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**Set-Up and Punchline as Figure and Ground:  
The Craft and Creativity of Stand-up Comedy**

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**Abstract** *Set-ups and punchlines are the basic elements of stand-up comedy bits. Generally speaking, the set-up puts forth a situation or an idea, on which the punchline provides a new, sometimes radically altered, perspective. Ideally, this twist or reversal creates a dialectical relation of tension between the two that cannot be resolved by appeal to either set-up or punchline, but traps thought between them in an ‘epistemological problem’ as comedian Louis CK put it. For comedians, set-ups and punchlines are basic tools, practical and concrete ways to create and organize material. They are also familiar to humor theorists. One of the main theories of humor focuses on incongruity: jokes involve bringing together elements that don’t seem to belong together. However, incongruity by itself is not enough to make something funny; the elements need to be related in a more precise way so as to open up a range of imaginative possibilities between them, enabling reflexive digressions. In this paper, I offer an analysis of how a set-up and punchline relate to each other as a reversible figure-ground pair (in the sense of Roy Wagner). Through exploring the semiotic relations in specific examples of comedy bits I will show how incongruities can be evoked and calibrated, and discuss how the bit may be related further through figure-ground relations to other elements, such as the persona of the comedian, current events, or cultural conventions. The research is based on 20 months of ethnographic field work in Finland, including becoming an amateur comedian myself.*

## **Introduction**

Current stand-up comedy is generally characterised by a lone performer addressing the audience directly, usually performing more or less as him/herself and using original material with the aim of making the audience laugh. As stand-up often gives the impression of improvisation or casual chatting, the audiences may not realise how much offstage work goes into preparing material for the stage. A ‘bit’ (as the jokes are called) needs to be phrased so that it gives the right amount of information at the right time. Basically this is organized through ‘set-ups’ and ‘punchlines’.

Generally speaking, the set-up puts forth a situation or an idea, on which the punchline provides a new, sometimes radically altered, perspective. Ideally, this triggers a reaction of amusement and laughter. As part of my field work in the stand-up comedy scene of Finland, I attended several stand-up comedy courses. All began with the introduction and the explanation of these terms. In the courses we analysed examples, and worked on crafting our own bits through such exercises as coming up with ten punchlines to one set-up. This was staked on the ‘rule of nine’ described by John Vorhouse (1994) in *The Comedian’s Toolbox*: 90 percent of what you write won’t be that good, so with some luck, ten attempts would provide you with one good bit. In another course, our teacher Heikki Multanen asked us to try to come up with examples that would violate the rule, to search for examples of jokes that did not in some way have a set-up and punchline. We couldn’t. Later, I

discussed this with Multanen in an interview. He told me he had done this in many courses over the years and so far, there has been no example. Anything, even a gesture or a one-word joke, only becomes funny in relation to something else. Creating comedic effect hinges on the way things are related. Things are not funny in and of themselves, they become funny through semiotic relations as seen through specific perspectives.

In this paper I will discuss the sorts of semiotic relations that create comedy. While humor theories tend to analyse existing jokes with the aim to generalise from these, comedians are faced with the task of crafting original bits. In my work I aim to bridge the gap between the comedians' expertise and semiotic and humor theories. Stand-up comedy has been analyzed as texts, a form of oral performance, presentation of identity and self, interaction between comedians and audiences, and cultural and social commentary (e.g. Brodie 2014; Colleary 2015; Krefting 2014; Limon 2001; Lindfors 2017; Mintz 1985; Rutter 1997; Seizer 2011). Formal analysis of how jokes are structured has mostly been done in linguistics (see Attardo 2008, for an overview of humor studies in different fields, see Raskin 2008). In this article I will analyse how jokes are structured through considering the set-up and punchline as a reversible figure-ground relation in the sense of anthropologist Roy Wagner. Building on previous work, I suggest that Wagner's (1981, 1986) theories of invention and convention and figure-ground reversals offer a new perspective on comedy (Keisalo 2014, 2015, 2016, 2018). Through exploring the semiotic relations in examples of comedy bits I will show how incongruities can be evoked and adjusted for semiotic purposes, and how the bit may be related through further figure-ground relations to other elements, such as the persona of the comedian, current events, or cultural conventions. Invention and convention, and figure-ground reversals are part of all semiotic action. Looking at how they are patterned can provide a better understanding of comedic as well as non-comedic sign processes.

