

Fighting backwardness

The Aristocrats, directed by Paul Provenza

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The Aristocrats is a documentary that traces the origins and effects of a single joke. The film does this by bringing a series of more or less recognizable figures in front of the camera. These range from conventional television personalities like Drew Carey and Paul Reiser, to more important and interesting comedians like George Carlin and Monty Python's Eric Idle.

These comedians, for the most part, simply tell the joke. But they also reminisce about their first encounter with it, relate an especially memorable occasion when it was told, reflect on its peculiar standing in the profession, and occasionally philosophize about its broader significance.

Leaving aside the premise, which is always the same, the joke itself is a sort of empty vessel. Each person fills it with his or her own variations on a basic theme that typically consists in a paroxysm of extremely violent and gross sexual images. This is usually told in an unwholesome crescendo setting up the punchline, which is also for the most part always the same—deflating, absurd, and yet funny.

From a cinematic standpoint, this is in no sense a remarkable work. It certainly takes no special care in its visual appearance. The camera is placed sometimes hastily in front of a comedian in the dingy or nondescript setting of an office, a bar, or a dressing room. There is hardly any formal narrative complexity as the same joke is told over and over again. The editing seems to follow the same crescendo of the joke, from a relatively tame introduction to the most extravagant renditions of it, but that's as far as its sophistication goes.

On paper, none of this is especially promising. If anything, a sketch of this sort will suggest a trivial, repetitive, extremely narrow and even debasing work. But in fact *The Aristocrats* manages to rise above these limitations and, though far from transcendental, is actually an interesting film.

One would expect the relentless cacophony of vulgarities and the unrelenting evocation of disturbing mental images first to shock, then to have a numbing effect on the audience. However, the character of many of the protagonists, the care and interest with which they tell and reflect on the joke gives the work, in the midst of its verbal muck and filth, a surprisingly endearing and humanizing quality.

In fact, one is tempted to say that in spite of itself this is a surprisingly calm and introspective work—more patient and more serious about its subject, no doubt in its own way, than many other self-consciously “respectable” films. This is, in any case, a labor of love, not a cheap attempt to shock and transgress for its own sake.

The film has some value, first, as a window into the peculiar world of stand-up comedy. This is after all an interesting milieu composed of quirky and sometimes complex personalities who by virtue of their profession and disposition are often unwilling to abide by prevailing cultural norms.

The joke is in fact most of all a mirror held up to each performer showing his or her peculiar psychology. Rarely told to an audience as part of an act, it is a sort of secret handshake for professional comedians, performed by themselves, for themselves, and allowing each to put his or her own stamp of individuality on it. Exactly because the material is fixed, the contours of the personalities involved are more clearly delineated. Here it is possible to appreciate the difference in approach, in sensitivity or lack thereof, in the conscious awareness or obliviousness of the comedian to the world around him.

The film shows how the joke is also a sort of release for the frustrations peculiar to comedians. On one hand, it reflects the problem of selling one's act and the temptation of dragging it to debasing extremes in order to do so. On the other hand, the joke is a release against a different kind of frustration provoked by the norms of proper taste and behavior that can confront any artist as dubious and arbitrary constraints.

The Aristocrats is therefore a close study of the craft of stand-up comedy and its practitioners. But the film also casts the familiar world of popular television shows in a very different light. In the world turned upside down of *The Aristocrats*, for example, the otherwise painfully conventional and proper Bob Saget slowly and reluctantly emerges as the darkest and most disturbing figure of the lot.

The world of television shows and personalities is no doubt predicated in part on titillating the worst instincts of the audience. Compared to this, the film itself is at a minimum far less calculating. But alongside *Fear Factor* and most reality shows, the television world also consists of a plastic, sedated and equally artificial world of all-too “normal” families—the sort of fare typified by old shows like *Mad About You* and *Full House*. *The Aristocrats* may not be a conscious and probing social critique. But by simply recasting some of the familiar faces of this world, like

Riser and Saget, in this dramatically different setting, the film achieves the remarkable effect of disrupting and exposing its artificiality.

