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British Vs American Comedy

The Wise Cracker and The Guitar Player

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Chapter 1: What is the Difference and Cause

British versus American humour, neither side is better than the other but there is a massive difference between the both. Looking at different TV shows and films from both cultures it becomes very obvious very soon about how different the two cultures are. Ricky Gervais (2011) stated it's all about upbringing, the fact that Americans are brought up in a lifestyle where everything is so much bigger and that you can be anything with the American dream even the next president. Conversely, British people are told from a young age not to take risks, don't look like a failure, image is everything and it probably won't happen to you. The ideals behind the two are strikingly different British people favor tradition and staying within their comfort zone whereas Americans like to be the every man and hero of the story. They show humour that gets away with everything in the story.

A very good example of this is the TV show The UK Office. The programme originally aired in 2001 and ended in 2003. The series ran for 2 seasons with 6 episodes per season, the show went over some dark tones and themes about childishness, heartbreak, and stupidity, it gave a mockumentary style look into a fictional workplace in Slough. The manager portrays a childish leadership with a workforce who visually don't get anything done and an ineffective workforce. When the programmes ended in early 2003 it portrayed a sad ending with the

main character David Brent begging for his job back. After 2 years of being off the air, the office made a comeback with an entirely new cast. The American adaptations from the first season was almost a carbon copy of the original but why did they do this? Some sources believe that this was done to bring a more British humor to America and trying to integrate the more dark and mundane life of the English workplace into the American dream and bring a contrast to the comedy sense which was dominated by sitcoms such as Friends. That 70s Show and Malcolm in the Middle shows have a main character being a wisecracker culminating at the end of the episode eventually getting one up or getting their own way.

With the office it was different, the main premise about it being mundane and boring but when the show was renewed for a second season the writers saw something in the humor that could be adapted into something more and something more of a hybrid than just a British comedy or a American comedy. Towards the second season the US office started to move away from the UK offices original narrative and more people started tuning into it at this point once the plot started changing towards what Americans like. Looking at the image I have put below it shows you that the UK office (on the top) is similar but still a lot darker, whereas the US Office is a lot brighter with a wider showing you that is not the British workforce but it's more of a family picture. A pivotal point in the writing was when they stopped writing it with an American focus and kept some British parts in there. The significant difference was they didn't want the manager to be a wise cracker Everman, they wanted Michael Scott to be a David Brent not in the way of being a loser but in the way of being emotional. They developed real problems and that is where the best and most interesting type of comedy is when a character is the hero but also a loser that's the sweet spot.

I think we need to ask the question why are both cultures and forms of comedy so different. Breaking down how they're so different is by comparing the average British sitcom and the average American sitcom and they really ask some very interesting differences one of the biggest is in how almost all British comedies ends in disaster, an example of this is Blackadder. Blackadder is one of the most popular British comedies ever made, every single episode of both of those shows without exception ends in total disaster. The protagonist will have a task he will try to complete that task and just when all seems well everything goes horribly wrong and it ends with quite frankly an unhappy ending. In one episode of Blackadder he has to rat out a German spy in the field hospital and all seems well, in the end, he's caught a spy and she's off to be shot by firing squad without a trial except just at the last moment it's revealed that there was no spy it was all just a misunderstanding and Blackadder just sent an innocent nurse off to be executed. The final moments are of him learning that alongside his fellow officer who hates him they both dash off to tell the commander which leaves us all to imagine what dire consequences Blackadder is going to face. The very last episode of Blackadder ends with all the characters going over the top of a

World War one trench facing almost certain death. This creation of horrific historical events of the War does demonstrate a sad and depressing historical fact.



But when you look to the other side of the Atlantic you do see more hopeful shows.

Commonly, for American sitcoms to end happily there needs to be a great emotional catharsis, not so much to leave the audience laughing in tears like the British do but rather more inclined to leave the audience with actual tears. An example is the American office Michael and Dwight who are two characters with a very bitter hate-filled relationship, except when Michael leaves the show he leaves Dwight with a letter of recommendation and this happens *"to whom it may concern, the dictionary defines superlative as of the highest kind quality or order I define it as Dwight Schrute as a sales executive as a man and as a friend he is of the highest kind quality supreme"* (Rainn Wilson the office episode 22 of season 7 Goodbye Michael).