### **Humor in theory**

In humor theory, humor-as-a-relation is best articulated in the incongruity theory, which asserts that humor is created by bringing together elements that do not belong together. The following quip, attributed to W.C. Fields is often used as an example in joke theory:

Do you believe in clubs for young men? – Only when kindness fails.

The incongruity interrupts the (linear) flow of perceived information and thought, and a resolution is sought by going back to re-evaluate the message and look for other interpretations. The ambiguity of jokes often means that there is no resolution, there are two opposed but possible interpretations – in this case the homonym club – and this recognition of incongruity creates a comic reaction (see also Attardo 2008). William Beeman describes one way of creating humor as presenting first one ostensible frame and then ‘pulling it aside’ to reveal another, which reframes the material (Beeman 2001).

The incongruity theory of humor is the third of classic humor theories, the first two being superiority – humor is a form of social aggression – and release – humor releases psychological tension (for an overview of humor theory, see Critchley 2002). The first two focus on the social and psychological functions of humor. These are subject to the usual critiques of functionalist theories in that although humor may fulfil a certain function, this does not explain the forms humor takes or even why humor and not something else is used. These theories can be further disputed by counter-examples: not all humor is aggressive, and humor may cause tension as well as alleviate it. However, all humor seems to have an element of incongruity: bringing together elements that do not fit, playing with linguistic polysemy, scale, and so on. However, this opens up further questions. Why are certain incongruities funny while others are not? Mary Douglas (1968) wrote about obscenities, abominations, and jokes in her seminal article *The Social Control of Cognition: Some Factors in Joke Perception* to show that recognizing and correctly using humor requires thorough knowledge of the contexts one is operating in. When is throwing excrement just excrement and when is it wit? When is the result of mixing categories a horrendous abomination, a sacred mediation, and when is the result a joke? (see also Keisalo 2014, Siikala 2014). Elliot Oring (2016) has coined the concept of ‘appropriate incongruity’ as the kind that will generate humor within a particular cultural context. However, this leaves us with a somewhat circular definition and many questions. What makes the incongruity appropriate? From what perspective?

Linguistic theories of humor have aimed to provide more precise analyses of incongruity in jokes. One well-known example is the semantic script theory, later revised as ‘the general verbal theory of humor’ (Attardo 2008). The semantic script theory suggests that jokes are based on the opposition of two scripts, understood as sets of ideas about a domain of meaning. The general verbal theory of

humor adds to this by naming further elements such as the target (who or what the joke is aimed at) or vehicle, the form in which the joke is told (e.g. a riddle). Although these theories do not discount the importance of context, an anthropological view of stand-up comedy needs to accommodate for more than what is present in the text (such as the performer's physical presence). Analyses of jokes also tend to assume that jokes-as-texts have definable interpretations, and that people who find the same joke funny will do so for the same reasons. I suggest applying Wagner's ideas if invention and convention and figure-ground reversals can extend humor theory so that it can accommodate more layers of context, as well as different perspectives.

### **Example: A man and his dog**

'What would I be without a dog?' asks Finnish comedian Harri Soinila in his set-up. 'I'd be some crazy guy in a park with a plastic bag full of shit' answers the punchline. This bit has a classic question-and-answer form. The question as the set-up tells the audience the topic is the relations of humans and dogs, more specifically the relation between Soinila and a dog (note: not 'my dog'). The set-up sounds like a rhetorical, even idealistic question, perhaps conjuring up ideas about 'man's best friend' or ways that a dog might help Soinila. *What*, rather than *where*, suggests that this is a question of Soinila's self and identity in some deep way. The set up creates an assumption that in some way Soinila and a dog form a set – the question is what would happen if the dog were removed. This bit is told in a cultural context where dogs are considered as potentially important as pets, service animals, or working alongside humans herding or hunting.

Then comes the punchline: Soinila without a dog would be 'some crazy guy in a park with a plastic bag full of shit.' It answers the question, but in an unexpected way, that is both logical and illogical. It is logical since a person taking a dog to a park might very well end up carrying around excrement in a bag, and illogical since having the dog in the first place is the reason to do so, and it is unlikely that the dog would be erased from the set at that exact moment. The unexpected punchline turns us back on the set-up: the image of Soinila without a dog, but with the plastic baggie, shows the question to be more specific than we might have thought. If the question is somewhat abstract, the answer is overly literal, taking us from the ideal level of relations of humans and dogs to the realities of pet care. The specification that Soinila would be 'some crazy guy' also points out that without a dog, carrying excrement in a bag would be strange. The incongruity between the question

