

Comedians as Stars: The Monty Python Troupe

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Introduction

Comedy has been, and remains, an understudied subject. One reason for this certainly is the fact that comedy is produced in smaller quantities than drama. A second reason might well be that comedy has probably always been seen more banal, lesser in value than drama – after all, while acknowledging comedians’ value as appreciated entertainers, Aristotle nonetheless saw comedy as inferior to tragedy. Thirdly, comedy, and humour in general, are often seen as difficult objects of study on the theoretical level, and indeed a good number of studies dealing with the subject begin with bringing this question to the fore and noting the complexity of the field. At the same time, the subject is, rightfully, seen as important, as comedy can bring important cultural questions to the fore.

The lack of studies of comedy seems to correlate with the study of comedians’ stardom, and it is likely that the same problems have contributed to this. My aim here is to try to highlight some aspects of comedians’ stardom through the comedy troupe Monty Python, using examples from their own works, interview material and public performances. While my intention is to make some points about comedians as stars on a general level, the choice of Monty Python as the subject matter naturally means that some observations apply specifically to them. Thus, we need to start with making some points of the group and their stardom.

Monty Python were, of course, a comedy troupe consisting of five Englishmen, the late Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Eric Idle, Terry Jones and Michael Palin, and an American, Terry Gilliam. They ended up working together after the BBC had decided that it needed something a bit different for their new television channel, BBC2, in order to successfully compete for viewers with the commercial ITV network. The result was the television series *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*, which ran from 1969 to 1974. The group also made films, of which *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975), *Monty Python’s Life of Brian* (1979), and *Meaning of Life* (1983) are best known. They have also produced a number of books and record albums. The group have not been working together as Monty Python for a couple of decades now, partly because of Chapman’s death in 1989, but the individual members remain variably active in various media to this day.

As performers, and indeed stars, the Pythons first build their reputation on television before managing something many television performers only dream of: they became film stars, arguably the most sought-after status in the Hollywood-dominated show business. A second important aspect of the Pythons’, as they became known, stardom is that as *auteurs*, being both writers *and* performers of their material, they stood at what Roy Shuker has poetically called “the pinnacle of a pantheon of performers and their work” (Shuker 2002, pp.115).

A third important aspect of their stardom was, and to an extent remains to be, that they became stars as a group. Of course some of the members are more widely known than others, and in fact in the beginning, some of the group thought John Cleese would be the star of *the Flying Circus*, having appeared on the television screen more often than the others. But it was also Cleese’s opinion that the show would be a group effort. This emphasis on group is in itself an interesting matter, if we consider it in the context of British popular culture in the late 1960s. In fact, I have often thought that in many ways Monty Python similar to the rock bands of the era, an era that saw rock music, as opposed to pop, being played by bands, rather than individual stars backed by anonymous

musicians. Apart from sharing at least a relative anti-Establishment stance, hanging out with the top British rock fraternity, being interviewed repeatedly by rock magazines, the Pythons, for some reason, decided to not ridicule rock culture of the day in their television show. In fact, while just about any other form of popular culture of art were used in the Flying Circus, rock music is virtually absent from the sketches. Finally, whether we believe the late George Harrison, who said that “the spirit of the Beatles moved on to Monty Python” or not, the individual Pythons ended up with a similar ‘tag’ as Harrison did: after the groups break-up, all the members became “ex-Monty Python”.¹

Filed Under ‘Light Entertainment’

As I mentioned above, comedy has probably always had an inferior status to drama. Most comedians are aware of this, and the Pythons certainly were, right from the start of their career. Their television show was placed under the title Light Entertainment, because it was a comedy programme. This is how Terry Gilliam has articulated it, even with a hint of bitterness: “We weren’t doing drama, we were doing comedy, which fell under Light Entertainment, and *light* seemed to be required constantly, so you could see the joke,” also noting, “we wanted it to look like drama, as opposed to entertainment. Drama was serious; that’s where the *real* talents hung out!” (quoted in Morgan 1999, pp. 50, 51.)

