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Laughing Towards Bethlehem: A Critical Reading of Bill Hicks as Prophetic Archetype

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ABSTRACT

The performative value of standup comedy is in its inclusion of the audience in the communicative moment; the audience member, at-home and live, exists as a witness to the presentation of the comedian in the involuntary response of laughter, an active and realized part of the comedic event. While there has been a burgeoning amount of scholarly work surrounding the cultural significance of standup comics and the literary implications of their work, there has been very little scholarship assessing the work of comedian Bill Hicks, and none regarding the final special filmed before his death, *Revelations*. In a world where a standup comic has become the most popular interviewer of all time, and seven of the most downloaded twenty-five podcasts in America are hosted by current or former standup comedians, the link between the actual comedic event and the larger scope of the comic's influence is clear. Although scholars have correctly identified standup comedy as a new literary and rhetorical form directing consumers toward cultural and social change, and heterodoxic formulations of thought, I will argue that this framework is incomplete. In order to wholistically understand the influence of standup comedy on American culture, one must correctly identify the religious nature of the comedian's work and self-presentation, specifically through the Judeo-Christian concepts of "messiah" and "prophet." Such a framework provides a language for the ritualistic response within the prophetic moment, as well as the dual nature or reverence and revulsion that consumers have for comedians. These concepts are archetypes, and provide new language for interpreting both the work of Bill Hicks and the standup comic in general. The comic claims to bear witness to the truth, and the member of the audience participates in the prophetic moment by bearing witness to the comedian, acting with him in ritualized movement. I will present a case study and close reading of Bill Hicks' televised special *Revelations*, evaluating his comedy as a fulfillment of the prophetic archetype. When the standup comic is understood prophetically, and the material understood through the lens of the prophetic message, the consumer and the scholar are able to grasp the foundations of the larger movement centered around the cultural figure of the standup comic beyond the performative work; the larger movements amount to a form of religious devotion, and the comic's social commentary ceases to be performative, but transformative. The devotion of acolytes to the extra-performative catalogue of comics like Dave Chapelle, Joe Rogan, and Hannah Gadsby form a larger cultural moment, for which Bill Hicks presented himself as a forerunner and prototype.

KEYWORDS

Prophetic archetype, prophet, messiah, theology, literature, standup comedy, cultural studies, performance, masochism, ritual response, Bill Hicks

Introduction

In an article published in The Guardian twenty years following the death of Bill Hicks, an admirer and fellow standup comedian Brendon Burns described his relationship to Hicks in this way, "And after he died, I did what I think a lot of people have done – I turned Hicks into a replacement messiah. Quoting his jokes as if they were gospel, quoting his routines to answer any of life's questions as if they were a self-help programme."[1] Burns speaks colloquially to indicate his love for an idol and pioneer in his field, but the specific words he uses tell us something about Hicks' own identity. On examining Hick's presentation in his final special, *Revelations*, it becomes clear that this conception of the comic as messianic transcends the colloquial, and functions as a signifier of his personal self-image. Hicks intentionally makes use of the characteristics of codified prophetic figures found in religious texts, and in the common versions of these figures parodied in popular culture. What the prophet does for the purpose of moving a religious people to worship and repentance, Hicks does in order to drive an audience seeking to be entertained to transformative action. Hicks recognized before Burns and other fans and peers that the standup comedian is engaged in a form of religious identity-making, namely, that of the prophet or messiah. Hicks' presentation is not the assumption of a persona, but an acknowledgement of a larger transformative moment within standup comedy.

The existing scholarship recognizing the cultural influence of standup comedy, especially in terms of psychological studies of response and laughter, and in literary or socio-linguistic constructions of humor and the joke, while valuable, has not adequately addressed the form of the communicative event and the presentation of the self for the comic. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate an additional and necessary interpretive element in understanding the form. By understanding standup comedians through the lens of the theological concepts of prophet and messiah scholars are provided with a language for the ritualistic response within the prophetic moment, as well as the dual nature of reverence and revulsion that consumers have for comedians. Scholars have already used this idea of an archetypal prophet to interpret literature,[2] music,[3] and history.[4] The comic communicates a message through both the live performance medium and audio or televised documentation. The audience participates in a collective response by listening to the material, watching the performance, and responding with laughter, disgust, or

[1] Burns, Brendan. (2014, February 19). *Brendon Burns on Bill Hicks: 'I felt like he was speaking directly to me'*. The Guardian. Retrieved November 9, 2021. https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/feb/19/brendon-burns-on-bill-hicks.

