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What is a Stand-Up Special?

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Abstract: The stand-up special is growing cultural significance just as it is maturing and becoming more distinct as an art form. Philosophical treatments of the special are therefore neither frivolous nor redundant. I argue here that such inquiry can be aided by a definitional account of the 'special' and that an essential definition – if one is available – would serve us best. I then offer a candidate definition of this kind and reply to some likely objections to it.

Limitless though they could be, philosophical questions about a particular art form often gravitate toward one of four topics: (a) the extension of the term we use for the form – i.e. the set of works that are properly considered instances of the form, (b) the intensional definition of that term, which tells us how to pick out the members of that set, (c) the form's ontology, or what kinds of things its members are, and (d) the evaluative criteria or standards appropriate to the form. Ontological questions are likely the most interesting philosophically, and evaluative questions the most practical. It may be, though, that extensional and definitional questions are more fundamental. After all, we usually want to know what it is we are talking about before we ask further questions about it.

Some concepts (so to speak) carry their ontology and evaluative criteria with them, so that determining a thing's kind, or determining what makes an instance of that kind good, in effect provides a definition.¹ To ask for a definition of 'number' or 'property' is to ask into their ontology. And some terms, like 'friend', imply that their instances have satisfied certain success conditions. We might say, for instance, that 'a bad friend is no friend at all'.

Art forms, though, aren't like any of these. Art forms can share an ontology with non-art – consider poetry and letters, representational paintings and advertisements – and there can be both good and bad instances of a form. So even if our interests are primarily with ontology and evaluation, we may have reason to independently seek a definition as a first step toward those. And at least some common ground on extension is required for any profitable discussion of definition.

An explicative definition – one that is more informative than the merely stipulative, ostensive, or lexical – may be especially useful in relatively new and emerging art forms.² My first ambition here is to argue that this is the case for the 'stand-up special' (hereafter, 'special'). In that process we'll have to discuss a number of likely objections to making any such attempt. I'll then make a preliminary case for a particular definition and respond to some concerns about it.

I. THE EXTENSION OF 'STAND-UP SPECIAL'

The classical special is immediately recognisable as such. The first thing that comes to mind is likely a film of a comedian delivering what appears to be a single continuous performance to a live audience. I say 'appears' because even very standard cases of specials are typically content-edited and pieced together from multiple performances. There are, however, specials that diverge from this prototypical case in any number of ways. There are specials that interweave additional filmic material such as sketches (Sarah Silverman's 'Jesus is Magic'), interviews (Gary Gulman's 'The Great Depresh') or surrealistic cut-aways (Chelsea Peretti's 'One of the Greats').³ Other specials such as 'The Original Kings of Comedy' feature more than one comedian.⁴ Adam Sandler's '100% Fresh' transparently presents to us a set delivered over a number of different performances, as does Maria Bamford's 'Old Baby' – the latter often does so away from typical stand-up settings and sometimes without an audience.⁵ A special may also diverge from the norm by virtue of the content of its performance. We might reasonably wonder or disagree about whether or not what Andy Kaufman's specials capture is stand-up comedy per se.

Films can also closely resemble specials without being members of the category. First and foremost, not every recording of a stand-up comedy performance is a special. I can't surreptitiously record a comedian's set on my phone and release it as a special. Nor would a comedian's own recording for her own evaluative purposes be a special. Fictional films like 'Funny People' and 'Mr. Saturday Night' prominently feature stand-up sets without being specials.⁶ And documentaries about comedians and comedy ('Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work', 'Why We Laugh: Black Comedians on Black Comedy') don't become specials by virtue of their presentation of actual stand-up sets.⁷

So the set of specials has, in addition to its base cases, both borderline cases and close-but-excluded relatives. We'll do well to keep this in mind when we look for a definition that is satisfied by all and only specials. Any such account will have to avoid both the permissiveness that would obscure our clarity about core instances and the rigidity that would gloss over the difficulty we have in deciding about others.