I believe that along with *the Flying Circus* constantly sending up the prestigious BBC, the Pythons had a relatively cynical view of both national and international cultural industries, to which the question of comedy’s undervaluing was connected. They took a comical revenge in a lengthy *Flying Circus* sketch titled “*British Show Biz Awards*”. The categories presented are, apart from the best foreign film director category, which serves as a link to an intervening sketch, Light Entertainment, the best [screen] credits and the award for the cast with most awards award, who this year are the cast of the Dirty Vicar Sketch (which is shown and is, of course, a rather banal piece). The satirical take on show business practices is cemented by the people who have been asked to read out the nominees: Sir Alan Waddle, a dead (also fictional, to my knowledge) aristocrat, whose urn is brought out to read the list; David Niven, who “unfortunately cannot be with us”, and has instead sent one of his fridges, “in a typically selfless gesture”. In addition, not only have the people to present the awards, for different reasons, neglected to come, but the winner of the best credits award has not showed up as he is asleep at his home. Not only are the Pythons doing what they often do, satirizing show business’ antics, but at the same time, they comment how comedy is, here, fittingly disguised as ‘light entertainment’, often looked down upon regardless of talent, at least from the perspective of comedians.

Another matter related to this is that once a performer, especially a well known performer, has been labelled as a comedian, it is a label that makes it hard to move into non-comical territories; it marks the star as a comedian. Of the Pythons, Terry Gilliam has most notably tried to leave his Python connection in the past, and has arguably managed to do that to a considerable degree. However, he was the one who never really played a memorable character, and made himself a notable post-Python career as a film *director*. For the rest of the group, the label, or the comedic context was always there, as Eric Idle has observed: “[...] most of the Pythons have been involved in documentaries recently. [...] So, what is this urge by ex-comedians to get out there and examine the world? Are they tired of dressing up as women? Surely not.” (Idle 2005, pp. 2.)

However, it would be untruthful to portray comedians as underdogs of sorts in other contexts. Both as performers, in Monty Python’s case writer-performers, as well as stars, comedians have possibilities that artists of ‘serious’, or non-comical, fields do not possess. For example, the Pythons have claimed that they had problems deciding who is going to play the lead role of King Arthur in *Holy Grail*, because that person will not be able to play several roles in the film. Of popular genres, only in comedy can an actor play several main roles with credibility, apart from the lead role, unless the plot involves an identical twin, a double or something alike.

As theorists of humour will tell you, when a discourse shifts from serious to non-serious, entering “the realm of humour” (Mulkay 1988), anything is possible. This is also true, to a certain extent, of a comedian’s star image, and the ways in which it is articulated. Anyone can be humorous, tell jokes. In the case of stars, “serious”, non-comedy, stars naturally often display a sense of humour. In some situations, such as being guests on a talk show like *Late Night with Conan O’Brien*, stars are expected to share anecdotes with the audience, participate in the host’s joking, and even to have a little laugh at their own expense. But for comedians, it is about *comedy*.

As a performer, a comedian’s most important professional task is to try to be funny, comical, to ridicule, to make people laugh. Whether a comedian succeeds in this is to a considerable extent irrelevant here. What is more important - to us, not the comedian - is that the audiences recognise the comedian’s efforts as comedy. Jerry

Palmer has emphasized this distinction. He speaks of “comedy-in-intention”, as opposed to humour, or merely comical (Palmer 1987). This means comedy, be it a film or a stand-up routine, has generic conventions by which people recognise, or are at least likely to recognise, something as comedy.

In 1998, Monty Python appeared in a tribute show in the US Comedy Arts Festival, in Aspen. The group were reunited for the first time, I believe, for close to a decade. They were all there, the only one absent was the late Graham Chapman. Or was he really absent? It turns out the group had brought his ashes with them! After the urn is carefully placed to the table, with a cardboard cut-out image of Chapman with a pipe in his mouth, the interview goes on, until one the group ‘accidentally’ manages to kick the table, with the urn falling off, ashes spreading to the floor. What follows is frantic sweeping with brooms, vacuum-cleaning, and so on. The audience is of course roaring with laughter. Then after a couple of coughs, the interview continues as nothing special had happened. It is possible to laugh at the group’s antics, macabre as they are, because we know they are comedians. Someone may find it distasteful, but all the same, we know it wasn’t Chapman’s ashes, or anyone else’s (except perhaps a fictional aristocrat’s) and we know this is a comedy act. (Monty Python Live at Aspen, 2001.)