[2] Wu, Zhi-fang, and Wen-li Pi. "Prophet of Doom Analysis of Archetype of Raven in Allan Poe's" The Raven "Through Mythological and Archetypal Approach [J]." *Journal of Chongqing Jiaotong University (Social Sciences Edition)* 4 (2009).

[3] Kravchenko, Nataliia, and Valentyna Snitsar. "Cultural Archetypes in the Construction of "Possible Worlds" of Modern African American Rap (Based on Kendrick Lamar's Texts)." *Euromentor* 10.4 (2019).

[4] Smylie, James H. "The President as Republican Prophet and King: Clerical Reflections on the Death of Washington." *Journal of Church and State* 18.2 (1976): 233-252.

an array of other emotions. If the comic does indeed fulfill the prophetic archetype then the audience by consequence participates in the prophetic moment through response.

There is almost no scholarship assessing the work of comedian Bill Hicks, and none analyzing his special *Revelations*. This comedy special features Hicks presenting a bevy of transgressive comedic material, particularly around the subjects of religion, political discourse, war, and consumerism, all of which were taboos of the early 1990s in Hicks' home country of America. Hicks does not only present jokes associated with the form of standup comedy, but packages the material within an artistic framework featured on religious themes from scriptural texts and popular culture. This is especially true of Hicks' persona and attire, the cold open to the special, and the closing remarks and montage of the project. I will present a case study and close reading of Bill Hicks' televised version of the special, evaluating his comedy as an essentially religious self-presentation akin to the delivering of the prophetic word. If Bill Hicks positions himself as prophet in acknowledgment of the nature of the form, then the performance of the standup comic as a general entertainment figure ceases to be performative, but transformative.

Obvious Prophetic Imagery of *Revelations*

Before coming to a broader understanding of the nature of both the Judeo-Christian understanding of the Hebrew *Old Testament* prophet and the *New Testament* Messiah, as well as the hallmarks of the prophetic message and how it relates to the form of standup comedy, one must understand the way in which Bill Hicks intentionally takes up the mantle of the prophetic. Bill Hicks uses obvious biblical imagery designed to evoke a shared imagination in the audience in the form of a series of images that revolve around the persona Hicks creates in signifying the theological concepts. He crafts his own self-presentation, one that elevates the ideas he intends to communicate and the shift toward transformation in the closing moments of the special.

The title of his work, *Revelations*, signifies the explicit relationship of the special to the final book of the *New Testament*, the *Revelation of John the Apostle*, which is thought in Christian theology to be a prophetic and apocalyptic vision of the end of the world. Hicks, in taking *Revelations* as the title, directs the audience to his own version of the religious notions of the end of the world and the vanquishing of evil, the main themes of the biblical text. Hicks also manages to position himself as the prophet, the one who reveals, in the same way John the Apostle positions himself in his own *Revelation*. This adoption of the collective consciousness of prophetic vision serves to elevate Hicks in relation to his audience; while in some sense this creates a power dynamic, it also creates a system of reciprocity in which the audience member is involved in the moment of revelation. It should be noted that the biblical text refers to the singular Revelation of John, denoting a situated moment of revealed truth, and a certain amount

of continuity in the larger textual process.[5] Hicks, on the other hand, uses the title *Revelations* in the plural, acknowledging his own disjointed style and varied subject matter to indicate the nature of his message. His title indicates that in his prophetic apocalypse, many things are revealed through communication of his worldview and experience.

