

Openness, Otherness, and Expertise: Uncertainty and Trust in *Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle*

Rob Hawkes

In *'90s Comedian*, a live stand-up show recorded for DVD on 10 March 2006 at the Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff, Stewart Lee pauses during a long and, in many ways, harrowing story about a drunken encounter with Jesus Christ (which involves the inebriated Lee – “at his apparent insistence” – vomiting “into the open mouth of Christ”) to deliver this aside:

Now, right. I've been doing stand-up for seventeen years, OK? And I can sense when there's tension in a room. And I know why it is and I un-, I understand it. Basically there's a performer-audience bond of trust built up. We have worked on that together over the last hour. And, and, and you think, “Yes, there is, Stew, but you've broken that bond of trust. Because we weren't expecting to be made to visualise this image. There was no warning of this, it wasn't flagged up. There was no indication that you would do something like this, especially when you opened with all that light-hearted material about the bombings.” (Lee 2010a, 213; see also Lee 2006)

As Lee highlights, this moment comes after about an hour of stand-up comedy. It also performs an important structural function in the show, relieving the tension that surrounds the telling of the Christ story and the issues it raises of religion, blasphemy and offence. This apparent diversion allows Lee to return to the story after a five-minute interlude and to push it to an even more extreme conclusion, whilst also referring to a promise made earlier in the show that nobody in the supposedly divided audience (split by Lee into “Team A” and “Team F”) would be left behind by the end of the evening. In his book *How I Escaped My Certain Fate*, which includes an annotated transcript of *'90s Comedian*, Lee describes this moment as one that gives the audience “permission to laugh” at the difficult material to come (2010a, 213). This chapter takes Lee's reference to a “performer-audience bond of trust” as considerably more than a throwaway remark or pressure-releasing structural device. Indeed, in what follows, I will argue that Lee's stand-up, focusing on the BBC2 television series *Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle* (2009–2016), raises important questions about uncertainty, authenticity, and trust in contemporary culture. Furthermore, I contend that Lee's work warrants particular attention due to a set of properties – many of which it shares with literary texts and other art forms – that demand, interrogate, challenge and enact trust on a number of levels: formal, thematic, ethical, and political. By making demands on his audiences to trust

in the performance, to accept uncertainty and allow expectations to be challenged and overturned, Lee's work counters reactionary and/or conventional forms of comedy that implicitly or explicitly rely on the exclusion of otherness and offers an alternative based on an aesthetics, an ethics, and a politics of openness.

In recent years, scholars in a diverse range of fields, including history, philosophy, sociology, politics, and economics, have paid increasing attention to the concept of trust. As the political scientist Russell Hardin observed in 2006: "Over the past decade or so trust has become a major worry of many scholars and pundits, very many of whom think trust is in decline" (2006, 1). Similarly, the moral philosopher Onora O'Neill noted in the first of her BBC Reith Lectures on the topic of trust in 2002: "Every day we read of untrustworthy action by politicians and officials, by hospitals and exam boards, by companies and schools. We supposedly face a deepening crisis of trust" (2002a). The historian of trust Geoffrey Hosking cites evidence of declining levels of trust amongst the British public during the latter part of the twentieth century: "Surveys in the UK suggest that, when asked 'Would you say that most people can be trusted?', in 1959, 56 per cent replied 'Yes'; in 1998 the equivalent figure was 30 per cent" (2010, 1). While Hardin and O'Neill are sceptical of the notion of a contemporary "crisis of trust", or the idea that we now live in an "age of distrust" (Hardin 2006, 13), Hosking takes the idea of a crisis seriously, noting that a "far-reaching crisis of trust burst forth in 2007–09, when it was discovered that our major banks were on the brink of disaster, having taken on far too much debt, and that our MPs had been fiddling their expenses to support a lifestyle most of their constituents could only dream of" (2010, 12–13). Nevertheless, all of these scholars agree that trust, in crisis or not, is of critical importance for modern societies. As Hosking puts it:

Trust is crucial because it is the tool we use to face our own future. It affects how we take decisions and how, in order to do so, we assess risk and seek security. In the majority of cases the process is unreflective, but in difficult or unfamiliar situations we carry out that assessment more consciously. When we do so, we discover that life is very complicated and that ascertaining and interpreting all relevant facts is usually impossible. That is why the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann asserts that trust is a device for dealing with a complex reality. (2010, 3)

While trust has been the subject of fierce debate in the fields highlighted, however, it remains a neglected topic both within comedy studies and my own field of literary studies.¹ As

Hosking notes above, trust plays a fundamental role in modern and contemporary life by reducing social complexity and fostering, in Niklas Luhmann's words, a "tolerance of uncertainty" (1979, 27). As Sophie Quirk observes in her book *Why Stand-up Matters*, Lee's "aim is often to create a feeling of uncertainty among the audience as to how they should respond" (2015, 72). In view of this fact, and given that formal, structural and thematic complexity and uncertainty feature significantly in his work, I argue that Stewart Lee's stand-up both demands and continually challenges the audience's trust.