Stars and Outsiders: Comedians as Critics of Themselves?

The Pythons have always emphasized that a comedian is an outsider, and cannot be on anybody’s side. This claim is backed up by the fact that they ridiculed just about every social group, any profession and class of the British society, men and women. They also made fun of comedians, but have they placed themselves at the receiving end of ridicule, and have they mocked themselves, as the Pythons, as stars?

Ellen Bishop has argued in favour of this in her article (Bishop 1990), in which she reads *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* and applies Mikhail Bakhtin’s ideas on the carnival laughter. Bakhtin’s argument was that mediaeval carnival laughter involved everyone in a society. A joker did not exclude her- or himself from the joke; as a part of the world they lived in, the laughter was always directed at themselves as well. Bakhtin claimed that starting from the Renaissance era, and continuing into the following centuries, carnival laughter was lost, and the spirit of it was “reduced” into various types of humour, such as satire, parody, and irony. In this process, the joker became an outsider, a satirist whose laughter became negative, mocking, as the joker positioned him- or herself above the target of the laughter.

Building on this, Bishop argues that Monty Python resurrected, or reinscribed, the carnival spirit in the 20th century, describing the process: “As the grotesque, and ambivalent universal images were recast [...] by subsequent generations, the clown who had at one time been the participant/observer of the carnival world, splits into the joke teller who stands outside the frame or the butt of the joke standing completely inside the frame.” (pp. 53) Bishop also argues that “They critique not only their own culture, its politics and history, but also their own stance as comic critics. However, they are removed from their audiences in ways their predecessors were not.” (pp. 54) I do agree that they are very aware of their stance as comic critics, but I do not agree that they actually critiqued that stance.

By removal Bishop seems to refer ultimately to the fact that unlike mediaeval jokers, the Pythons mainly appear to us on film, on television, and so on. Yet does not the mediated aspect of Monty Python also mean that they are also *not* removed from us, that they are not just on the silver screen, but also *present* to their audiences, or even to those who are not even interested, in various media, increasingly across the globe? In this sense they are present to us in ways their predecessors were not, through their work, repeats, through various media appearances and of course, sellable products.

Even as *the Flying Circus* was first being aired in the early 1970s, the group were releasing record albums. The group have often emphasized just how little the BBC was paying them, so in this sense they were trying to capitalize on the show’s potential popularity. If we look at the titles of these albums, apart from film soundtracks or live performances, a clear similarity is notable: *Another Monty Python Record*, *Monty Python’s Previous Record*, *Monty Python’s Instant Record Collection*, *Monty Python’s Contractual Obligation Album*, and finally, *The Final Rip-off*. Apart from obviously sending up show business’ practices, such as multi-record deals, and having a hint of truth to them as they contain a lot of recycled material from other media, the titles have been ultimately chosen to do the same thing as the tagline to the film *Holy Grail*, “Makes Ben Hur look like an epic”, or a text on the sleeve of a Monty Python Live DVD set (Monty Python Live!, 2001) from a few years back, “You’re too young to have seen... or too old to remember, either way it is new to you”: to sell the product. These examples make use of comedy’s possibilities in marketing itself. In non-comedy, putting down a product one is trying to sell is not

considered to be sensible marketing. The same is true in the case of highlighting the commercial aspect. In the Pythons' comedy these form a central strategy.

Do the Pythons-as-stars allow themselves to be ridiculed? Steve Martin hosted and narrated a 1989 television programme *Parrot Sketch not included: 20 Years of Monty Python*. Martin starts his introduction: "In the late 1960s a comedy force emerged that was so original, so zany, so fabulously original that many people thought the world of entertainment had changed forever." He then proceeds to another, longer, even nonsensical list of adjectives describing this "comedy force", only to conclude with: "But enough about me." What follows after Martin's introduction is a potpourri of sketches from *the Flying Circus*. At the end of the programme, returning on screen, Martin asks, "Where are they [the Pythons] now? Well, they are here in this cabin." He opens the doors of a cabin next to him, and the Pythons have indeed stuffed themselves into the cabin. Martin then immediately closes the doors, adding "sad, isn't it", and walks away. We can hear the Pythons asking Martin to open the door and let viewers see them, as "that is the point of this", but the programme just ends.