In addition to the special's title, the image of the opening scene consists exclusively of the Judeo-Christian apocalyptic imagery. The opening image is that of a white horse galloping, the whole image tinted red and accompanied by the sound of a lightning strike. The moon appears also tinted red, and pans to include both the horse and its rider, Hicks himself, galloping first through a wooded area followed by a city landscape. A flashing image of a monolith with a red glow behind it and fire appears in the sequence, a replica of the monolith from *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Hicks dismounts his horse in a ruined and burning segment of the city, and walks to a burn-proof barrel where he lights a fire as the camera pans away and fades into the lone image of the moon. As the screen fades into the final image of the moon as a backdrop, another *2001* monolith appears, and Hicks comes into view, cloaked in black with a black hat to obscure his face, first in the shadows and then emerging onto a stage to the cheering of the crowd.

In the biblical text of John's revelation, many of the same images are repeated. The blood moon is a prophesied sign of the end of the world in chapter six, accompanied by an earthquake, as is the pale horse and its rider: "I looked, and before me was a pale horse! And its rider was named Death and Hades followed close behind him." The destruction of the city, and in particular its burning, is the sole subject of chapter eighteen, referring to Babylon, often thought to be symbolic of the wicked cities throughout the world. Various sections of the chapter offer prophecies about the hypothetical Babylon, "The angel shouted with a powerful voice, 'She is destroyed! The great city of Babylon is destroyed! She has become a home for demons… She will be destroyed by fire, because the Lord who judges her is powerful." Chapter eight of John's vision produces familiarity again in the Hicks text, detailing an angel of God who fills a censer with fire from the altar of God and throws it on the earth, leading to thunder and lightning and trembling. While the exact meaning of the book of Revelation is debated even among Christian theologians, the images do convey an apocalypse, and a vast landscape of destruction.[6]

A voice-over accompanies the special's opening montage, the voice of Bill Hicks briefly detailing, or announcing, his birth and the corruption of what he calls the American dream, a familiar theme for the working class. The voiceover itself plays an important role in devloping a collective consciousness and prophetic archetype. The first words Hicks speaks in the opening

[5] Rowland, Christopher. "Revelation." *The Oxford handbook of the reception history of the Bible*. 1993.
[6] Collins, Adela Yarbro. "Reading the Book of Revelation in the twentieth century." *Interpretation* 40.3 (1986): 229-242.

montage and in the comedy special as a whole, is an announcement of his birth. He says, "On December 16, 1961, the world turned upside down and inside out, and I was born screaming, in America."[7] The announcement of the birth is an image in its own right, following the prophetic tradition of the annunciation of the prophet. Samson, religious and military leader in Israel, is announced at his birth by an angel. In Hebrew tradition, Isaac, the son of Abraham, is foretold as the religious father of Israel after Abraham. In addition, Ishmael is announced to Hagar, Abraham's slave and concubine, as the father of a different people revered in both Christianity and Islam. The *New Testament* prophet John the Baptist, was announced, as well as Jesus of Nazareth, thought to be the Messiah. In announcing his own birth, Hicks engages in forming the wholistic image of the prophetic and messianic figure in the collective consciousness, which is marked by an announcement of the birth of the religious figure under special circumstances.

It is his stated desire, in particular, that strikes the note of the prophetic; "I always wanted to be the cowboy hero. That lone voice in the wilderness fighting corruption and evil wherever I found it, and standing for freedom, truth and justice. And I still track the remnants of that dream, wherever I go, on my never-ending ride into the setting sun." These images, again, invoke a particular set of images in both the consciousness of popular culture and in the religious consciousness of his Western audience. The voice in the wilderness refers to prophet, John the Baptist, whom the *New Testament* refers to as "the voice crying out in the wilderness," while references to the "cowboy hero," "freedom, truth, and justice," and a ride into the setting sun, play on Americanized ideals on the Western hero who is an archetype of religious proportion as well.[8]

Hicks embodies the prophetic, apocalyptic vision of the biblical text of the Revelation with obvious intent, using direct images lifted from the text and titling his work after the recording of the vision. This is not to say Hicks is making a statement from the ingroup of religious adherents, but that he is intentionally playing a role that allows him to speak to concepts that indicate a kind of higher knowledge. In order to communicate the prophetic word one must resemble the archetypal prophet. Hicks plays into the archetype familiar to religious imagery, but these are not the only images he makes obvious. The opening scenes also evoke familiar images of the noble outlaw featured in Western novels and movies, in and of itself an extension of the biblical pale horse and its rider. Embedded in Hicks' own confessed desire to be a cowboy is his intention to be the lone rider facing the horizon, riding away after the gunfight which is a kind of

[7] Hicks, Bill. "Revelations." 1994, London, England.