and the answer shows that the question had led thoughts in a certain direction, which can be explained through cultural conventions. The punchline points to these conventions as part of how we interpreted the question. The conventions were thus implicitly evoked as part of the ground of the set-up as figure, but the punchline has the potential to make the audience become aware of these conventions even as they are shown to be beside the point. The incongruity makes us realise our expectations were thwarted as we re-evaluate the question on the grounds of the answer. Metaphorically we stand on this new ground and look back on the set-up as a figure from a new perspective. Of course, to enjoy the joke none of this needs to be considered in a conscious way. However, a semiotic analysis of humor can bring to light dynamics of interpretation, shifting attention and orientation to contexts that operate in all semiotic action by showing how humor hijacks and subverts these processes.

### **Invention, convention, and jokes as figure-ground reversals**

In *The Invention of Culture* (1981), Wagner develops a view of culture as based on the interplay of convention, the established and shared aspects of culture, and invention, the innovative extension of conventions into new contexts. Whereas most genres of performance tend to inhabit a more or less constant area somewhere on the range between the extremes of invention and convention, I suggest that comedic performances are often defined by shifts between convention and invention. In previous work, I showed how the Chapayekas, clowns that represent Judas in the Yaqui Easter ritual combine conventional actions, repeated every year, with invention manifested in improvisation, interrupting the ritual to do something else, and introducing new, often incongruent elements. The latter two were exemplified by a Chapayeka who stopped to play with a yo-yo in the middle of the solemn ceremonies (Keisalo 2014, 2015). This shifting from convention to invention make the comedic performer unpredictable in relation to conventional contexts. The returns to convention relate the inventions to the conventional contexts and gives the comedic performer the potential for efficacy. In the case of the Chapayekas, their unpredictability is a threat to the convention, which ultimately makes it stronger. The inventions revitalise the convention, supporting the continuity of the ritual and, conversely, Yaqui culture. As comedic performers shift their orientation from conventionalising (following the existing model) to differentiating (doing their own thing, departing from existing models) the other participants must shift the way they interpret their actions, to

understand and to be able to react to what is going on. This allows the incongruities to be noticed and recognized as comedy and as potentially funny. (see Keisalo 2016a).

There are several convention-invention dialectics at play in stand-up comedy. The conventions make it recognizable as a genre, and audiences can expect the comedians to make them laugh by presenting them with some unexpected perspective or juxtaposition. Certain comedians push against the conventions of stand-up as a performance genre. For example, in 1979 the late US comedian Andy Kaufmann invited his audience in Carnegie Hall out for milk and cookies – and had buses ready to take them to a cafeteria. All comedians are expected to produce new material – although the rate at which this is done varies. Comedians are also expected to be unique individuals within the category of comedian (see Keisalo 2018). The incongruity of set-up and punchline is also a patterning of convention and invention, used directly to create a comic effect. Generally, the set-up evokes a convention, and the punchline demonstrates a new perspective through invention. The punchline is not necessary an invention in itself. The invention may be in how the two situations are related to each other, as in Soinila's bit about dogs and baggies. Both the set-up and punchline rely on conventions about dogs and humans, but the way they are brought together is incongruent. Invention and convention, then, describe the relatively new, uncommon, or unique aspects of the semiotic product, and the orientation of the participants in their aims and expectations of following and creating cultural models. I will next discuss figures and grounds to address the meanings and referential ties in comedy. I will return to the relation of invention and convention and figure-ground relations at the end of the paper.

Figure-ground theory was first used in gestalt psychology to discuss perception; humans focus on figures against backgrounds. Visually, this can be represented in optical illusions or double pictures, such as the picture that it either a vase or two profiles facing each other, depending on what is taken as the figure and what is the ground. However, figure-ground theory can also be applied to all sorts of figures as objects of thought and their contextual grounds. A pun is the verbal equivalent of a double picture. Later figure-ground theory was picked up by anthropologists working on the concept of context (Duranti & Goodwin 1992). Wagner (1986) has developed this further through discussing figure-ground reversals, showing that as things make sense of each other, they serve as reciprocal figures and grounds to each other. As attention moves, things are foregrounded, rising out of an undifferentiated context and receding back into it. The constant shifting and shuffling of