II. WHY DEFINE 'STAND-UP SPECIAL'?

Just the attempt to define 'special' is likely to meet resistance before we get close to a particular definition. For one thing, the prevalence of intuitively borderline cases may incite pessimism about a successful definitional account. But it is just these borderline cases that make a definitional theory worthwhile – otherwise we could move on to subsequent questions 'just knowing' what a special is.

Also, a rigorous definition may be inappropriate if 'special' refers to a genre rather than an art form. Because the former has more fluid conditions of application, we would be better off identifying prevalent conventions than providing a definition. However, the special is more distinct from other kinds of film than one genre is from another: Notice that genres can be blended (horror-comedies, sci-fi-westerns, etc.). As in a number of the cases I mentioned above, the combination of stand-up with other forms in a film is more jarring than that, and the components remain more distinct. The effect produced is more of a hybrid than a blended work.

Perhaps, though, we've set the burden of proof on the wrong side. There's no need to consider arguments against defining 'special' if there's no affirmative reason to do so in the first place. However, we have at least two reasons to want such a definition, which in their combination become fairly compelling.⁸

First, the special is maturing as an art form. As the examples above indicate, some specials solidify distinct norms and conventions while others explore the bounds of the form and self-reflectively comment on them. There is both a mainstream and an avant-garde. And as an art form, the special is in something like its adolescence. It is old enough to have established classics and a history on which to draw, but young enough for its innovations and rebellions against tradition to be more formative than reflective.⁹

Second, aided by the ascendance of streaming media services – most importantly but not exclusively Netflix – the special is coming into its own as an art form just as its cultural significance is growing.¹⁰ For many of us, a 'water cooler' conversation is now as likely to be about a special as a fiction film, documentary or serial television program. References to lines, bits, observations and arguments from specials increasingly provide the kind of shorthand recognisability that once belonged only to poetry and theater, then to novels, films, etc.

Putting these together, we have an art form that is gaining in both distinctness and significance in an era of unprecedented speed in technological media development.¹¹ Therefore, understanding the special better is valuable because of its own significance, but also because it can provide an excellent pedagogical, experimental and theoretical example of art form development. And if the special is worth considering, it is worth becoming as clear as we can about what it is that we're considering.

III. CONCEPTUAL STRUCTURE

How clear we can become about what it means for something to be a special will depend largely on the special's conceptual structure. On this question we have useful analogues in the well-trodden debates over the definition of 'art'. An essential definition – one that provides individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions without circularity or other forms of triviality – is likely to provide us a maximum of combined simplicity, informativeness and applicability. But not every concept admits of such analysis.

Just as we have institutional and historical definitions of 'art', so too might we define 'special' via reference to the particular cultural practices that surround it or the historical narratives that are true of it.¹² Both of these approaches face a kind of dilemma. On the one hand, we could take the history or practice of specials as undefined and fundamental, but then we end up in a potentially trivialising circularity. Specifically, we won't have the resources to specify beyond mere pointing which history or which practices are the relevant ones. But then if we do articulate which history or which practices are operative, we'll have a set of conditions that should serve as their own – and entirely different – definitional account.

Various anti-essentialist theories favour different conceptual structures. A disjunctive account would provide a set of conditions some combinations of which are sufficient without any one being necessary.¹³ A prototype theory would have us pick out specials via an unspecified similarity to the kind of base-case specials we discussed earlier.¹⁴ Either of these theory-types may turn out to provide the best account of specials, but in the absence of a particular account to consider we should notice for now that a disjunctive account would be more complex and a prototype theory less informative than an essential definition. The former adds complexity by multiplying the paths by which something could be a special. The latter diminishes informativeness by leaving such paths unspecified beyond mere similarity. In between these could be a resemblance-to-paradigm theory, on which a special is anything that has enough of certain properties in common with base-cases.¹⁵ This sort of theory, however, would either need to (a) specify precisely which properties must be common between our base and test cases, but then we'd have an essential definition and could skip the comparison step, (b) allow for a number of combinations of such properties, effectively collapsing the theory into a

disjunctive account, or (c) give only a minimal characterisation of the relevant similarities, and thus provide no more useful information than prototype accounts.

