined to laugh.

Conclusion

The case studies considered above demonstrate how the suggested model of analysis can be applied to slapstick sequences (whether performed or occurring spontaneously in life). At the outset, the model suggested three elements which might lead to appreciation of such physical comedy. Of these, recognition and evaluation of pain are straightforward to apply. The notion of embodied understanding is more complex, requiring a consideration of the performer's body and our own, which is likely to be highly subjective, coloured as it is by our own experience. The concept of skill cannot be ignored and could, possibly, be a separate step in the model. What has become clear in watching the examples over and over again is the significance of automatic, unchecked movement in creating comedy. When calamity strikes, the instinctive physical reaction is key to whether the viewer will laugh. It is not so much the incident which provokes laughter but the automatic, desperate movements by which the subjects seek to stop themselves from falling. In performance the amount of laughter provoked relates to the skill with which the performer can replicate such desperate natural moments. This is particularly important in the performance of 'near-miss' pain as exemplified by Michael Crawford in *Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em.*

The source of the pain is also a key influencer and this needs to be incorporated in to step 3 of the model (evaluation of pain). It is not simply a question of whether pain is experienced but *how* and *why.* Alongside the elements of 'real pain', performed pain and no pain, we also need to analyse whether the pain is itself 'self-inflicted' or 'other-inflicted'. A subsequent issue is whether the pain is intentional or accidental.

What I set out to do in this article was to test the model which earlier research had suggested to me. Given how important the performance of pain is in comic genres it is crucial to establish a model for analysing how such performances provoke laughter. The intention is not to create a formula by which comedy can be created but to move us towards a more objective way of examining and assessing the creation and intentionality of comic performance.

1 Eric Weitz, *The Cambridge Introduction to Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 57.

2 *Some Mothers Do 'Ave'Em* was a British sitcom starring Michael Crawford as Frank Spencer, a man so incompetent he fails at everything he attempts. The series ran from 1973 – 1978*.

3 *Liar, Liar* was directed by Tom Shadyac and starred Jim Carrey. It is a comedy film which was released in 1997*.

4 *Jackass* began life as a television show on MTV. In 2002 the cast appeared in *Jackass – the Movie.* This was followed by *Jackass Number Two* in 2006. *Jackass 3D* is due for release in October 2010.

5 *You've been Framed* was first aired in 1989 and is still running today. Video clips of amusing accidents are sent in for a cash prize. Each episode then shows a range of clips with a witty commentary from the show's host. The current host is stand-up comedian Harry Hill.

6 Andrew Stott, *Comedy- the New Critical Idiom* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).

7 Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

8 John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1983).

9 Henri Bergson, *Laughter, An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (Mineola, New York: Dover books, 2005), 13.

10 John Wright, *Why is that so Funny?* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2006), 14.

11 Ibid. 5.

12 Ibid. 9.

13 Ibid. 18.

14 Ibid. 13.

15 Ibid. 23.

16 Jennifer Hay, "The Pragmatics of Humour Support," *Humor,* 14:1 (2001), 55 – 82.

17 Ibid. 67.

18 Alex Clayton, *The Body in Hollywood Slapstick, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co, 2007),* 173.

19 Ibid. 173.

20 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lFLpwRMS00g

21 Bergson, *Laughter,* 15.

22 Wright, *Why is that so Funny?* 12.

23 Ibid. 12.

24 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jzv2R3gUhks&feature=related.

25 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=686rZLL06l0: begin watching at 37 seconds.

26 Wright, *Why is that So Funny?* 8.

27 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v2Z5_HwAXNI.