The character realizes in that moment just how much he grossly underestimated what Michael meant to him creating this powerful revelation that brings the audience to tears. There is nothing wrong with that approach to comedy such as Futurama which is a cartoon comedy. You wouldn't expect it to have these heart-warming moments that bring the audience to tears. The majority of episodes draw on emotions. One episode in season 4

called Jurassic Bark, the character of Fry discovers that his old dog from his past has been fossilised, and in an attempt to see his dog again he goes to the professor seeking his aid. When commencing the re-animating of his dog Fry has a moment of guilt, he thinks back and imagines what his dog's life would have been like after Fry left. He imagines that his dog would have found a new owner and lived a happier life without him but just before the credit roll it shows a flash back to Fry's dog doing none of those things and just sitting and waiting for his owner to return which he never does. In my opinion this is not even the most emotional episode as there are so many more episodes that challenge emotions.

American comedy just appears to be happier than British comedy and that's no real secret and from a certain way of thinking it's a flaw with British comedy as characters are often denied that ability to be real to create genuine emotion in the audience. The IT Crowd is a very funny British comedy but it's just hard to imagine one of those characters having a serious heart-to-heart with one another, they just aren't given that chance.

Now it's one thing to talk about how the two styles of comedy are different but I want to address a side of the argument that has never been really talked about. I want to try and explain why they're different why Americans enjoy happy shows and why the British don't so much. Personally, humour is a construct of culture. The culture of a country has a massive effect on the sense of humour that country has and few things affect culture more than the news. After doing research into why the British are more cynical or why Americans are more go-getters I have found very little about the outside effects of it, it's either about the writers or the show style and creative choices like that. Further searching found a small factor that I think is a massive key to why Americans and British people are so different in the types of

comedy they enjoy and one of the biggest things that affect the fact American prefer their media to be happy is because of the news more specifically because the news in the USA is so dark and fearful *"it's no secret to anybody that the news is just a constant battering ram of fear-mongering if you want to be terrified there's never-ending coverage they can make you scared shitless now"* (Doug Stanhope: Voice of America 2010)

Chapter 2: Fake News = Real Comedy

it's no secret that there is a massive fundamental difference between the news in the UK and the news in the US and from my research and findings it's a difference so important that it affects the taste in media those two cultures have. Within this chapter I will be not arguing the point but setting in stone truly that the news and the forms of information media what both countries have is the reason why comedy writers and creators are writing these stereotypical forms of media.

when you actually sit down in the UK to watch The Evening News you realize something, the delivery is cold, the address will be in a detached way. The anchor will read out the news emotionless from the teleprompter almost like a very good text-to-speech program, never directly giving their own opinion to the audience. This is something you would be hard-pressed to find in stories and to be honest the news in the UK is boring. The BBC news is state-funded which means two important things, it is non-profit, secondly they don't run advertisements. The newsreaders in the UK are not governed to make money, however in USA it's the exact opposite. CNN, Fox and all the other news providers are private companies needing to make money. These companies draw viewers which links to profit, therefore will sensationalise and dramatise the news.

An example being the Ebola virus in 2014. The disease was spreading and it was a huge concern for many people. Contrastingly, news coverage of the outbreak was in the UK "*hundreds of British troops are being sent to West Africa. a small number of cases will reach the UK. We can contain it. Britain is at the forefront of preventing the spread. A message for the public don't worry*" (BBC NEWS 2014 – 2015) and the exact same story in the USA in a

country just as well equipped to stop a viral outbreak as the UK was covered "*here in America the killer virus spreading much faster than efforts to contain it spiralling out of control stop admitting West Africans into America right now*" (CNN, FOX NEWS 2014 – 2015). The difference is extremely mind-blowing and the reason why is quite simple if you're worried about something you switch on the news and they say everything is fine don't worry about it then you probably switch off and go do something else but if the news is saying that everything is spiralling out of control and heavily implying that that deadly virus will be at your front door soon, you keep watching spending more time watching their adverts which means more profit.