Finally, we may be more skeptical of our prospects for finding any acceptable definition. Perhaps there are no privileged prototypical cases and no relevant similarities between specials beyond a meagre ‘family resemblance’.¹⁶ Or ‘special’ may be – as the name may suggest – an essentially normative concept through which we confer approval or advocate for a particular set of films.

Now it may be that a circular, partial or even skeptical account is the best we can provide. And while it would be a mistake to decide on a conceptual structure prior to determining the right account, because of the aforementioned advantages of an essential definition, we should start there and see if one is available.

IV. TOWARD A DEFINITION

We want to work our way toward a characterisation of specials that distinguishes them from those art forms and media with which they’re most likely to be confused. Let’s consider, then, some of the distinctions between specials and these nearby neighbours, starting with other forms of film.

First and foremost, we want to be able to distinguish the special from a mere audio-visual recording of a stand-up set. While thoroughly teasing out the difference between the two would raise some thorny ontological issues, it is enough for our current purposes to notice that the special, unlike the mere recording, has a distinct identity as an artwork. If there is an artwork in the mere recording, it is only the recorded set itself. The special may also record a set that remains a distinct work, but the special has life of its own as a film, with its own place in an artworld and subject to its own critical standards.

Notice also that specials have names but sets and mere recordings of them typically do not. Naming a recording of a set may in fact be enough to provide it with an identity distinct from what it records. If it isn’t, there are things we could do with the recording (packaging, sharing, selling, etc.) that would suffice for that sort of distinct identity as a work. But I cannot quite so easily create a special from a recording I surreptitiously make from the back of a comedy club. I would at most have a bootleg of the set, not a special. The performer must authorise a special as such. This authorisation requirement is especially significant for the evaluation of specials, which involves criteria distinct from those we would use for either sets or mere recordings of them. It is also a reason why stand-up sets in fictional films cannot – no matter how prominent they are in the film – be specials. Fictional characters cannot authorise anything in the actual world. Fictional characters can at most fictionally, but not actually, do anything – including authorise the use of their work in (actual) specials.

We also have certain cinematic expectations of specials we don't apply to mere recordings of sets. We expect them to be shot, edited, and mixed in ways that do more than just document what happened in the club or theatre. We expect a special to have some distinct cinematographic style. This is not to say that a special couldn't look just like (perhaps because it is created from) a cellphone recording of a stand-up set. But such a special would have to result from a stylistic choice rather than mere technological necessity.

Nelson Goodman's distinction between one-stage and two-stage art forms provides another way of thinking about the significance of cinematography and editing in specials.¹⁷ Printmaking and music are Goodman's prototypical cases of two-stage art forms. Producing a matrix or a score may end the artist's work, but a printer or musician must do something else in order for the work to find its final form. Paintings and sculptures, on the other hand, are complete at whatever moment the artist's work is complete – one stage. Stand-up sets themselves could plausibly be one-stage or two-stage works, depending on their adherence to a prepared routine. That is to say, the more improvisation a set contains, the more likely we are to think of it as a one-stage work. What, then, about the special? Here again we have two possibilities: If the special is a two-stage work, then the director's role is like the musician's and the comic's like the composer's (I suppose this could be a three-stage work depending on the set). If the special is a one-stage work, then the director must instead be an author contributing in her own right.

It seems to me that the director of a special does not stand in relation to that work the way a musician does to a musical work. Had another musician performed a particular piece, it would still be that piece. Had another director directed a special, it would not still be that same special. Two performances of a single comedy set may vary quite a bit in delivery the same way that two performances of a musical piece may differ quite a bit sonically. Two performances of a special – like two performances of a narrative film – are of the same special only if they are very nearly identical. We might instead imagine two directors simultaneously filming two different specials capturing the same set. The result would be two different specials, not two performances or productions of the same special. The necessity of the director's creative work for the identity of the special means that the special must be a one-stage work to which the director is a contributing artist.

So here is where I think we find ourselves: a special is predominantly a recording of a stand-up performance, but not all recordings of stand-up performances are specials. In order to be a special, that recording must be distinct in some ontologically robust sense from the performance it records, must be authorised by the performer in some appropriate way, and must be subject to some minimal cinematic expectations.

