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The Last Man Standing

America’s entire sense of safety remains intact because its citizens believe that, while there are children starving in so-called desperate regions of the world, at least they have the comfort of turning off the television and resuming a normal life. In an effort to live without pretense, those deemed abnormal by society often protest by way of social media. Activists for body positivity, like plus-size yoga teacher Jessamyn Stanley and bearded woman Harnaam Kaur, use their platforms to step out from the shadows of anonymity and present the public with the uncomfortable truth that is the human body. It is clear that though some have made efforts to be inclusive when it comes to gender and societal norms, the idea that a sure sense of normalcy does not exist is unimaginable. Foucault’s essay entitled “Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison” divulges how the harsh carceral system mimics the manipulative outside world, a realm in which stand-up comedy is used as a means of protest.

According to the prison system, inmates are inherently undisciplined and must endure constant surveillance and rehabilitation for the well-being of society. Foucault shares that “…punishment and institutions of discipline…diffused penitentiary techniques into the most innocent disciplines…and [placed] over the slightest illegality…the threat of delinquency” (1493). The author expresses how there must be delinquents in order to have a society successfully controlled by a set of rules. Oftentimes, persons deemed unfit to co-exist with law-abiding citizens are considered threatening or inferior based on complexion, race, or religion.
Still, there is no one man in charge of the world’s affairs; there exists only an endless rotating cycle of mouthpieces who abuse their power. Salvatore Cerrato contends, “there must be a discernible shift in mood… [Correctional administrators] appear less inclined with initiating change and more interested in perpetuating a fragile system of governance” (281). Consequently, the carceral system- that is unmistakably the domain of men- serves to soothe the egos of law officers whose sense of purpose relies solely on the existence of the criminal.

Though some men avoid speaking out against injustice, others adopt the notion that remaining candid in a society reliant on impossible standards of control is the ultimate confirmation of individuality. Tomlin says, “I will tell you one last secret. Sometimes, when I'm happy, I feel just like crying. But when I'm sad, I never feel like laughing. So I think it is better to be happy. You can get two feelings for the price of one” (“The Comedians’ Stand Up History”). Truly, stand-up comedy is the guilty bearing of one’s soul to strangers and the finding of reprieve through the laughter that follows. The public is willing to overdose themselves on fiction, yet are unable to understand that which is sincere. Similarly, there is a sort of unspoken uncomfortableness in laughing alone; thus, a comic may only receive positive reactions from his audience if the majority feels the joke does not hit too close to home.

Issues that are at the forefront of society when a comic performs, like homophobia or gun control, are political. Like the ominous presence of flashing police lights in one’s rearview mirror, matters of importance, too are overlooked until avoiding them is no longer an option. The comic’s resistance of reality- of his treatment in the world- is his motive for collecting the laugher of others. His existence is a testament to an imperfect reality that the masses visit comedy venues to mourn. Although they go through great efforts to believe otherwise, the audience is the true tragedy.
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