[8] Fitch III, John. "Archetypes on screen: Odysseus, St. Paul, Christ and the American cinematic hero and anti-hero." *Journal of Religion & Film* 9.1 (2005): 1.

apocalypse. This narrative vision often results in the destruction of the city as a means of justice.[9] In addition, his employ of the monoliths of the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* point towards his swath of comedic material to follow on aliens and other worlds, but also towards the larger meaning of the stone projections in the film, namely the symbol of transcendent and foreign knowledge and progress unable to be fully grasped by humanity.[10]

The Prophetic Role

It is not enough to say simply that Hicks embodies the archetypal prophet or messiah through his intentional use of imagery. He embodies the biblical manifestations of the concepts themselves beyond imageries. The prophet in the *Old Testament* is defined primarily by the actions they perform. The *Old Testament* scholar David L. Peterson writes,

> "An Israelite prophet did, among other things, communicate Yahweh's words to various segments of Israelite society. The prophet did this not because he has an inherent personality predilection to speak Yahweh's words but rather because he was doing what prophets normally do. Were that person to cease functioning as a prophet, we would not expect him to communicate Yahweh's words."[11]

An *Old Testament* prophet is definitionally a person who communicates a message that is thought to be the truth of the Jewish God, Yahweh. Functionally, Yahweh can be conceived of as the highest ideal or concept, and a transcendent morality in himself. This is evidenced by the Hebrew tradition in biblical texts to write "YHWH," the tetragrammaton, to refer to the Jewish God. The Hebrew God was thought to be so holy or set apart that his name could not be printed on paper by human hands. To write of a God that is transcendent is not to understand him, but to communicate parts of the truth that could be found in him, both literally and figuratively. To speak on his behalf is to reveal a higher truth to those who have not yet understood him, and a prophet necessarily functions as a moral and social authority to those who hear his message, but have not received it themselves. The authority of the prophet is not born from hierarchical power structures per se, but exists only within the ability to perceive and understand the higher truths of the transcendent world, the knowledge of Yahweh, the highest of thoughts.

Hicks, then, fulfills the function of a prophet not in the religious sense, but in a general one based in culture. He seeks to communicate the higher truths to a people awaiting the message. Hicks hints toward this purpose throughout the special, taking an adversarial view

[9] Seesengood, Robert Paul. "11. Western Text(s): The Bible and the Movies of the Wild, Wild West". *The Bible in Motion: A Handbook of the Bible and Its Reception in Film*, edited by Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch, Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2016, pp. 193-208. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781614513261-016

[10] Hoch, David G. "Mythic Patterns in" 2001: A Space Odyssey". *Journal of Popular Culture* 4.4 (1971): 961-965.

[11] Petersen, D. L. (1981). *The Roles of Israel's Prophets*. JSOT Press.

against the status quo. He rails against the first Bush regime, wars in the Middle East, and the prevailing narratives about psychedelic drugs. Hicks spends a considerable amount of time and material dissecting theories of the Kennedy assassination as both inadequate and in service of power structures, He becomes a paragon of rebellion against prevailing ideas. This attitude culminates in Hicks' final verbal movement of the special, which begins with a statement of purpose directly to the audience. He asks, "Is there a point to my act? I would say there is. I have to. The world is like a ride in an amusement park…Some people have been on the ride for a long time and they begin to question, is this real, or is this just a ride? And other people have remembered, and they come back to us, they say, 'hey – don't worry, don't be afraid, ever, because, this is just a ride…' And we kill those people."[12] Hicks positions himself theologically as the one who knows the higher truth, or the illusory nature of existence. He is the one who recognizes the concerted effort by those in power to keep people from finding a meaning that transcends society as it has been constructed. He has "come back" to people through the form of standup comedy in order to tell that truth, fulfilling the essential tenet of the prophetic archetype.