Finally, and perhaps most obviously, specials are predominantly recordings of stand-up comedy performances and not of other things. We have the components, then, of a partial definition:

- (i) x is a stand-up special iff x is a distinct, authorised and cinematic recording of a stand-up comedy performance.¹⁸

If it is to be adequately informative, non-circular and non-trivial we will need to replace ‘a stand-up comedy performance or performances’ in definition (i) with a characterisation of such performances. Employing the same strategy we just used, we can move toward such a characterisation by distinguishing stand-up performances from others. This will not, of course, distinguish the special from other presentations of stand-up comedy, including close relatives like comedy albums. If successful, the cinematic considerations in our partial definition carry that burden.

First, stand-up performances are not the same as those we find in sketch comedy or comedic plays. All of these involve storytelling (broadly construed to include the telling of the very short stories we call ‘one-liners’), but stand-up is dominated by the verbal rather than pictorial or demonstrative representation of events. True, comedians will often ‘act out’ certain parts of the stories they tell, but a performance that only or even primarily consisted of this sort of telling wouldn’t be stand-up per se. We expect that stand-up comedians do much more telling than showing.

Second, these verbal performances, as opposed to informative lectures or talks, are successful only when they are funny. There are, of course, many other good-making properties of stand-up performances. We should prefer the performance that is resonant, significant, moving, etc. But no matter what else it is, a stand-up performance that isn’t funny isn’t successful. And while a lecture may be better for being funny, a lecture can be successful without being funny. To be clear, I am not suggesting that a performance must be funny in order to be an instance of stand-up comedy. That would mean that we cannot have bad stand-up comedy. Rather, my claim here is that it is characteristic of stand-up comedy that its performances cannot be good instances without being funny.

Next we need some way of distinguishing the stand-up performance we see Adam Sandler provide in ‘Funny People’ and the one we see him give in ‘100% Fresh’. The former, we should notice first, is done in-character. It isn’t Sandler’s set that we’re seeing but his character’s. What we see is, in fact, not an actual stand-up set so much as the depiction of one. The audience, the club, the performance are all fictional – even if they would or could be actual under only slightly changed circumstances. At the same time, though, we cannot make it a requirement that stand-up must be delivered authentically. Many comedians adopt stage personas that may be very different from themselves in personality, attitudes, beliefs, and affect. But a stage persona is not the same thing as a fictional character.¹⁹ The one is adopted for the sake of performance, the other is performed for the sake of a fiction. It does not matter if the Adam Sandler that we see in ‘100% Fresh’ is at all like the Sandler that his friends and family know. In that film he is an actual comedian

delivering an actual set. Whether comedians are speaking in their own voice or in the voice of a persona, the utterances that we find in specials are actual while the utterances in fictional films or plays about stand-up comedians are fictional.²⁰

We're now in a position – tentative and provisional though it may be – to offer a definition of 'stand-up comedy performance':

(ii) x is a stand-up comedy performance iff x is a performance of actual verbal storytelling that is successful only when funny.

Combining (i) and (ii) leads us to:

(iii) x is a stand up special iff x is a distinct, authorised, and cinematic recording of a performance of actual verbal storytelling that is successful only when funny.

V. SOME OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

In the very beginning of our discussion I suggested that art forms do not conceptually carry requirements that their instances must be successful. We want there to be both good and bad paintings, novels, plays etc. It may seem, though, that the definition in (iii) above has just such a requirement. There are two ways, however, that a definition could entail a success condition. It could imply that the definiendum is properly applied only when certain aims are achieved. This is how we can say things like 'a bad friend is no friend at all.' Here we have a success *requirement*. But the definition in (iii) isn't like that. It doesn't carry a success requirement. Instead it defines 'special' in part by laying out what a successful instance would have to be. When a special isn't funny, it is still a special – in part because its not being funny is sufficient for it not being successful.