More than a focused and interesting look into particular professions, however, the film poses the question of the value of vulgarity, profanity, and a certain kind of “popular” sensibility. This is not to say that the film provides the elements for a satisfactory answer, but it does succeed in putting into focus a question that is only apparently mundane, and is in fact tied up with all sorts of important cultural and political problems.

There is no doubt that profanity, particularly when seen as the projection of a working class authenticity, has historically been used as a form of opposition. George Carlin, who plays a prominent role in the film, famously used a sequence of profanities as a way to call into question the facile moralism of the industry and, more broadly, prevailing cultural norms.

Particularly in the American context, where no effort is spared to mythologize and sanitize the family and its “values,” the sort of profanity practiced by a Carlin can plausibly present itself as a form of opposition. It is probably no accident that the joke in *The Aristocrats* draws much of its power from the fact that it always involves a family, with the most extravagant permutations of incest and depravity. It is also no accident that certain sections of the film industry predictably reacted to the film by censoring it outright—the AMC theater chain officially declared that it would refuse to show it.

This phenomenon of profanity as opposition is of course neither recent nor limited to the US. In nineteenth century Rome, for example, G.G. Belli wrote flamboyantly vulgar poetry in popular dialect as a conscious tribute to the fertile imagination and rebelliousness of the Roman plebes. This had a real political force, particularly from the standpoint of opposition to the papal state, as nuns, priests and popes in particular were made to appear in compromising situations, stripped not only of their clothes, but of their dignity and veneer of divine authority in the face of the ruthless scorn of the people.

In the film, the most significant expression of this sort of phenomenon involves comedian Gilbert Gottfried. We are shown the recorded footage of Gottfried’s performance at a roast that was held shortly after the events of September 11 in honor of pornography mogul Hugh Hefner. This is the emotional centerpiece of the film.

Gottfried’s joke about his flight being delayed for a stop at the Empire State Building was received with hostility by the audience. “Too soon!” someone yelled angrily. Thus rebuffed, rather than apologize or fall back on less controversial material, Gottfried launched into a no-holds-barred performance of “the aristocrats” joke. This unexpected turn triggered a sort of cathartic reaction from the audience. It is here that the film consciously and with some success reveals the broader significance not of a single joke, but of profanity as a form of rebellion against unthinking deference to arbitrary and dubious norms, and ultimately against authority.

Ultimately, the film seems to suggest, there is something valuable about exploring and expressing the most sordid depths of the imagination. It is important to point out, however, that if, on the

one hand, “popular” profanity can be thought of as a form of opposition against stifling cultural norms, and even against a particular political regime, it remains a most primitive form of opposition.

In the same way as the Luddites attempted to smash the first products of capitalism, “popular” profanity reacts against the limits of bourgeois culture not by attempting to absorb the best of it before transcending it, but by reveling in inherited social backwardness and in fact elevating it to a higher, self-sufficient and self-satisfied norm. Ultimately it represents a denial of the need for a process of collective education and maturation—a denial that historically has had disastrous consequences. Moreover, from Belli to Gottfried, in most instances “popular” profanity is far from a direct and unmediated expression of popular sensibilities, but instead a sort of reproduction of it offered by a different social layer. It is in this sense, for example, that Trotsky insisted in the early 1920s on the need to fight against both specific forms of popular backwardness, and the official sanction of them.

To show the limits of this phenomenon as a form of opposition, Belli’s case is particularly instructive. After years of acting anonymously as a thorn in the side of the clerical regime, when a revolution finally threatened to overthrow it (the Roman Republic, which was the most important if fleeting manifestation of the failed 1848-49 revolutions in Italy), Belli welcomed its failure. He eventually got a job as a censor in the bureaucracy of the restored papal state, and begged his son to burn all his poems as it would jeopardize his career.

Similarly, the significance of Gottfried’s performance is far from unambiguous. Perhaps in Gottfried’s mind telling “the aristocrats” joke after being chastised for making fun of 9/11 was a way of upping the ante. Certainly this is the interpretation favored by the film. However, by shifting the terrain of his performance from a political terrain to sheer profanity, one could argue that Gottfried actually capitulated, choosing the path of least resistance while preserving his irreverent image. The significance of *The Aristocrats* as a film is subject to the same ambiguity.



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