At the most basic level, trust is *only* necessary under circumstances of uncertainty. As O'Neill puts it: "Where we have guarantees or proofs, we don't need to trust. Trust's redundant. We don't need to take it on trust that five eevens is fifty-five, or that we are alive, or that each of us was born of a human mother, or that the sun rose this morning" (2002a). In the face of complex and uncertain social conditions, however, trust becomes a palpable necessity. A key context for thinking about this is modernity. As Marshall Berman observes in his seminal work on this topic: "To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, 'all that is solid melts into air'" (2010, 15). Zygmunt Bauman, in a series of influential books, continues and extends the metaphor of the melting of "all that is solid" in his concept of "liquid modernity". In *Liquid Times*, for example, Bauman speaks of:

the passage from the "solid" to a "liquid" phase of modernity: that is, into a condition in which social forms (structures that limit individual choices, institutions that guard repetitions of routines, patterns of acceptable behaviour) can no longer (and are not expected to) keep their shape for long, because they decompose and melt faster than the time it takes to cast them, and once they are cast for them to set. (2007, 1)

Bauman's subtitle, *Living in an Age of Uncertainty*, is telling here, and it is in the context of a profoundly uncertain set of modern conditions – in which social forms, structures and relations are constantly shifting, unstable and bewilderingly complex – that *trust* takes on a fundamental significance. Hosking highlights the fact that social inequality, which has risen markedly in Britain and the US in recent years, "is closely linked to low levels of generalised social trust" and that this can manifest as distrust of those regarded as "other", since: "It is easier to trust people who are [perceived as] like oneself" (2010, 61). Somewhat paradoxically, then, the very conditions that demand the trust of the individuals living under them also work continually to undermine that trust by preventing social forms from solidifying, by increasing inequality and precarity, and by fostering the distrust of otherness.

The connections between social and political uncertainty and the problematics of trust have come starkly into view in the context of the “post-fact” or “post-truth” politics that brought President Trump to power in the US and which also dominated debates in the UK in the run up to the 2016 referendum on European Union membership. In June 2016 the then Justice Secretary and “Leave” campaigner, Michael Gove, made his now infamous claim that: “people in this country have had enough of experts” (Sky News 2016). Although this idea was widely ridiculed, it was clearly a precisely calculated remark, designed to tap in to what is in many respects a reasonably-felt sense of the powerlessness, confusion and frustration fostered by current social conditions, not least due to the utter dependency of modern individuals on knowledge and information to which they do not, by and large, have direct access. While we simply cannot function in a modern society without placing trust in people we will never meet and in organisations that do or manage things for us that we cannot do or manage ourselves (whether these are banks, supermarkets, newspapers, or government departments), contemporary experience continually reminds us that experts can and do get things wrong (for example, when intelligence services provide famously misleading reports on weapons of mass destruction, or when expert bankers’ mistakes push the global financial system to the brink of collapse). Gove’s remark was made in an interview with Faisal Islam, who listed world leaders and institutions from the Bank of England to the International Monetary Fund who backed the “Remain” campaign and asked: “Why should the public trust you over them?” Gove’s response was: “I’m not asking the public to trust me, I’m asking the public to trust themselves. I’m asking the British public to take back control” (Sky News 2016). Gove’s dismissal of experts, then, involves a powerful invocation of the idea of trust in support of “taking back control”, rejecting elitism, and railing against the profound uncertainty of contemporary life. However, it is worth reflecting on the oddity of the idea of people “trusting themselves”. Trust is usually something that we place in others. It presupposes uncertainty and is inherently risky. As O’Neill points out: “All trust risks disappointment. [...] Trust is needed [...] because life has to be led without guarantees” (2002b). In asking the British public to “trust themselves”, Gove appears to urge voters to hold on to fixed opinions, even in the face of evidence that might contradict or challenge them, and to resist new or opposing ideas (in other words, not to trust at all). I would suggest that there is a link between the idea of an across-the-board distrust of experts, politicians and institutions with acronyms, and the distrust of and refusal of openness and compassion towards those perceived as “other”, such as refugees and EU migrants, which was also associated with the “Leave” campaign.