figures and grounds is not necessarily noticeable, as the focus takes the figures as meaningful, rather than the ground or the relation between the figure and the ground. However, humor is created by abrupt shifts and unconventional figure-ground relations, all of which serves to highlight the reversals and manipulation of the semiotic relations. In this sense a joke is like a magic trick that in the end lays out its secrets. A joke with a well crafted figure-ground reversal will even remain funny or at least interesting after the first time in that the way elements are opposed in a way that doesn't resolve the incongruity, but generates more oppositions, more figure-ground reversals. In a GQ interview, world-renowned US comedian Louis CK says he loves jokes 'that don't answer themselves completely, because you think about them forever.' In these cases the punchline 'doesn't *solve* the joke, doesn't stop it, so the joke keeps going and going and going' creating an 'epistemological problem' that catches thought in a meaningful puzzle. (Corsello 2014).

The way a stand-up comedy bit unfolds illustrates the figure-ground process of meaning. The set-up is presented first. As a semiotic expression presented for the audience it is a figure. As a figure, the set-up refers to its relative grounds, which may vary depending on the individual perspective. Here the comedian needs to be aware of what the audience knows and needs to think of for the bit to work. Comedy usually works best as extremely condensed and economic expression, and often relies on evoking shared contexts rather than spelling them out. 'What would I be without a dog?' is a good example of this. It requires certain ideas of the position of dogs in relation to humans, but is general enough to assume that people everywhere in Finland will understand the idea, and the bit is easily translated into English. The set-up provides the ground for the punchline as it delineates a context within which the joke operates. The punchline is processed as a figure, but the incongruity interrupts this: a successful punchline will both fit the context defined in the set-up and either point to another context or point to something usually overlooked within the context. The incongruity triggers a shift to seeing the setup as a figure again. The punchline as new ground, we are able to reconsider the previous context from a new perspective.

In many cases expressions may be more or less comedic or communication may oscillate between straightforward and ambiguous. As each situation has its own social contexts and semiotic repertoires, producing expressions with perfectly clear and unambiguous meanings is not in any way the default of communication and certainly no less difficult than crafting comedy. However, in a case of straightforward semiosis meant as non-comedic and aimed at reducing ambiguity, the

movement would go from figure to figure, and the previous figures would be absorbed as part of the grounds in a linear process of obviation. For example, in this paper I am trying to build an argument by first delineating the topic, then evoking previous views, and finally through examples suggesting my own analysis. Each of these phases is presented as a new figure, meant to be subsumed into the contextual grounds so that the next thing makes sense<sup>1</sup>.

A joke reverses the linear forward-moving direction of interpretation. The incongruous relation between set-up and punchline creates an abrupt reversal, and the perceiver is jolted into awareness of the perception and its grounds.

### **Example 2: Neo-Nazi boy band**

*If soldiers of Odin were a boy band* is a bit by Jamie MacDonald, a Finnish comedian, originally from Canada. He performs in English. In the past few years, anti-immigration groups calling themselves the 'Soldiers of Odin' (SoDs) were formed in Finland. Among their claimed purposes was to patrol the streets of various cities to 'keep Finns safe' from the newly arrived refugees and other foreigners. Members of these groups had connections to far-right and nationalistic groups and openly racist ideology. They were ridiculed for choosing a name of foreign origin while glorifying 'Finnish' people and culture. Any ability to add to safety or feelings of security on the streets was also questioned, especially as it turned out that some prominent members of the group had been convicted of crimes, including domestic assault.

*If soldiers of Odin were a boy band* is a longer bit than the previous one. It is also a multi-modal performance, featuring movement and music as well as words. The bit culminates in a song that the Soldiers of Odin might sing, if they formed a boy band. MacDonald sets this up by claiming that the SODs have a branding problem, that they're not 'hip with the kids' and this could be solved by

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<sup>1</sup> Likewise the orientation towards invention and convention is stable: I aim to follow the conventional model of anthropological articles by making my references clear, evoking ethnographic evidence, and so on. At the same time articles are expected to provide new knowledge in some form, invention in the form of extending previous theoretical views or bringing evidence in the form of ethnography from one realm to another.

becoming a boy band. The transcript of the performance is taken from the subtitles of a video clip from a performance<sup>2</sup>, with my additions included in parentheses.

The soldiers of Odin, I think they have more like a branding problem

They're not hip with the kids  
Really they're not hip with anybody  
But especially not hip with the kids

But I thought they could probably solve all of this by just becoming a boy band.