My theory is this intentional toxic delivery could be seen as evidence as to why Americans enjoy happy movies and comedies so much more than the British do resulting in a negative fearful culture. American news makes the people more fearful more distrusted and more paranoid, however in the UK that kind of news coverage is rare and that results in the American people having a proclivity and addiction to escapism they want to lose themselves in the happy fantasy of their media to escape from that culture of fear. The news works hard to create a hero and I think what's quite interesting on that point is the straight man he or she is a character in comedy where they are totally normal when every other character is stupid or naive or has a massive ego or any other character flaw that straight man has no flaws very often you'll see this take the form of the wise cracker someone who is always incredibly wet he always has some clever one line or something funny to say and there is no better example of the wise cracker than in Seinfeld.

Protagonist Seinfeld is a near-perfect character and he fills that role of the wise cracker like a glove *"name please Seinfeld you made a reservation for a midsize and she's a small getting around a foot, unfortunately we ran out of cars but the reservation keeps the car here that's why you have the reservation I know why we have reservations I don't think you do"* (Seinfeld, *The Alternate Side* 1991). Seinfeld the protagonist is exceptionally witty he always has something clever to say and this comes back to the whole notion of the straight man. The idea of that character and comedy who is normal and has no big character flaws where the butt of the joke is not him but more so the people around it. This is a pretty common stereotype in American comedies, for example, Michael in Arrested Development where everyone in his family is seemingly insane except for him. For example, there is an episode of arrested development where Michael is trying to prove to his family that he is not gay and in fact has a girlfriend and then when he questions his family about why they think he's gay, they called him a chicken and scared of girls and they then make chicken and bird noises for 34 seconds.

However, in British comedies such a character is very rare now there are exceptions. For example Parks and Recreation is an American comedy with no real straight man, everyone in that show is flawed for example Leslie the woman who is desperately naïve, April the intern whose nihilistic and hates everyone, Ron Swanson is a blunt man with ideas of his own thinking that the world is only for him and everyone else is just strange or a hippie.

The straight man stereotype is one that's pretty popular in America and it's pretty rare in Britain and I think that's an extension of that escapism as Stephen Fry once excellently put it

"the American comic hero is a wisecracker who is above his mature and who is above the idiots"

around him, all the great British comic heroes are people who want life to be better and on whom life craps from a terrible height and whose sense of dignity is constantly compromised by the world letting them down, in a sense comedy is the microcosm that allows us to examine the entire difference between our two cultures" (Steven Fry on American VS British Comedy 2012)

The straight man is more than just a character they do more than just create comedy because in a sense they are a vessel for the audience to project themselves onto you on a subconscious level when you see a wisecracker saying funny one-liners and pushing customer service people into their place on a subconscious level, the audience projects themselves onto their character which assists in that fantasy and escapism and that example of Seinfeld tearing apart the customer service I think it's a wonderful reflection of that idea everyone has had crappy experiences with customer service. In the scene Seinfeld does what we all wish we had done with witty comebacks he essentially destroys the employees dignity and outlines in great detail why they've done their job wrong, there is nothing wrong with that style of comedy as it is just that a style of humour that's no worse or better than the others.

Chapter 3: Adapting

Within the chapter I will discuss the failure of the British to American comedy show The Inbetweeners and the American Counterparts of the same name. I will conclude with a indepth look at the why these failed and how the American office was such a success even though it was doing the same thing. This was previously discussed but I will be looking more into the reasoning to why it became more successful.

The Inbetweeners is personally one of my favourite comedies. I started watching it just about the time I was in college so this show was perfectly relatable and true to life that I was addicted after the first 2 episodes. The characters are funny and seamlessly represent the 4 types of people you meet in college and the antics they get up to and the trouble they get themselves portraying a true picture of the teenage years. So imagine my feelings when I discovered that there was an American remake, and its that sort of stigma that sits with a lot of British people, that Americans always ruin beloved British sitcoms. This is a grey area because whereas America tries to recreate a show off the back of a British show is most of the time fails and doesn't make it past the first few episodes. However, in a very rare case it can sometimes become more successful in the case of the office but I'll get more into that show later on in this chapter, lets get back to the inbetweeners.