While this function is essential to prophethood, it does not encapsulate all that constitutes prophethood. Scholars have identified several ways in which a prophet's message is constituted in the *Old Testament*, provided that the prophet attached to the message fulfills his or her larger functional purpose of communicating on Yahweh's behalf. The prophet's message is inherently critical of social and political hierarchy. Corrine L. Patton, in her dissection of both the biblical text and person of Ezekiel, defines the prophet as both an advocate of a new binary between the elevated role of "priest" or "prophet" and that of the lower class. The prophet is raised from the lower class as an opponent of corruption and cruelty of existing human power structures.[13] Other scholars have described the prophetic message in terms of "liberation" from the hierarchical system of Israel, though the same scholars view the message as ineffective in establishing a new system free from any power imbalance.[14] This push against existing hierarchies and the creation of new hierarchical systems produces another hallmark of the prophetic word.

The prophetic word is always resisted either by the prophet himself, as in the case of Jonah and Moses, or by the people it is meant to help, as in the case of the Israelites in response to the system of judicial authority, or by the authorities who may be deposed because of it, as in the case of Herod in response to the messianic prophecies. Bill Hicks imitates the prophetic word in his criticism of the prevailing hierarchies at play in America: the first Bush presidency, the

[12] Hicks, Bill. "Revelations." 1994, London, England.
[13] Patton, Corrine L. "Priest, prophet, and exile: Ezekiel as a literary construct." *Ezekiel's Hierarchical World: Wrestling with a Tiered Reality* (2000): 73-89.
[14] Dempsey, Carol J. *The prophets: A liberation-critical reading*. Fortress Press, 2000.

political landscape, war in the middle east, and even media and marketing. Hicks' message is one that rejects any hierarchy in favor of a restructuring that positions him as a new kind of leader that liberates consumers of his comedy from an ideological prison. This emphasis on liberation and rejection of traditional hierarchy is pursuant to the prophetic message.

Another wave of scholarship defines the prophetic word as inherently futuristic[15] and apocalyptic.[16] In fact, two of the three words translated as "prophet" in the ancient Hebrew of the *Old Testament*, *ro'eh* and *hozeh*, are derived from the root that means "to see." From this version of the word comes the signified concept of the English term, "seer."[17] A prophet's message is often one that denotes future and connotes the apocalyptic catastrophe. The prophetic word, because it is futuristic and apocalyptic, is also directed toward action. The third and most common Hebrew word for prophet is *navi*, which is used over 300 times in the *Old Testament*, and comes from a root which means "to call out." It has also been translated as "to call," "to proclaim," or "to summon." The use of this word indicates an action in the communicator who does the "calling" pr "summoning," and in those who receive the word who move to answer the call or summons. One scholar interprets the biblical text of Micah in the framework of Greek theater due to the action it implies in the particularities of Micah's prophetic message; Micah details the future actions of Yahweh in judgment and of the rebellious people who worship idols.[18] Not only does prophecy naturally include futuristic action as a predictive feature, but also demands action from its subjects as a means of reformulating the predictive future. This has been called conditional futurism by theologians, the conflict of predictive prophecy paired with the actionable mandate for the people who receive the prophecy, which in turn could alter that predicted future. As the communicator demands action from the people, the future becomes dependent on the fulfillment of that mandate.[19]

In his work on linguistic and historical implications of the form of standup comedy, Oliver Double defines the form as happening in the present-tense, not only in the performance event but also in the larger comedic moment; the comedian makes observations and jokes about things as the currently are.[20] This is certainly true of Hicks. Most of his movements in *Revelations* center around absurdities he perceives in the world, which lead him to the futuristic.

