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Book review

Balkin, Sarah and Marc Mierowsky (2024). *Comedy and Controversy: Scripting Public Speech*. Cambridge University Press.

As a space where social hierarchies, hegemonic cultural practices, and power struggles are negotiated, humour encompasses numerous aesthetic forms that vary according to historical and cultural contexts. Sarah Balkin and Marc Mierowsky's book, *Comedy and Controversy: Scripting Public Speech*, approaches stand-up comedy, one such form, not merely as an aesthetic performance, but as a discourse that both shapes and is shaped by public speech. The book focuses on the conflicts, debates, and grey areas that arise when stand-up comedy intersects with public discourse. With this approach, *Comedy and Controversy* transforms stand-up comedy into an effective object of analysis for current cultural debates and humour studies.

The things a society finds humorous reveal which norms it questions, which values it preserves, and which social boundaries it could potentially transgress. Balkin and Mierowsky address the question of what can be said, by whom, and with what intent when the line between public speech and comedy is blurred. In seeking this answer, rather than defining and limiting what is comic, they focus on comedy's place within the network of discursive relationships that exist in the public sphere. They examine comedy, particularly stand-up comedy, through the lenses of historical continuity, digital transformation, and ethical and political responsibility. They focus on moments when jokes become part of social and political discourse and on the questions that arise when the boundary between comedy and public speech becomes blurred. This permeable boundary brings new dimensions to questions about the context of comedy and comedians, putting them back on the agenda. They revisit questions about the comedian's role as a public figure, the interplay of performance, discourse, and media contexts with digitalisation, and the patterns formed by these interactions. Additionally, they explore how comedians have become figures through which social values, political views, and ethical boundaries are negotiated in light of the evolving boundaries between public speech and comedy.

While examining these questions, Balkin and Mierowsky focus on the concepts of persona and comic license. These concepts enable the explanation of social issues represented by comedy and the space in which these representations are produced. In addition to these two fundamental concepts, Balkin and Mierowsky explore the tensions between truth, fiction, and ethics, the discursive strategies employed to conceal the political effects of humour, the public role of the comedian, digitalisation and new media platforms, and the impact of the multi-layered audience formed by digitalisation on the reception of comedy. The work makes a significant contribution to contemporary discussions of humour and public speech, as well as to the comedian’s unique position within these broader cultural and social frameworks. The objective of this study is to delineate the patterns of the relationship between performance, discourse, and media by addressing public speech that shapes the license between the comedian and the audience in the new conditions of the media ecosystem, which has undergone significant changes with the advent of digitalisation. The authors approach humour not as a fixed form of social criticism, but as a dynamic and negotiable field in interaction

with changing public discourse and audiences. Another contribution of the work to contemporary debates is its proposal of a new method for examining the consequences of digitalisation, particularly in the media, for the practice and academic analysis of stand-up comedy. While not representing a radical rupture from existing analytical approaches, this new method incorporates the transformative effect of public discourse into its methodology by focusing on persona and comic license.

Comedy and Controversy consists of four main sections: *Introduction: Comic Performance and Public Speech*, Persona, Comic License, *and Conclusion: Gender Agenda/Banana Palace.* The sections address the relationship between comedy and public speech at multiple levels, thereby establishing the book's methodological integrity.