The American remake bombed and the series was cancelled after one season due to low ratings. In the series you notice that a lot of the jokes and plot points are the same, so why didn't people like it? It just wasn't funny, seriously the real problem is that the series failed to adapt its jokes or even write new material for an American audience, and the ones that were kept were butchered badly.

The American *Inbetweeners* has two glaring problems number one is a lack of build up to a joke for example there is a scene in episode 2 from the first season called Bunk Off. In this episode 4 boys are playing frisbee in a park in an attempt to try and impress some girls when they see some girls actually walking past the character of Will Mackenzie played by Simon Bird shouts at one of the girls and throws the frisbee towards them but instead of going to the girl it hits a disabled girl in the side of the head. Following this Will then goes over to ask for his frisbee back, but they don't want to give it back so they end up wrestling

and it looks like Will is trying to take the frisbee off her and a gang of boys come in and try and stop them.

Compare that to the American inbetweeners when it's a 10 second skit where the character Will throws a ball and it just hits a guy on crutches and no-one reacts. These two scenes are incredibly important to analyse because scenes like this are the reason that the American Inbetweeners Flopped. The factors that the American show ignored is that the scene didn't have build up for consequences.

The UK's version built up the scene talking about 5 seconds just showing people's faces we see them visibly change as the realisation of what will happen settles in this shot is also important as it establishes where the frisbee is heading before it gets there and gives time for the audience to react alongside the characters. We also have a good sized medium shot where you can clearly see the woman's facial expressions not to mention plenty of time devoted to showing the shock set in on the people around them. The US version on the other hand spend little time building it up. Will throws the football, it travels through the air, one shot of Simon looking at it and there was the payoff. The timing in the US version is three seconds from when Will throws the football to when it hits the guy with the crutches. In comparison the UK's build-up lasts 9 seconds, 3 times the length. The extra length and shots give a lot more time for the viewer to anticipate the impact when it happens.

One of the most iconic and famous scenes from the Inbetweeners and became a joke country wide because of this. The phrase "Buss-Wanker" from episode 4 in season 2, the scene takes place as the group of boys are driving through the town. Jay Cartwright played by James Buckley hangs out of the car window and shouts "bus wankers" at a group of people sitting in a bus stop this is perfectly executed and it gives everyone in the car a good

laugh. Later on in the show the character of Jay does it again but everyone seems a little scared as everyone but Jay notices that there is a red light and becomes nervous because the people at the bus stop are now within walking distance of them. They approach the car and threaten the boys and it gives the scene consequence and give a small pay off for Jays actions,

Now the major problem with the American adaptation of this joke is that wanker isn't really a swear word over in America. There is actually a few swear words that are rarely used in a America and this is why the American version fails because a lot of the jokes revolve around the delivery of a joke and the joke is sometimes supported on the legs of a word meaning something. The issue is that there isn't any American swear word that are similar to the word wanker, and it would be extremely hard to create a scene that is similar to the British version and still keep the same feeling about the phrase. This paired with the stricter rules of swear words being used on American TV gives us a result of the phrase being changed to "Bus Turds".

It feels extremely tame and out of place in comparison to the British counterpart. There is a certain sweet spot in this scene that I just don't think any other word other than bus wankers could compete with and make this very British scene funny. Again going back to my previous statement about consequence in the American version this scene plays out as if the only person panicking is the guys who plays Will and Simon and the character of Jay is even zoned out but in the British version there is panic from everyone.

Now that's not to say a American version of the Inbetweeners wouldn't work if timed correctly and the writers not being so worried as to ruin the original. An example of this is

the film 'Super bad' it plays out in a similar sort of situation, a group of teenage boys trying to impress some girls but still with a bit more care and attention there isn't any reason for an American Inbetweeners show to actually catch on as long as it does the same thing that the office did and that is have its own story, and this is something I'll speak about next.