It's fine, because they can do their boy band poses. You know, like.

[turns sideways, arms folded]

and then they'd be like.

[crouches down, chin on hand]

and one of them could be like.

[nazi salute]

and they'd be fine.

They can call the band "Take that, immigrant".

MacDonald then notes that he has written a song and offers to sing it. Music is cued.

Alright, here we go.

*Ooh yeah* [dances]

*Now you might say*

*I'm a racist*

[poses]

*but I'm just misunderstood*

*'cos it's the way that you move baby girl*

*that makes me wanna*

*wanna patrol my neighborhood*

[walks along the stage, makes a circling gesture with hand and finger]

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/jamiemacdonaldthecomedian/videos/1906199852753966/>

*I can be your mister right  
I wanna be your right-wing wingman  
don't wanna leave you aloooone-ah  
'cos if anyone ever hurts you babe  
it's gotta be in the privacy of our own home*

[speaks] That's the way I feel about it, I feel about you, it's **domestic**. [emphasis]  
My feelings about you are domestic. [slightly lesser emphasis]

[goes back to own voice] Anyway [cheers, clapping]

This bit features several figure-ground pairs on different scales. The (main) set-up and punchline are presented in the first lines: SoD has a branding problem, they are not 'hip with the kids'. The punchline offers the solution: they could become a boy band. After all, boy bands are an example of a successfully branded product and especially hip with kids, as products go. The main incongruity of Soldiers of Odin vs. Boy Bands, their differences and similarities acts as a ground for further set-ups and punchlines. This bit is an example of having one main figure-ground pair which then makes it possible to create more. Further punchlines, called *tags* can also take the premise further or offer yet another view on it. Examples are the name of the band, 'Take that immigrant', which is an extension of *Take That*, an actual boy band, or the word play of right-wing wingman.

The bit comes across as an effective denouncing of the SoDs, but as reversible, the figure-ground relation also points to the darker aspects of the gender norms of pop culture and how control or possessiveness is presented as a sign of affection. While the bit works as an opposition of 'silly boy bands' and 'violent racist hypocrites', it can also point to similarities of gender relations in these different fields.

*Now you might say I'm a racist  
but I'm just misunderstood  
'cos it's the way that you move baby girl  
that makes me wanna*

*wanna patrol my neighborhood*

A feminist interpretation of these lines would be that the woman (as the implied listener) is expected to both understand and even accept responsibility for the man (as the character singing). The infantilising language ('baby girl') is common in pop music, but using it in this context creates an incongruity that calls attention to the words as figures and grounds to each other. The line, 'the way you move makes me want to patrol the neighborhood' makes the SoDs sound ridiculous. The line, "if anyone ever hurts you babe, it's gotta be in the privacy of our own home" is more chilling. The song ends on taking the word domestic and explores its potential meanings by relating it to domestic violence on the one hand and nationalism on the other. Despite the difference between these uses of domestic the bit also plays on the connection: both uses refer to a bounded unit, and seems to refer to a right to control what happens within these boundaries, in the 'domestic realm'. The associations to violence and control on different levels are a reminder of the darker side of distinguishing between 'domestic' and 'foreign', or private and public realms. The claim of wanting to 'protect women' is compared to wanting to control women and treat them as property. 'The way I feel about you is domestic' is presented as a romantic line on the ground of 'a boy band song'. Conversely, using a phrase like this defines the character of the fictive boy band member a bit further: the line 'The way I feel about you is domestic' is also a ground for considering the SoD/Boy band member as a figure. Through figure-ground reversals, semiotic elements, such as the term *domestic*, gain and give associations, and exchange attributes with other figures/grounds.

This is also an example of a bit that is not wholly ambiguous; MacDonald takes a clearly critical stance. While the general idea of relating violent anti-immigration groups and boy bands is recognisable in other countries as well, the bit refers to an actual phenomenon in the Finnish context, including the SoD's claims of 'protecting women' from refugees on the streets while their members had been convicted of domestic assault. The incongruity of the SoDs and boy bands is undeniable in that it is based on cultural conventions of masculinity, gender relations, and violence, but finding this incongruity funny may require a critical view of at least the SoDs. From a perspective that does see protecting home and country as a man's duty, the bit might not be funny at all, or it might be funny as a spoof of racists and boy bands, but not as a parody of gender roles involving men controlling women. In this sense each audience member brings his/her own grounds

to stand-up comedy performances – and may end up becoming aware of or even reconsidering their ideas and attitudes on the grounds of new perspectives offered by the comedians.