I want to argue, then, that Stewart Lee's stand-up explores, interrogates and dramatises the questions of trust I have been highlighting here in a number of important ways. *Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle* was first broadcast in the spring of 2009. Highly regarded by critics, *Comedy Vehicle* received BAFTA nominations for each of its first three series and, in 2012, series 2 won the BAFTA for "Best Comedy Programme". The fourth and final series was broadcast in the spring of 2016. *Comedy Vehicle* marked Lee's return to British television after a ten-year hiatus, having previously starred alongside Richard Herring in *Fist of Fun*, a combination of stand-up and sketches which ran for two series in 1995–1996, followed by *This Morning with Richard Not Judy* (1998–1999). Lee went on to co-write and direct the critically-acclaimed musical *Jerry Springer: The Opera*, which, following a successful run at the National Theatre in 2003 and then a move to the West End, became mired in controversy when an organisation called Christian Voice sought to prosecute those involved in the show for blasphemy. As a result, in part, of this experience, Lee frequently explores questions of offence, controversy and context in his stand-up. However, unlike comedians such as Rowan Atkinson, who argued in 2004 in response to UK government plans to outlaw incitement to religious hatred that "the right to offend is far more important than any right not to be offended" (quoted in Hall and Branigan 2004; for further discussion of this claim see Mondal's chapter in this collection), Lee defends political correctness in his act as "an often clumsy, admittedly, negotiation towards a kind of formal linguistic politeness" (Series 1, Episode 3). Furthermore, Lee is openly critical on stage of comedians such as Frankie Boyle and Jimmy Carr, alongside figures from the world of entertainment, such as the former presenters of *Top Gear* Jeremy Clarkson and Richard "The Hamster" Hammond, who are deliberately offensive and/or politically incorrect.

As well as targeting such figures, Lee often ridicules observational stand-up comedy of the kind associated with Michael McIntyre and *Live at the Apollo*. As he puts it in his 2010 live show, *If You Prefer a Milder Comedian, Please Ask for One*: "I haven't noticed anything about your lives. They're not of interest to me" (2010b). It is this aspect of Lee's performances that has led some detractors to regard him as smug, snobbish and condescending, as looking down on popular culture and sneering at anyone in the audience who cannot recognise his work as superior to what he describes as McIntyre's "warm diarrhoea" (2010b). However, Lee's continual references to other comedians throughout both *Comedy Vehicle* and his live shows are also related to another hallmark of his comedy: a persistent tendency to comment self-reflexively on the nature of stand-up and to highlight at the same time as subverting its conventions. In the second series of *Comedy Vehicle*, Lee

offers an anecdote about how he started out as a stand-up. As he “recalls”, he was working as a librarian at the time, but when he handed in his notice in order to embark on a career in comedy the head librarian remarked: “Oh, you never seemed very funny” (Series 2, Episode 4). A second librarian counters this by saying that he is a funny librarian, “it’s just that you have to have seen a lot of other librarians to realise what it is he’s doing” (Series 2, Episode 4). Indeed, Lee frequently pulls his own jokes apart, or draws attention to the bizarrely contrived nature of the stand-up performance itself, based as it is on an individual suddenly offering anecdotes or one-liners to a group of strangers, apropos of nothing. Nevertheless, Lee’s tendency to poke fun at other comedians is also a matter of questioning and critiquing the implied values represented by other acts. For example, in series two of *Comedy Vehicle*, he discusses a well-known BBC panel show:

I used to like *Mock the Week* when I was a bit younger but since I’ve had kids [...] I feel a bit more connected to the world, I feel a bit more squeamish if you like and I find *Mock the Week* a bit cruel now. And I don’t, I don’t like it like I used to, I don’t like it when they make fun of handicapped people or old people or do jokes about poor people or ugly people or disab–, when they mock the weak basically. Mock the strong that’s what I say. Have a bit of ambition . . . it’s what raises us above dogs.
(Series 2, Episode 3)