The first chapter outlines the book's purpose, methodology, and theoretical approach. In this chapter, Balkin and Mierowsky draw our attention to the intent and effects of jokes, inviting us to consider the boundaries of comedy performance in changing media contexts and its reciprocal relationship with public discourse. Balkin and Mierowsky clarify their focus points through the performances of contemporary comedians such as Stewart Lee, Hasan Minhaj, and Hannah Gasby, and the effects their performances create. They focus not "only" on stand-up shows, but particularly on performances that have become topics of discussion on social media, created agendas in the context of wide digital distribution and reception, and have been mediatised. The analysis of performances focuses on the effects of the decontextualising process, whereby comic performances are stripped of their context through media manipulation. It cites Stewart Lee's joke being taken out of context and becoming a Daily Mail talking point as the first instance of the fine line between comedy performance and public discourse being crossed, permanently destabilising their mutual relationship. Lee's analysis of the Daily Mail incident, which centres on the loss of context, is the first comprehensive warning about the changes stand-up comedy's performance will undergo in terms of reception and interpretation, as well as their effects. The examples of Minhaj and Gadsby reveal in detail the impact of the expanding media environment and the loss of context. Minha's inter-genre transitions in his performances, as well as the debate over sincerity versus originality, are cited as examples of the political instrumentalisation of humour in the assessments following Gadsby's speech at the awards ceremony. The loss of context that stand-up performances face in the expanding media environment, the undermining of the license with the audience by digital distribution and reception networks, and the overlapping of the real impact of virtual events that provide material for stand-up performances and public discourse create grey areas. This ambiguity opens the door to Balkin and Mierowsky's original methodological approach and their question about the function of comedy:

> Does stand-up's mass digital exposure equip the audience with a deep understanding of the scientific and political possibilities of the genre and encourage them to embrace experimentalism, or does it, as in the Lee case, become an industrial programming that confines humour to cultural stereotypes, trapping the audience in a narrow perception of comedy devoid of aesthetic diversity? (p. 4).

The second section, Persona, discusses the construction of the comedian's public persona. According to Balkin and Mierowsky, persona is the most effective source of public discourse in stand-up comedy. The ambiguous area between the performer and the persona is constantly negotiated. The work presents the historical development of this negotiation. Beginning with pseudo-identity columnists in the early 18th century, the historical process progresses with the proliferation of examples in stand-up comedy that transform personal style into persona,

opening up the distance between the performer and the persona—freeing it from the "ethical imperative" of the traditional style. Balkin and Mierowsky note that this historical process heralded the contemporary use of stand-up persona in three ways: the first-person perspective; the opportunity to examine the self and society through the distance created; and the formal freedoms that allow for deviation and digression (p. 21). The development of persona in comedy, which began with types, evolves into mixed types and, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, undergoes a complete transformation into the comedian persona. Balkin and Mierowsky examine the evolution of persona through the performances of Lenny Bruce, David Chappelle, and Sarah Silverman. In the first part of the section discussing the comedian's persona in the context of freedom of expression and the limits of comic license, they note that Lenny Bruce's stage persona gained its independence, its ability to use expressions that would not be permitted in everyday speech, through the comic license it established with the audience. However, context reappears here: when it is removed from the context of the comedy performance and the performer's persona, the conditions of the freedom granted by the license disappear. This point leads the reader to another original contribution of the book: How will the distinction between persona and performer survive in an age of private shows, different media environments, and short performances created from excerpts taken from shows, and what will be the conditions of the comic license based on this? Other examples that the chapter invites the reader/audience to reflect on are the questions raised by the distance between persona, the power of representation, and the performer in the shows where David Chappelle and Sarah Silverman represent an identity. In today's world, where identity politics has significantly increased social awareness, performing comedy through the lens of minorities, evaluating the comic persona, rethinking the boundaries of comic license, and understanding how public discourse and policies shape and transform the ideas that form the basis of stand-up comedy is an important area of inquiry.