This example also shows how stand-up comedy can benefit from a multimodal performance, which adds another aspect to the figure-ground reversals: a movement between abstract ideas and actual demonstrations. A focus on the functionalist effects of a joke might suggest that MacDonald's bit provides the satisfaction of criticizing hypocritical racists or stereotypical expressions of heteronormative romance, but does not explain how the singing adds to it. Juxtaposing hate groups and boy bands is an evocative invention in itself, and if the song were just mentioned the audience could imagine it. Does the comedian's ability to do what he criticizes enhance the critique by making the details richer? In terms of figures and grounds, performing rather than just describing the song is that much more concrete as a ground. The song as performed is at the same time a real song and an imaginary example of what the songs of an imaginary band called 'Take that, immigrant!' would be like. In Wagner's (1986) model, 'microcosmic figures' are relatively more abstract, and 'macrocosmic grounds' are relatively more concrete. However, the same thing may be either one of these: spoken words may be microcosmic figurations of something existing in the world. Speech may also be abstract thought rendered into something concrete and object-like. Anything that can be thought of is a figure, and anything that is accepted to exist (in some sense) and thus participates in forming the context can be a ground. The band called 'Take that immigrant' only exists in MacDonald's performance, but once it has been presented to the audience, it is a plausible ground, which can take on more meanings as it is placed into relation with further elements.

### **The comedians' craft and example 3: second-hand tattoos**

While humor theory is usually based on the analysis of finished texts and performances, comedians face a situation where they can, in principle, do whatever they want, as long as it is funny. Here having the categories of setup and punchline provides tools for turning observations and experiences into bits. Although stand-up comedy requires creativity and invention in that the comedian is expected to somehow go beyond the conventional, the process of crafting bits often starts with an observation or reaction rather than conjuring jokes out of thin air. I have argued previously that being a stand-up comedian requires becoming aware of and cultivating a comedic

perspective, which both reveals potential material to the comedian, and acts as a frame for this material in performance (Keisalo 2018, 2016c). Again, courses and books offer exercises available to direct attention to or to bring out material. These may include deliberately doing something new, or separating elements from their conventional contexts to see them in new ways, and like ethnographers, comedians often carry notebooks to write down ideas and observations as they occur (see also Keisalo 2016c).

For the final example, I will tell how one of my bits originated. As part of my field work, I started doing comedy myself. This worked better than I had dared to hope, and in the first couple of years as an open mic comedian, since December 2015, I have performed more than 100 times at about 30 different clubs in Finland and Denmark. Almost all of my stage material is the result of discovering an idea while doing something else. This bit is based on the idea of buying and selling second-hand tattoos. The idea came to me when I was looking for a bicycle to use in Aarhus. While the rows of shiny new bicycles in shops attracted me, the expense seemed unjustifiable when there were so many second-hand ones around. I then thought about why I felt so reluctant to buy a new bicycle, when I had just spent an equivalent amount on a tattoo. This led me to think about value, attitudes towards money and spending, as well as what can be bought and sold second-hand, and what if there were second-hand tattoos and a market for them? In developing the bit, I then thought of what possibilities this would open up, what would be the negative (stealing them would be inevitably creepy) and the positive (it's an investment!), how used tattoos might differ from other second-hand wares, and so on. Finally, I used the template of set-ups and punchlines to organize these ideas into jokes. In one of our courses, our teacher Ida Grönlund suggested writing out the story you are telling first in a straightforward way to take care of the necessary set-up and then adding in the punchlines: 'like hanging decorations on the Christmas tree'.

The concepts of set-up and punchline came up often in my field work in discussing and critiquing existing work. "Good concept, but needs more punchlines". It is not uncommon for comedians to identify with being better at either set-ups or punchlines. I find it easier to come up with set-ups, scenarios that lend themselves to becoming material, but finding the right punchline with enough sharpness is more difficult. However, some comedians have called for 'better set-ups' as a way to develop comedy further, to pay attention to what you are making fun of, rather than rushing to the

rewards of laughter the punchline brings. Heikki Multanen noted in an interview that ‘the worst is when the set-up actually offers a new perspective and the punchline brings it back to the status quo’.