In this way, Lee persistently makes jokes at the expense of *Mock the Week*, its panellists and its audience, on the grounds of its encouragement of cruel and sneering attitudes towards disadvantaged social groups. Again, in the opening episode of series 4, he describes witnessing a group of drunk lads on a canal towpath, “laughing and cheering as they watched five seagulls peck a fluffy baby duckling to death. And then I realised why *Mock the Week* is so popular” (Series 4, Episode 1). Importantly, there’s a connection to be made between the cruelty of jeering panel shows and the wider ways in which comedy can function to reinforce the attitudes of audiences rather than challenging them and this might be just as true of the observational comedian who tells you things you already seem to know about your electrical appliances as it is of comedy with more reactionary and unpleasant tendencies. Put simply, these forms of comedy merely offer their audiences an illusory sense of certainty. As Lee quips in *Comedy Vehicle* series three: “If you want certainties you have to go and see Roy Chubby Brown, in his new touring show: ‘An Evening of Certainty’”. The advertising strapline: ‘Leave the same as you arrived, only more so’” (Series 3, Episode 4). Lee’s work,

by contrast, refuses – both in terms of its content and its form – to appeal to the apparent certainties about the world that are implied (albeit in very different ways) by acts such as Roy Chubby Brown on the one hand and those in the less overtly offensive mould of Michael McIntyre on the other. This, then, brings me back to the issues of uncertainty and trust I outlined earlier. In asking his audiences to remain open to uncertainty, both in relation to the topics he addresses in his act and the form and structure of the routines themselves, Lee’s work demands that those in the crowd place a form of trust in the performance. Meanwhile Chubby Brown’s imagined “Evening of Certainty” represents the equivalent of asking members of the audience simply to trust themselves.

In *Why Stand-up Matters*, Quirk offers a persuasive argument about the significance and power of stand-up comedy:

Joking is not merely a frivolous pursuit. On an individual level, the nature of one’s sense of humour is considered very important. [...] On a wider scale, sociologists, anthropologists and philosophers have long regarded joking as an important form of social comment and dispute. (2015, 14)

Quirk goes on to cite Mary Douglas’s work on “the subversive power of joking”, which “states that ‘the element of challenge’ is a vital ingredient of every joke; yet, at the same time, a joke can only work if it is ‘permitted’ by its audience” (2015, 15). “If this is true”, Quirk observes, “then with every joke that a comedian makes he is faced with a difficult and potentially dangerous balancing act” (2015, 15). In an important sense, then, all comedy must offer some form of challenge to the expectations of its audience in order to function *as comedy*. Extend the challenge too far, though – or, to put it another way, introduce too much uncertainty into the equation – then the comedy will fail. Nevertheless, as Sharon Lockyer and Lynn Myers’ research into the appeal of stand-up from the audiences’ perspective demonstrates, “expecting the unexpected” is a significant part of the attraction for many audience members (2011, 175). For Lockyer and Myers, this “can be understood in light of the Incongruity Theory of humour and comedy” (2011, 176). As John Morreall explains it: “What makes [...] any situation [...] humorous, according to the Incongruity Theory, is that there is something odd, abnormal or out of place, which we enjoy in some way. In its simplest form, the theory says that humorous amusement is the enjoyment of incongruity” (2009, 68). Presenting a challenge to the expectations of audiences and exploiting the comedic potential of incongruity, then, are amongst the basic building blocks of stand-up.

Lee's work, however, continually pushes against the limitations of the form and repeatedly – and deliberately – risks upsetting the terms of the balancing act. Furthermore, it is my contention that stand-up comedy, especially as practiced by Lee and acts like him, enacts and exemplifies something of the paradoxical nature of trust that we also see on a larger scale in our interactions with the uncertain social conditions of modernity: the performer needs to secure the audience's trust but must work simultaneously and continuously to challenge and undermine the very trust on which the act depends.

I would argue, furthermore, that this is an aspect not just of stand-up comedy but of other art forms too, not least among these being the forms of literature that I examine in my wider research. In his important work on *The Singularity of Literature*, Derek Attridge argues that a defining characteristic of literature is its ability to bring about an encounter with “the other”. For Attridge: “Otherness is that which is, at a given moment, outside the horizon provided by the culture for thinking, understanding, imagining, feeling, perceiving” (2004b, 19). He also emphasises that: “respect for the singularity of the other involves a willingness to have the grounds of one's thinking recast and renewed” (Attridge 2004b, 128). Importantly, this is an effort which demands a degree of trust on the behalf of readers, since: “Responding responsibly to a work of art means attempting to do justice to it as a singular other [...]. It is to trust in the unpredictability of reading, its openness to the future” (Attridge 2004b, 128, 130). Trust, then, is fundamentally bound up with our experience of the literary, especially, in Attridge's terms, when we suspend our expectations and allow ourselves to be challenged and altered by the otherness of the work. I would argue that stand-up can make similar demands on us – requiring audience members to trust in the unpredictability of the performance – and can also involve the experience of otherness, even if this is only encountered momentarily as part of “the element of challenge” within every joke. Furthermore, Attridge argues elsewhere that: “A literary work is not an object or a thesis; literature *happens* (and not only in the texts we call ‘literary’)” (2004a, xii). Literature, then, is not a thing but a unique event or a performance and it can be compared in this sense to the unpredictable and unrepeatable event that is a stand-up comedy show.