Even if it doesn't rule out bad specials, we may have concerns about the necessity of the 'successful only when funny' condition. There are at least two kinds of potential counterexamples. First, a special may serve purposes entirely unrelated to its quality, and might therefore be considered a success. Perhaps even an entirely unfunny special could further the career of its comedian by virtue of the exposure alone. If this seems implausible, consider Aziz Ansari's 'Right Now'.²¹ There are jokes, but it is easy to get the impression that Ansari's primary objective with the special is to resuscitate his image and pivot away from a damaging public accusation. The special may or may not have helped him do this, but I imagine Ansari could count it a success if it did – regardless of whether or not anyone found it funny. Here we should distinguish between something successfully serving some aim and it being a successful instance of its kind. The former does not imply the latter. I might run for president in the hope of getting to travel and meet new people, but without any hope or even thought of winning. Here we could say that my

unsuccessful presidential run successfully served my purposes. It would only be a successful instance of its kind if it made me president. Similarly, if it isn't at all funny then 'Right Now' may successfully serve Ansari's ends without being a successful special.

Hannah Gadsby's 'Nanette' presents us with a more interesting challenge along similar lines.²² 'Nanette' is, among other things, a series of comments on stand-up comedy and specials. It is effective at making those statements which could not have been made as effectively outside of the format of a special. It is funny, but that is not obviously necessary for its success. Were it not funny, it looks like it could still be successful, unfunny and a special, and so a counterexample to (iii). Here we have a few options. We could respond as we did before and deny that it would be successful *as a special* without being funny, but that it serves other purposes. I think this would be a mistake, though, as those purposes are not ulterior to the project of creating the special. They are, in fact, front and centre in the special itself. We might instead say that 'Nanette' is not a special after all, or that we shouldn't assume it to be one too quickly. It is as much a philosophical treatment of stand-up comedy and specials as Duchamp's 'Fountain' is a philosophical treatment of art status. It is closer then to a work of philosophical performance art that uses the form of an actual special in the same way that (perhaps) 'Fountain' is a piece of philosophical performance art that takes the form of an object submitted for consideration as an artwork. I think there is something revealing about 'Nanette' in this claim, but it goes too far. We are no longer defining a common in-practice sense of 'special' when we exclude works like this. The better response is to insist that 'Nanette' would not be successful without being funny, though not in the straightforward way of more common examples. Gadsby's set is successful largely in its ability to make us uncomfortable with our own comic amusement, forcing us to question the relationship between comic and audience. This would not be as forceful if we didn't find it funny. Because it is a special, its success depends on it being funny, only in this case the humour is instrumental to a larger – and not ulterior – goal.

The reader may also be concerned that a number of the adjectives I use in (iii) point to extremely vague predicates, especially 'cinematic' and 'verbal'. We should not expect any antecedent agreement, for instance, on how much cinematic style must be employed or how much telling rather than showing is required for something to count as a special. This is, however, exactly what we should want. We should look to explain rather than explain away reasonable disagreement over borderline cases. On this account, we can agree that these conditions are necessary without agreeing on what it will take to satisfy each one. It is the latter, I believe, that best accounts for our disagreements over individual cases.

The previous objections focused on the necessity of each of the conditions in (iii). We may also worry that they aren't jointly sufficient. Let's consider a potential counterexample to sufficiency that I take to be indicative of many

similar objections. Say a company puts together a corporate training video consisting primarily of one person giving a talk to a small assembled group. The speaker makes a long series of bad, unfunny jokes none of which land with his immediate audience or anyone watching the video. The jokes are so bad that they are distracting from the training that was supposed to be going on, and the messages the company wanted to get to its employees are lost to annoyance and discomfort. This is a distinct, authorised, and cinematic recording of a performance of actual verbal storytelling. And had the speaker been funny, the video would have been successful.

There are at least two available responses to a case like this. First, we should notice that a speech meant to be funny and a stand-up comedy set have very different critical standards. The problem in the current case is that the jokes are so painfully unfunny that they distract from the intended message. Were they just unobtrusively tolerable the speech and video may have served its purpose. So while it may have been a success were the jokes funny, their being funny isn't strictly necessary for success. On the other hand, if the jokes themselves are so foregrounded and constant that success really does depend on their being funny, then I'm not sure that we don't just have a bad attempt at corporate messaging via a special.