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[15] Maller, Allen S. "Prophecy and progress: Biblical prophets as futurists." *The Futurist* 29.1 (1995): 39.
[16] Hays, J. Daniel. *The message of the Prophets: A survey of the prophetic and apocalyptic books of the Old Testament*. Zondervan Academic, 2010.
[17] Strong, James. *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible: With Dictionaries of the Hebrew and Greek Words of the Original with References to the English Words*. Christian Heritage Pub. Co., 1988.
[18] Wood, Joyce Rilett. "Speech and action in Micah's prophecy." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 62.4 (2000): 645-662.
[19] Goetz, James. *Conditional Futurism: New Perspective of End-Time Prophecy*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012.
[20] Double, Oliver. *Getting the joke: The inner workings of stand-up comedy*. A&C Black, 2013.

He does not discuss the absurdities of the world in a vacuum, but uses them in order to make a final point about what the world could be if the people receiving the comedic and prophetic word took the appropriate actions in understanding of the apocalyptic moment of the special. He is not only entertaining his audience or eliciting laughter, but is calling the audience to action and response by directing his ire and attention to the power structures at play in social narratives. This is the essence of his discussion of the Kennedy assassination and psychedelic drug use, as well as marketing and the consumerism of America.

Marianna Keisalo defines the standup comic as "both a sign and sign-maker." She argues that the comedian defines both the perspective and the context of their material, while also functioning as a kind of material in their presented self. The audience must not only interpret the words of the comic, but the comic himself as a contextual presentation.[21] This essentially describes the active ambition of the prophetic archetype. The prophecy calls for the action of the people in the presence, but the prophecy itself predicts the apocalypse. Hicks spends the entirety of his special detailing the evils of the world, which in turn highlights the coming apocalypse, a crisis of meaning and originality.

He demands action from his adherents. While one of the hallmarks of the traditional format of a standup comedy setlist is to end with the most effective or profound joke, one that ties the material together, Hicks makes a different transition in his final moments. Hicks abandons comedic intent wholesale, choosing instead to remind viewers again that, from his perspective, life is only a ride that can be abandoned for the sake of social change. He chooses to end *Revelations* with these lines:

> Here's what we can do to change the world, right now, to a better ride. Take all that money that we spend on weapons and defenses each year and instead spend it feeding and clothing and educating the poor of the world, which it would many times over, not one human being excluded, and we could explore space, together, both inner and outer, forever, in peace.[22]

Hicks makes himself an archetype of theological ideas. He has predicted the future throughout his standup special, a psychological consequence within his viewers as a result of pointing out the absurd in the current societal norms. He offers that same audience a way out of the future he has predicted, or to use his own language, a way off the ride. This means the audience must first realize the existence of power dynamics that create hierarchical systems in which the audience participates. Then the audience must make the necessary changes to rectify these imbalances,

[21] Keisalo, Marianna. "Perspectives of (and on) a Comedic Self: A Semiotics of Subjectivity in Stand-up Comedy." *Social Analysis* 62.1 (2018): 116-135.
[22] Hicks, Bill. "Revelations." 1994, London, England.

which Hicks identifies as decisions regarding voting patterns and national expenditures, in order to change the felt reality of society. This is the conditional futurism of religious prophecy at work.

Masochism as an Undercurrent of Prophecy and Comedy

Perhaps the most important facet of the prophetic message is that it is inherently masochistic. In a study on religious experience and masochism, Stuart L. Charme identifies six categories that demonstrate masochistic tendencies: "1) a distortion of love, 2) a need for punishment, 3) a payment for future rewards, 4) a strategy of the weak or powerless, 5) a flight from selfhood, or 6) an effort to be an object for others. In each case, religious analogies can be found exhibiting the same dynamics."[23] The prophetic experience fulfills these categories as the personhood of the prophet and the message are entwined in the masochistic expression. This form of masochism, however, is engaged in order to derive meaning rather than sexual or psychological gratification. The prophet engages in the act which produces pain as a means of obtaining the approval of God or the repentance and action of the people. This is the end result of the masochistic endeavor of prophecy. One notable example from the biblical text is Ezekiel eating food cooked on hot dung. In this episode, the prophet masochistically involves the self in the prophetic word to signal the higher truth of Yahweh, resulting in spiritual gratification. Ezekiel communicates that the people of Israel, if unrepentant, will eat their food in the same way as a result of being conquered and enslaved by a stronger nation. Similarly, Hosea is told by God to marry a prostitute, Gomer, thus delivering her from the necessities of her profession. Hosea later finds that she has returned to the profession of prostitution. Yahweh tells Hosea through a revelation of prophetic word to go back and find his wife in her prostitution, symbolic of the continual rebellious relationship of Israel to God, who is aggrieved at his chosen people's adultery.