Finally, for Attridge, it is the unpredictability of the literary event that “gives literature its ethical force” (2004a, xii) and as he puts it in his conversation with David Bayot and Franciso Guevara:

To use the term *otherness* is [...] implicitly to bring an ethical dimension into the picture, since that which is other *to x* is that which *x* excludes, and such exclusion may

well have ethical consequences. All over the world, injustice is being done as a result of the fear and hate of “the other” [...]. I’m not proposing a direct link between the openness to alterity encouraged by literary works and the exercise of generosity toward other cultures and communities [...], but the two are not entirely unconnected. (Bayot and Guevara 2015, 48–49)

As noted above, comedy that mocks the weak or otherwise panders to the apparent certainties of the audience depends on just such an exclusion of otherness. In the case of stand-up that relies on and reinforces forms of racial, gender, class, and/or ableist prejudice, this exclusion has clear ethical and political consequences. Attridge is surely right to caution against the assumption that encountering “the other” in works of art (including stand-up shows and literary texts), which therefore demand an “openness to alterity” on the part of audiences and readers, automatically or inevitably leads to a spirit or to acts of generosity towards “the other” in wider social and political contexts. Nevertheless, in *Stewart Lee’s Comedy Vehicle* there are numerous instances of routines that both push against the boundaries within which a television stand-up act might be expected to operate and offer powerful arguments against, for example, the anti-immigration rhetoric of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and in favour of embracing otherness and being open to the positive changes that immigration brings. In series three, one such routine starts off as a response to remarks that Paul Nuttall, then UKIP’s deputy leader, made following reports that millions of Bulgarian citizens had expressed a desire to move to Britain. As reported in the *Express*: “Mr Nuttall told Bulgarians that a ‘brain drain’ would be just as bad for Bulgaria as for the UK. ‘You need to ensure that your brightest stay and make your own country economically prosperous instead of coming to the UK to serve tea and coffee,’ he said” (Giannangeli 2013). Lee begins his routine by ridiculing the idea that Paul Nuttall has any concern whatsoever for the economic prosperity of Bulgaria before going on to present a form of anti-immigration rhetoric about foreigners “comin’ over ’ere” that is exaggerated to the point of absurdity. Ten years ago it was the Poles, he points out, and before that it was the Indians and Pakistanis in the 1970s. This goes back and back through time to the Huguenots and the Anglo-Saxons and the “bloody Beaker Folk”, punctuated by parodies of Paul Nuttall’s statement about ensuring, for example, that the brightest and best Beaker Folk stay in the Iberian Peninsula in order to make it economically prosperous. Eventually, the first prehistoric fish to crawl onto the land comes under parodic attack, before Lee gets to the idea that it is not just the country that is “too full”:

Reality. It's too full isn't it? Reality. There's too much stuff everywhere in reality, isn't there? I liked it when there was nothing, remember? Remember when nothing existed at all? There was nothing and it – and it was just an infinite void of nothing and nothing existed. It was brilliant, 'member? 'Member the old nothing – the old times of nothing, 'member? When there was nothing, 'member? Ah, the old nothing days. 'Member when there was nothing, 'member? [Singing] *Oh, oh there's nothing. There's nothing. Oh. 'Member? Oh, 'member? [Singing] Oh there's nothing at all anywhere.* (Series 3, Episode 2)

This continues for about another minute with various different versions of “old nothing times” songs, before concluding:

The old nothing times, remember? When there was nothing – ah, it was brilliant. There was no planets, was there? No. And there was no suns, was there? No. There was no crime. Make of that what you will. You could leave your house unlocked couldn't you? 'Cause it didn't exist. There was nothing and it was bloody brilliant. And now, ah, there was a big bang wasn't there? I don't remember anyone asking me if I wanted a big bang. And now there's all this matter isn't there? Comin' over 'ere and existing. “My name's Paul Nuttall of UKIP and I say we need to ensure the brightest and best particles of energy that are yet to find a physical form stay in an infinite void of nothing instead of somehow coming together and forming the basis of everything that will ever exist”. (Series 3, Episode 2)

The important thing to note here, as well as the valorising of the encounter with otherness that's implied by the whole routine, is the way it works to highlight and ridicule the nostalgia inherent in much anti-immigration sentiment – the idea of a golden age before the immigrants came that we can fantasise about going back to. Tellingly, a poll conducted by YouGov in February 2017 offered powerful evidence that, for a significant number of “Leave” voters in the 2016 referendum, taking “our” country *back* meant precisely a nostalgic desire to go back in time to an age of hanging (which over half of those surveyed supported), pounds and ounces, physical violence against school children and inefficient incandescent light bulbs (Kentish and Walker 2017). Lee's routine, then, both celebrates the way that Britain has

repeatedly accommodated otherness in the form of waves of immigration from the Big Bang to the present and attacks the creepy nostalgia that often accompanies the distrust of the other.