Finally, the reader may also worry that 'funny' is left undefined in (iii) when it is both central to the account and perhaps less well understood than the definiendum. Be that as it may, humour has been much more thoroughly theorised and discussed. If you hold some version of the three principal contending theories of humour - the 'superiority', 'incongruity' and 'relief' theories - you can substitute that account for 'funny' without problem. It seems, in fact, that any theory of humour unable to be similarly substituted into (iii) would be lacking. That said, a complete account of these issues would include a theory of humour. For now, I'm confident that a minimal common understanding will suffice.

VI. INTERIM CONCLUSIONS

I have had two distinct ambitions here. If you're convinced that seeking a definitional account of the stand up special is a worthwhile project, we've both spent our time well. If you think the definition I've provided is - given this preliminary argument - on the right track, all the better. In either case, I expect the importance of these issues to rise along with the cultural significance of stand-up specials themselves.²³

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NOTES

¹I have more to say about the ontology of stand-up specials in Boardman 2018, and more about the evaluation of stand-up specials in Boardman 2020.

²Belnap 1993.

³‘Sarah Silverman: Jesus is Magic.’ Liam Lynch. 2005. Black Gold Films; ‘Gary Gulman: The Great Depresh.’ Michael Bonfiglio. 2019. Apatow Productions, et al.; ‘Chelsea Peretti: One of the Greats.’ Lance Bangs. 2014. New Wave Entertainment Television.

⁴‘The Original Kings of Comedy.’ Spike Lee. 2000. 40 Acres & A Mule Filmworks, et al.

⁵‘Adam Sandler: 100% Fresh.’ Steven Brill and Nicholas Goosen. 2018. Irwin Entertainment; ‘Maria Bamford: Old Baby.’ Jessica Yu. 2017. Comedy Dynamics.

⁶‘Funny People.’ Judd Apatow. 2009. Universal Pictures, et al.; ‘Mr. Saturday Night.’ Billy Crystal. 1992. Castle Rock Entertainment, et al.

⁷‘Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work.’ Ricki Stern and Annie Sundberg. 2010. Break Thru Films; ‘Why We Laugh: Black Comedians on Black Comedy.’ Robert Townsend. 2009. Codeblack Entertainment.

⁸Lintott (2017, 2020) for similar claims about philosophical approaches to stand-up comedy in general.

⁹This may be true of stand-up comedy in general as well, at least as we know it today. See Knoedelseder 2009 and Tafoya 2009.

¹⁰Zinoman 2018.

¹¹The various media (networks, digital purchases, DVDs, streaming services) and formats (hour-long, half-hour, showcase,

compilation, etc.) at once produce variations on specials’ conventions and audience expectations and – in what remains invariant among them – shed light on what is essential to the special as a kind. As the special continues to evolve, I expect paying attention to its different forms will only become more valuable. I’m grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

¹²Dickie 1969 and Dickie 1997; Carroll 1993; Levinson 1979.

¹³Gaut 2000; Longworth and Scarantino 2010.

¹⁴Dean 2003.

¹⁵Ziff 1953.

¹⁶Weitz 1956.

¹⁷Goodman 1976. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

¹⁸I use the term ‘cinematic’ here as a poor (but much less cumbersome) stand-in for ‘subject to minimal cinematic expectations’. I do not mean to suggest that a special must actually have any particular aesthetic quality.

¹⁹E.M. Dadlez 2020 makes a similar claim about the asymmetry between comedians’ personas and fictional characters, focusing instead on the differences between audience’s typical perceptions and expectations.

²⁰For a much fuller treatment of this and similar issues, see Rappaport and Quilty-Dunn 2020.

²¹‘Aziz Ansari: Right Now.’ Spike Jonze. 2019. Pulse Films et al.

²²‘Hannah Gadsby: Nanette.’ Jon Olb and Madeline Parry. 2018. Guesswork Television.

²³I’d like to thank Sue Spaid, Rob van Gerwen and two anonymous reviewers for excellent and helpful comments and suggestions.

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