This idea of masochism is especially poignant in the concept of the "messiah" as elaborated in the *New Testament*. *Messiah* is the Hebrew word for "anointed one" and is translated to *Christ* in the Greek version of the *New Testament*. The messiah is anointed, chosen, for several purposes, among them "to bring good news to the poor," that is, to engage in the prophetic word. But the messiah is also the primary *New Testament* vehicle for masochism. The prophet Isaiah, himself this similar kind of "meaning-masochist," writes that the Christ figure "was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was on him, by his wounds we are healed." It is interesting that this passage occurs in the past tense. The figure of the messiah undergoes immense pain for the apparent

[23] Charme, Stuart L. "Religion and the theory of masochism." *Journal of religion and health* 22.3 (1983): 221-233.

purpose of securing a spiritual or higher reality for the good of others. Isaiah use of the past tense solidifies the actions of the Christ as singular and actualized. The messiah, then, can be thought of as a prophet whose masochism transcends the symbolic. The messiah is himself the ultimate meaning-masochist, one who suffers and dies in reality rather than the realm of the symbolic, for the purpose of demonstrating a higher plane of truth in fulfillment of the hallmarks of masochism in religious experience.

Standup comedy itself, can be accurately conceptualized as an exercise in masochism. In work formulating the standup comedian as its own archetype, Rikki Tremblay employs common stereotypes that contribute to the figure. The "comic" archetypally perceives themselves as deeply flawed and incapable of normality, deals with negativity and depression, and has deep trauma that leads to introversion and social anxiety. This kind of formation of archetype dictates that the comedic moment, the actual performance, functions as one defined by masochism. If the archetypal comic is defined by these characteristics, the performance becomes a display of those characteristics for the pleasure of the audience and the comedian alike. The audience laughs and roots itself in the persona of the comedian, participating in the moment through the hearing and acceptance of the joke and the message within. The comic feels the pressure of "being funny" and through the exposure of the "darkness" within himself or the heterodoxy of their message, according to Tremblay's formation, finds relief. In this way, the comic sees the performance as "therapeutic" or "intimate." Like the prophet, some sort of social or internal pleasure is derived from the moment of revelation, which involves pain and the tragic figure of the comedic archetype.[24] Hicks. then, most accurately fits this archetype of the prophet, the messianic figure. It should be noted that the form of standup comedy shares many traits of the form utilized in the message of the archetypal prophet and messiah. Hicks takes this comparison a step further by embodying both the standup comic and the religious imagery of the apocalyptic, blending the prophetic and the messianic in the final movement of his special.

In the final visual sequence of the standup special, Hicks thanks his audience as is typical of the comic performer. As he takes his final bow, an image of a pistol flashes on the screen and three shots ring out. The viewer sees the comedian, clothed in black with his face obscured by the western hat, falling to the ground as the screen fades out and the audience cheers. There are many layers to this final shot sequence. Hicks, in archetypical messianic fashion, makes the ultimate sacrifice. Among the central aspects of his final monologue is his acknowledgement of the tendency of society to kill the bearers of those voices who tell the truth. He chooses to embody that moment in order to fully embrace the prophetic role to its furthest extent, into the messianic.

[24] Tremblay, Rikki. *Just kidding: A phenomenological investigation of standup comedy and the standup comedian from a communicative perspective*. California State University, Fullerton, 2014.