The antagonism with which Lee often appears to regard his audience encapsulates another of the more powerful ways in which questions of trust are enacted in his stand-up. This works alongside the complex self-reflexivity of his performances, which frequently place the audience in an uncomfortable and uncertain position (unsure whether they might find themselves censured for not laughing at the right moment or equally for *laughing* at a joke that's then revealed as cheap and obvious and therefore beneath both performer and audience). One of many examples of this, from the second series of *Comedy Vehicle*, occurs when an audience member conspicuously crosses Lee's line of sight in order to leave the room mid-set: "Ever seen that, a TV record where people walk out? Unbelievable isn't it? This isn't a mistake, this is my act" (Series 2, Episode 4). The same episode is interrupted a second and then a third time by members of the audience leaving, culminating in Lee remarking: "I'm not having the public in to shows again. If only there were some way of eliminating you from the equation" (Series 2, Episode 4). The implication again is that the audience, grown lazy on lowest-common-denominator comedy that simply reinforces what they already know about the world, is neither prepared nor equipped to work hard enough to understand his act. In November 2013, Dominic Cavendish, the *Telegraph's* lead theatre critic, complained of Lee's "contempt for his audience" and concluded that: "If Lee had a shred of interest or insight into the working lives of other people, he'd realise that those who give up an evening at the end of a week to see him deserve his thanks not his toxic scorn" (2013). In the final series of *Comedy Vehicle*, Lee responds to this remark directly, explaining: "I do understand all that and I just did it for a laugh" (Series 4, Episode 1). This comes moments after a comment on intellectual snobbery, which he says he wouldn't want to be accused of again:

unless of course I choose to appear as an intellectual snob on purpose, in order to create a secondary character-driven narrative that runs both in tandem with and in dramatic opposition to the surface-level stand-up. [...] It's an example of the theatrical practice known as "Brechtian alienation". It is – it's an incredibly high-risk performance strategy that very few people seem to appreciate. No one is equipped to review me. (Series 4, Episode 1)

This, of course, is at one and the same time a disavowal of intellectual snobbery through the assertion that the on-stage Stewart Lee is all a performance and an enactment of intellectual snobbery in its very complexity and pretentiousness, its reference to Brecht and its final, contemptuous flourish: “No one is equipped to review me”. The effect of this is to keep shifting the ground beneath the audience, continually problematising the trust that they place in the performer and the performance. As Lee repeatedly offers and withdraws versions of himself which he then reveals as constructs, he also plays with the audience’s credulity at the level of content. At times, he spins out long anecdotes – there’s one about knowing David Cameron at university and another about being school friends with Richard “The Hamster” Hammond – which conclude: “now, that story is not true”. At other times, he’ll continue with a reported conversation even after admitting to its artificiality – he does this, for example, with the fictional librarians – or he’ll keep reminding us of the fabricated nature of the set up to a joke by, for example, starting an anecdote: “Last week [...] I was, um, walking through Heathrow Airport – I wasn’t, this didn’t happen, I made it up” (Series 1, Episode 6). Morreall argues that when we find something funny “we are for the moment not concerned about truth or about consequences” (2009, 72). This is because humour “involves not just practical disengagement but cognitive disengagement. As long as something is funny, we are for the moment not concerned about whether it is real or fictional, true or false” (Morreall 2009, 72). Nevertheless, Quirk asserts that there is “a limit to the falsity that [stand-up] audiences can easily accept” (2015, 41) and she cites Oliver Double’s claim that “truth is a vital concept in most modern stand-up comedy because of the idea that it is ‘authentic’” (Double 2005, 97; quoted in Quirk 2015, 41). Lee’s work, by contrast, repeatedly tests and undermines the audience’s trust and credulity by advertising the inauthenticity of his act. These repeated reminders of the fictionality of the performance – and, therefore, its deliberate constructedness and lack of spontaneity – contribute to the sense of uncertainty and “Brechtian alienation” among the audience which, in turn, encourages a critical awareness of the political and ethical values being proffered and/or attacked.