Martin's performance as the host not only parodies the conventions of this type of programme where a star is invited to lead a celebration of fellow stars, but it also, by means of comedy, highlights the implication that in such a setting the host would rather be the star of the show himself. If we think about, for example, the Academy Awards, a celebrity who is there to read a list of nominees would probably rather receive an award him- or herself.

In this appearance, which of course celebrates their own career, the Pythons have seemingly allowed themselves to be ridiculed. Because they are comedians, the possibility of marking an anniversary in a comical fashion is possible, in contrast to the options open to a star of a non-comedic field or genre. Importantly, I believe, the person to perform this pseudo-mocking is *also* a star comedian: a comedian making fun of fellow comedians in a scripted tribute programme? This is, like the supposed self-mockery of their products, about the Pythons *reinforcing* their position, their stance as comical critics, and certainly as international comedy stars.

Somehow, the following example seems to capture exceptionally well the notion that even when seemingly making a self-critical, self-undermining comment on their own accomplishments, a comical effect is applied to add up to the success and stardom. In the aforementioned Aspen show, Terry Jones explained how the group tried always to make their sketches as unpredictable as possible, by stopping mid-sketch, avoiding punch lines, and so on. He concludes by mentioning that there is the word "pythonesque" in the Oxford English Dictionary, and that this shows they "failed miserably". Now, if we see how the explanation goes:

Pythonesque: Of, pertaining to, or characteristic of *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, a popular British television comedy series of the 1970s, noted especially for its absurdist or surrealistic humour.

How can we see this as a failure? We can't, and we do not. And neither does Terry Jones, no matter what he says.

Conclusion

In his conference opening plenary, Richard Dyer talked about how star images are always carried in the person of real people. No matter what kind of an image a star has, it is always entwined within the person in some ways. It is of course debatable, as Dyer noted, just how important this matter is from research's point of view, and it depends on the particular problem being researched. Still, the question is intriguing: "I wonder what he, or she, is *really* like?" Writer-performer-comedians such as the Pythons just have to be funny, to an extent. This does not mean we think that they are as 'real people', something which we cannot ultimately reach but know to exist, funny all the time. But because they are comedians, we expect the joker inside to show itself at any moment, such as in the following example.

In a recent interview, the former Deep Purple keyboard player Jon Lord recalled a friendly cricket game between the Pythons and a team of rock musicians. The musicians, Lord included, soon found out the Pythons not only were skilled players, perhaps not surprisingly given the public school / Oxbridge background shared by most of them, but that they also were extremely serious about the game. The opposing team had a problem: Not being an experienced cricket player, George Harrison was literally afraid of the cricket ball, and would merely dodge the ball when it came to his direction. The problem was solved in a typically comic fashion when Michael Palin replaced the ball with an orange. (Jon Lord and the Hoochie Coochie Men, 2004.)

That I concluded with an anecdote should not detract from the argument I made in the introduction: Comedy, and comedy stardom have important cultural significance. Comedians' work not only amuses us by making us laugh at various cultural conventions and social phenomena. It often, Monty Python being a prime example,

reveals cultural and social structures behind such conventions and phenomena, by various means often available to comedy only. The comedic interpretations are not any more ‘truthful’ than a serious interpretation of a same subject, but the different “realm” (to use Mulkay’s term) offers alternative, and certainly fruitful, possibilities to a scholar. Monty Python, as self-proclaimed outsiders, questioned and ‘deconstructed’ various show business conventions, including stardom, but also used these to reinforce their own stardom. This does not mean they ended up at the butt of their own joke, or not even closer to it. The ‘joke’ is, ultimately, on us, and we must study it further.

Notes

- ¹ The analogy of the Pythons as a rock group has been made by others as well. See for example Landy 2005, pp. 28. Landy describes how the Pythons’ American agent Nancy Lewis used the rock group idea in marketing.

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