The British office versus the American office I don't think there's ever been a larger argument when it comes to British versus American comedy. Both of these shows have a large dedicated fan base that aren't exclusive for the country either version originated from. I've spoken to people who love the American version and people who love the British original unlike The Inbetweeners. The American office managed to change itself and move away from the conventions of the original, everything after season two is much different and completely original and it's one of the reasons that it ran for nine seasons.

You have read the stereotypical differences I have written about. right away in the opening titles, the opening theme for the British office roles in, painting a rather drab and depressing feeling to everything. This is complemented by cinematic shots of grey buildings, traffic filled roundabouts and road signs in a sombre opening that Clues you into the kind of world you are about to enter. Compare that to the American opening, it's far more positive from the music to the cinematography, you only need those first three notes of the theme to instantly let you know that you're watching something more light-hearted.

The American opening is also far more americanized, you have these shots of the main characters with the actors names appearing over people smiling. The pace is much quicker and it's extremely similar to the other typical sitcom openings you see. This isn't a bad thing at all, it just highlights the overall difference between the two and this is almost the first step to the American office carving out its own identity.

Both shows almost perfectly show off the styles of comedy that their respective country is known for. I think Stephen Fry makes a fantastic analysis of both countries comedic stars as well as the origins of these styles, *"if you go to an American bookshop by far the biggest section is self-help and improvement yeah you know the idea that that life is refined a ball and improvable comedy is the microcosm that allows us to examine the entire difference between our two Cultures ours is bathed in failure but we make a glory of our failure we celebrate it"* (Steven Fry on American VS British Comedy 2012).

If you watch the British office expecting a flat-out comedy then you're likely going to be disappointed. Any comedy within the series tends to be weaved into several layers of

characters story and more often than not is part of something awkward or cringe inducing when you look into Ricky and Steve's comments on making the show. You can really see how much care and attention was put into it, they wanted to make sure they made something that was realistic and grounded.

The British office has its wacky moments but it's never to the point of being unrealistic. In contrast the American office is far less serious in tone. It embraces wacky moments and goes further with this joke than would ever be realistic. The characters are all larger-than-life and hilariously eccentric. When showing either version to an average viewer especially a younger one it's likely that the American office will succeed and making them laugh more than the British version.

However one thing we can be thankful for is that the producers did notice the issues I have mentioned in this paper. They started moving the show in its own direction and because of this we now have two iconic shows to enjoy. Each show provides us with a very different tone, one is depressingly realistic and sometimes hopeless. Whereas the other one is cheerful, cartoony and friendly. You'd always want to work at Dunder Mifflin since it feels so colourful and fun at times.

The American office seemed to portray that work is an area in which you waste your life away and people don't want to be reminded of that in their entertainment. As a result the show has a more positive and inviting world. The British version makes you feel like you're working at Wernham Hogg, slogging through the mundane and boring office life designed to be relatable and true to life for people that have worked in offices. In the past every ray of sunshine, a thousand things that can go wrong. It can be hard to watch even for those who are used to the British style of cringe comedy. Neither is necessarily better than the other

since they're both trying to achieve different things so whether you stick with the original or tune into the American style, you're always assured some quality entertainment.

Conclusion

From my findings I discovered that it's not simply the writers reasoning for making shows worse or better when trying to adapt or even starting from scratch its more about the media that that one person has taken in. The news is a powerful tool, it informs us what we know. The news is everywhere from our TVs to computers to smart phones and with the rise of the Fake News epidemic there is a higher need for good comedies more than ever.

To conclude, I think it's incredibly important to look at both cultures and take away something from each. Each style of comedy has its own positives and negatives and its easy to get lost in the argument of which one is better when your favourite show is from one side or the other of the ocean, Its more about how you view the world. If you want that escapism from the news dramatizing the hard-ships that the world is going through then watch an American sitcom or whether you want to feel better about yourself and laugh at your own pain then a British sitcom is for you. Its not a solid fact, neither style of comedy is better, they're just different and they're different because the cultures of America and Britain are much different.

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