Perhaps bizarrely, this brings us back to the issue of Michael Gove and the mistrust of experts. The first series of *Comedy Vehicle* from 2009 included what now seems like a remarkably prescient conversation between Stewart Lee and the show’s executive producer Armando Iannucci. This exchange, which appeared not in the show itself but in one of a series of interviews which were made available via the BBC’s red button service and subsequently included as DVD extras, involves Lee describing the television presenter Adrian Chiles as “the person that is most trusted by British people”, because “he’s not like a

know-it-all is he?” To this, Iannucci responds: “He’s a know-a-bit-of-it” and Lee concludes: “I think that’s what people like. I don’t think people like experts. I think they’re suspicious of them now and I think they want someone that looks like they *might* know” (Lee 2009). While this is obviously meant to sound ridiculous, it is of course strikingly similar to what Michael Gove said in 2016 with an apparently straight face. Again, though, it is telling that Lee’s act specifically addresses these questions of trust and expertise, which I argue are also continually being explored beneath the surface. For example, in the most recent series of *Comedy Vehicle*, the question of expertise comes up in a routine that appears to the untrained eye to consist simply of a list of foods on different parts of the body of *Sunday Times* columnist Rod Liddle. “Trust me”, Lee says to the audience, arguing that making a list of foods on a man funny is much harder than it seems. When this is met with scepticism, he retorts: “Who knows the most about stand-up, me or you? Me, right?” (Series 4, Episode 5). This, once again, could support the characterisation of Lee as a condescending intellectual snob who has nothing but contempt for his audience. I regard this, on the contrary, as Lee dramatising and playing with the figure of the expert who has access to a specialised field of knowledge and must appeal for the trust of those who do not. In other words, the fostering of the “performer-audience bond of trust” remains crucially bound up with Lee’s work, despite the constant disruptions and questioning of that bond.

The final example from *Comedy Vehicle* I want to discuss here brings me back again to the way that Lee’s comedy tends to ridicule racism, homophobia and other forms of bigotry. This example comes in the form of what’s become a staple of Lee’s work, the reported conversation with a taxi driver (in this instance a racist one):

In the end I said to him do you know what I’m going to get out here I said. Stop the car and don’t expect a tip. My wife is black. Now, she isn’t black, er, but if she was I’m sure she would have been very annoyed by what that cab driver had to say. Or maybe not, maybe she would have engaged with him and used her intelligence and her personality and her sense of humour to sort of talk him out of his prejudices. I hope so. I hope that’s the kind of woman my imaginary black wife would have been. (Series 3, Episode 4)

There follows a long stare into the camera that begins to indicate that this is not just a routine about mocking a racist taxi driver. Lee then proceeds to “develop” the character of the imaginary black wife:

But my black imaginary wife she... when we first met it was difficult because back then people in the UK were more suspicious of mixed-raced relationships but it's much better now and also it's easy because it, it doesn't, it's not real. I've imagined it so I don't really know what it's like – it's a sort of patronising liberal delusion. (Series 3, Episode 4)

This, then, is yet another instance of Lee seeming to lead the audience one way only to veer off in another direction all together, this time shifting the target of the routine so that it becomes a critique of lazy and simplistic liberal ideas about race, rather than simply lampooning racism. Time and again, Lee's work raises profoundly important questions of trust, whether this is achieved by shifting and changing his comedy persona, revealing it as performance and construct, by stretching and testing the “bond of trust” between audience and comedian, by performing the role of an expert on comedy who knows more about what's funny than anyone else, or by forcing the audience to question their own liberal assumptions about the world. I would like to conclude with a quotation from ‘Music Theatre’, a piece written by Lee in the context of his work on *Jerry Springer: The Opera* and published in *Esquire* magazine in 2004:

Some art exists to ask questions, and to play with expectations. Some people want art to take them to a place they would never have imagined going to in the company of people they would never have imagined meeting. Bob Dylan, Samuel Beckett and Reeves and Mortimer all do this. Other people want art to reconfirm the things they already know, and send them away feeling better about themselves. This is the job of Coldplay, Music Theatre and those kind of Comedy Store/Jongleurs stand-up comedians who invite the audience to think, “Yes, that's exactly what happens whenever I try and open a sachet of tomato sauce too, brilliant!” [...] Great art exists in the spaces between the certainties. (2010a, 317–18, 319)

Recalling Derek Attridge's observations on the singularity of literature, the forms of art Lee celebrates are those that “play with expectations” and, in so doing, foster an openness to alterity in the audience, listener, viewer, or reader. As I have argued here, *Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle* is consistently challenging, often disconcerting, and continually testing of limits of uncertainty, but in order to operate “in the spaces between the certainties” it requires

a considerable investment of trust on the part of the audience in the form of a willingness to be challenged in the first place.