## **Conclusions**

Although the basic relation of ‘appropriate incongruity’ at the heart of a comedic expression such as a joke is well established, an exploration of set-ups and punchlines as figures and grounds can offer a new perspective. Figure-ground theory shows how the elements brought into relation in a stand-up comedy bit affect each other. Incongruity theory assumes that elements carry with them meanings and associations of their usual cultural connections. Meanings are further defined, exchanged, or gained through the figure-ground reversals. As a semiotic event, stand-up comedy performance is extremely complex: there are many aspects to consider, from the social, cultural, historical, and political contexts to the particular night at a particular comedy venue, the person and stage-persona of the comedian, to any contingent momentary details, in addition to the text of the joke. Describing all of these would be impossible. However, I suggest that looking at the dialectics of invention and convention and figure-ground relations is a feasible way to understand the dynamics of stand-up comedy. An analysis of how these dynamics unfold shows how it is possible to orchestrate an event where people can expect they will be made to laugh.

In this paper I have used invention and convention to describe orientations regarding established cultural models and new or innovative elements. This orientation can refer, for example, to the relative position of an expression such as a comedy bit, or to the perspective, aims, and expectations from a person’s subject position. Considering the interplay of invention and convention on different levels can provide a way to understand the continuity and change of stand-up comedy as a performance genre or the way a particular comedian develops a stage persona. Analysing comedy bits shows how convention and invention are set up and mutually defined: the examples I have discussed show how juxtaposing different conventions is an invention that can place the conventions into a new perspective. The final example of second-hand tattoos is an invention that is the combination of conventions. The orientation of a comedy bit in terms of invention and convention could enable it as conservative or subversive to convention.

I have used figures and grounds to discuss what the bits are ‘about’ and how the semiotic process of a comedy bit unfolds. The incongruence in the juxtaposition of the conventions in the examples enables the figure ground reversal. The ambiguities, such as how the word domestic can be used, or the idealistic and more mundane aspects of having a dog, both connect and separate the elements in the bit. Being thus related-but-separate allows them to act as figures and grounds to each other, and the reversibility of the figure-ground relation makes it possible to consider each element in light of the other(s), and for the elements to take on each other’s characteristics to the extent that they are related. Both invention and convention and figure-ground relations are needed to analyse semiosis – there is no orientation without some kind of content or subject, and figures, grounds, and their relations are apprehended from cultural subject positions entailing an orientation towards invention and convention – but as these may be aligned in different ways, especially in comic semiosis, it makes sense to separate them for the sake of analysis.

Ambiguity, resolution, and the generative possibilities of an expression are related. As expressions can be more or less straightforward, comedic, ironic, or ambiguous, a given joke can be more or less ambiguous. Humor can be used to make a statement, as the example of Soldiers of Odin as a boy band shows when considered in the context of actual events. When seen in the context of Jamie MacDonald’s whole show, MacDonald’s stage persona and other material confirm that the bit is a critique. These are figure-ground relations that help make sense of the bit as a whole. However, when we consider the inner logic of the bit, the figure-ground relations are about the SoDs and boy bands, and the ambiguity is balanced in a way that can generate more contemplation. The twists or reversals between set-ups and punchlines create a dialectical relation of tension between the two that cannot be resolved by appeal to either set-up or punchline, but traps thought between them in an ‘epistemological problem’ as Louis CK put it. Soinila’s brief bit about the dog points at opposed realms of human-dog relations, and evokes a range of possibility between them<sup>3</sup>. At the same time, it is entirely possible for an audience member to briefly laugh at the vision of Soinila in the park holding his plastic baggy, self-designated as crazy, without pondering the topic further.

I have aimed to provide a glimpse into the inner workings of comedy, but different aspects of stand-up comedy as a semiotic event need to be analysed more thoroughly and in relation to each other. In addition to what happens in performances, there is much that can be learned from how comedians

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<sup>3</sup> This is reminiscent of the sensory and ideological poles of Victor Turner’s (1967) ‘dominant symbol’ that can condense and unite a range of different meanings.

learn to do comedy and prepare their material, how they form, test, and fine-tune the semiotic relations of their bits. While there is an intuitive aspect to creating bits, and performance adds unpredictable elements, it is a conscious process that entails vast amounts of both tacit and articulated knowledge. I suggest that an anthropology of humor that engages with the expertise of comedians has a lot to offer to the study of comedic as well as non-comedic semiosis.

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Link to Jamie MacDonald's *If Soldiers of Odin Were a Boy Band* video:

<https://www.facebook.com/jamiemacdonaldthecomedian/videos/1906199852753966/>