The *Comic License* section completes the framework established around public discourse, context, and persona by examining the nature and transformation of the relationship between the audience and the comedian. The section, which considers the different layers of comic license, contributes to contemporary discussions of humour by extending comic license beyond the license established between the comedian and the audience in the room where the live performance takes place, and by examining contracts made with audiences across different media platforms. Addressing the license in this way immediately raises another question: Who is the audience with whom the comedian makes the contract? Balkin and Mierowsky, referring to contemporary studies on the audience, start from the premise that the audience is not a passive recipient (Rancière, 2011; Heim, 2016; Sedgman, 2017). This is particularly evident in stand-up comedy, which is a more interactive form of performance. The question of which audience layer determines the nature of the comedian's contract with the audience is also central to contemporary humour debates and the book. Is the contract established by the comedian’s persona and performance context with the live audience, with television or media platform viewers, or with viewers watching clips on social media? (p. 47) The call to consider the consequences of this stratification of the audience and the blurring of the boundaries of comic license is one of the book's original contributions. Comic license, identified with freedom of expression, transforms into a new contract whose boundaries are determined by audience segments. Approaching comic license in this way requires us to reconsider the reception of jokes highlighted in the book's first chapter. Comic license is framed by what the audience can accept and can change over time and from one performance to another, depending on who the audience is and the shared values they hold. The role of the comedian should not be overlooked in this context. Comedians can also build what audiences can share throughout their careers.

Balkin and Mierowsky trace comic licence within the concepts of charged humour and cultural citizenship, as conceptualised by Rebecca Krefting (2014). Another contribution of the study is that it draws attention to this point: "Comic license continues to exist as a valid criterion in understanding the functioning of charged humour in the stand-up performances of comedians with various social identities and the reception of their performances" (p. 38).

Balkin and Mierowsky's work makes a unique methodological contribution to discussions of humour, both through the new method they propose and through their joint examination of comedy's social context and discursive form. The conceptual tools the book offers for proposing a new method, persona, and comic license are noteworthy. The concepts of persona, meticulously elaborated to understand the comedian's role in the public sphere, and comic license, broadly addressed to analyse reactions to comedy, strongly support the claim that comedy is a space for negotiation.

The book draws attention to comedy as a space for negotiation, the role of the comedian, the detachment of comedy from its context, and the new audience segments formed at different levels through digital platform distribution networks. Simultaneously, it offers ways to think about comedy through performance theory, communication philosophy, and political science. The book's structure, built around three main sections, also reveals the ethical and political dimensions of comedy to the reader. Although the study limits its examples to performances streamed on predominantly Anglo-American digital platforms, it points to a rich field of study for discussing and analysing online performances across different geographies and stand-up forms from diverse cultures, using the method proposed in the book. The concept of persona focuses on the representational power of the comedian as a discourse producer in public discourse. The concept of persona enables researchers across disciplines—such as law, communication, and political science—to examine the comedian's responsibility in its various dimensions. Comic license, another fundamental concept addressed in the book, is a powerful tool for explaining the boundaries of humour and the fractures it experiences in relation to other fields, such as politics and ethics. Social reactions to comedy popularised by digital platforms—cancel culture, censorship, online lynching—can be reevaluated along with the circumstances under which comic license may be invalid. Balkin and Mierowsky's demonstration of how digital platforms have expanded comic license is a highly compelling contribution to the study of humour. This contribution provides a highly productive ground for researchers interested in studying the long-term effects of humour on social discourse and its impact on the new public spheres emerging on digital platforms. While Balkin and Mierowsky discuss how digital platforms disseminate and make comedy visible, accessible and propagated and the effects of this visibility, they also raise a new research question for scholars and future studies: how does the structural functioning of digital media—the impact of algorithms, platform policies, interaction, etc.—affect responses to comedy and the boundaries of comic license?

Comedy and Controversy: Scripting Public Speech is a conceptually powerful work that allows us to consider comedy and public speech together. While the book's framework makes numerous original contributions to contemporary humour studies, it also identifies areas for further development. In addition to the new method it offers within the framework of the concepts of persona and comic license, the study provides a different perspective on humour by evaluating comedy not only as a problem of "freedom of expression" but also as a component of public discourse. By analysing comedy not only at the content level but also through the platform on which it is produced, the layered audience, and the forms in which it is shared, a practical framework for understanding the ethical, political, and aesthetic dimensions of comedy is created.

Hande Malgaç
Ankara University, Turkey
handemalgac@gmail.com

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