Bibliography

Attridge, Derek. 2004a. *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

---. 2004b. *The Singularity of Literature*. London: Routledge.

Attridge, John, and Rod Rosenquist, ed. 2013. *Incredible Modernism: Literature, Trust and Deception*. Farnham: Ashgate.

Bauman, Zygmunt. 2007. *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bayot, David Jonathan Y., and Franciso Roman Guevara. 2015. *Derek Attridge in Conversation*. Manilla: De La Salle University Publishing House.

Berman, Marshall. 2010. *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. London: Verso.

Cavendish, Dominic. 2013. "Why I walked out of a Stewart Lee gig." *Telegraph*. November 9, 2013.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/comedy/10437964/Why-I-walked-out-of-a-Stewart-Lee-gig.html>.

Double, Oliver. 2005. *Getting the Joke: The Inner Working of Stand-Up Comedy*. London: Methuen.

Giannangeli, Marco. 2013. "Millions of poverty-stricken [sic] Bulgarians want to move to Britain." *Express*. February 10, 2013.

<http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/376733/Millions-of-poverty-stricken-Bulgarians-want-to-move-to-Britain>.

Hall, Sarah, and Tania Branigan. 2004. "Law to safeguard religion is no joke, warns Blackadder." *The Guardian*. December 7, 2004.

<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2004/dec/07/raceandreligion.broadcasting>.

Hardin, Russell. *Trust*. 2006. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hawkes, Rob. 2011 "Trusting in Provence: Financial Crisis in *The Rash Act* and *Henry for Hugh*." In *Ford Madox Ford, France and Provence*, edited by Dominique Lemarchal and Claire Davison-Pégon, 229–42. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

---. 2012. *Ford Madox Ford and the Misfit Moderns: Edwardian Fiction and the First World War*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

- . 2017. "Bogus Modernism: Impersonation, Deception and Trust in Ford Madox Ford and Evelyn Waugh." In *Reconnecting Aestheticism and Modernism: Continuities, Revisions, Speculations*, edited by Bénédicte Coste, Catherine Delyfer and Christine Reynier, 175–86. London: Routledge.
- Hosking, Geoffrey. 2010. *Trust: Money, Markets and Society*. London: Seagull Books.
- Kentish, Ben, and Peter Walker. 2017. "Half of Leave voters want to bring back the death penalty after Brexit." *The Independent*. March 29, 2017.
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/brexit-poll-leave-voters-death-penalty-yougov-results-light-bulbs-a7656791.html>.
- Lee, Stewart. 2006. *90s Comedian*. Go Faster Stripe. DVD.
- . 2009. "Stewart Lee VS Armando Iannucci: Toilet Books". *Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle*. BBC/2entertain. DVD.
- . 2010a. *How I Escaped My Certain Fate: The Life and Deaths of a Stand-Up Comedian*. London: Faber and Faber.
- . 2010b. *If You Prefer a Milder Comedian, Please Ask for One*, Comedy Central. DVD.
- Lockyer, Sharon, and Lynn Myers. 2011. "'It's About Expecting the Unexpected': Live Stand-up Comedy from the Audiences' Perspective." *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 8, no. 2: 165–88.
- Luhmann, Niklas. 1979. *Trust and Power*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.
- Morreall, John. 2009. "Humour and the Conduct of Politics." In *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour*, edited by Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering, 65–80. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- O'Neill, Onora. 2002a. "A Question of Trust – Lecture 1: Spreading Suspicion." *The Reith Lectures*. Aired April 3, 2002. London: BBC Radio 4. Radio broadcast.
- . 2002b. "A Question of Trust – Lecture 2: Trust and Terror." *The Reith Lectures*. Aired April 10, 2002. London: BBC Radio 4. Radio broadcast.
- Quirk, Sophie. 2015. *Why Stand-Up Matters*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Sky News. 2016. "Michael Gove – 'EU: In Or Out?'" *YouTube*, June 3, 2016. Accessed January 26, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t8D8AoC-5i8>.

¹ A notable exception in the field of literary studies is Attridge and Rosenquist (2013). See also Hawkes (2011), Hawkes (2012, 99–136), and Hawkes (2017).