He does not simply note the symbolic in his standup material, but attempts to transcend the symbolic by miming death on screen and involving the audience in the moment. By ingratiating himself to the audience using religious imagery, and enlisting them in a larger culture war against the power elites of the system Hicks find himself in opposition to, he takes their adulation of him as a comic and transforms it into devotion to social cause. He indicts the audience in this final sequence, making them complicit in his death. His warning, that society always kills the people that tell them the truth, ultimately serves no purpose, as the audience cheers his death on without mourning. The comedic moment serves as an entry into the celebration that occurs at Hicks' collapse. What viewers are left with is an embodiment of the Messiah, a prophet who comes to give good news, whose death is no longer preempted by discussion and humor in Hick's closing remarks, but is actually pantomimed on stage. This act by Hicks necessarily involves the very people the prophetic word is meant to transform. It is as if Hicks desires the audience to be transformed by the experience, especially in his final monologue and shot sequence, and yet he acknowledges their limitations in seeing his comic routine as entirely performative. By acting out the very thing he just told them society is prone to do, and then luring them into applause and excitement over that very thing, he absolves and indicts them of their sin in the same moment. This is the ultimate function of both the religious and "replacement Messiah," the prophet and comedian. By conscripting the audience in the revelry surrounding his death, making them complicit, and then using the moment of death in the framework of sacrifice to lend weight to the social cause, he upends the power hierarchy.

Standup Comedy as Transformation and the Falsifying of Prophets

An astute observer should ask, "is Hicks' intentional presentation in the special as a prophetic archetype a recognition of larger thematic movements in standup comedy as a whole, or is his performance a singular feature in which he takes on the theological components to make a point?" In other words, is he presenting himself as a prophet because he sees the nature of standup comedy as prophetic, or does he embody the archetype to lend credence to his worldview apart from his artistic endeavor?

The two are not mutually exclusive Hicks certainly demonstrates a purposeful presentation of himself as a servant to a higher truth and evokes the religious apocalyptic imagery culminating in his simulated death in order to produce a desired impact on the audience, especially in the final movement of the piece. More importantly, it seems that Hicks' presentation indicates a response in the observer that presents him as an exemplar of all standup comedians. Hicks' imagery and religious ideation works for the audience because it creates a verisimilitude that is indicative of the art form. Returning to Brendon Burns' original thoughts on

Hicks, it must be noted that it is not *Revelations* that produces the religious language in his admirer, but Bill Hicks as a larger cultural figure. Hicks was not a "replacement messiah" because of that singular routine, but because he understood the power of standup comedy as an art form, and utilized that power to produce a prophetic word.

The form of standup comedy inherently involves all of the traits of the prophet and prophetic message: the service of higher truth and public communication, proclamation, of that message. At the very least, the standup comedian is critical of hierarchies in general, though not necessarily bound to the traditional idea of "punching up." The history of standup comedy stands in opposition to language purity laws as a place where hierarchy breaks down. Standup comedy makes fun of social norms and accepted ideas from a place of humor, but also from a place of frustration with the status quo and truth claims of the social structure. The standup comedian moves an audience to laugh or groan or heckle based on the content of his message, demonstrating the communicative imperative toward action; laughter becomes a ritual response of a worshipful devotee. Finally, Standup comedy is a famously masochistic art form as a whole, one in which its practitioners bear themselves to a room full of onlookers by sharing their perspective and pain, as well as their self-image and self-ridicule.[25] In short, the essential formulation and function are nearly indistinguishable from the prophetic word.

Hicks' role in the social landscape creates reverence because of his fulfillment of the comedic and prophetic archetypes, and this kind of reverence is not limited to him alone. Among the most relevant evidence for standup comedy's prophetic nature is the rise of a social system that allows for standup comedians to become cultural icons. Joe Rogan is the most popular interviewer of all time, based on studies from Edison Research, with a reach extending far beyond comedy and into health policy, science, politics, criminal justice reform, and entertainment at large.[26] While Joe Rogan is certainly revered by some, he and his podcasts have also been the subject of much disdain because of his political and cultural positions and those of his guests. Joe Rogan's standup comedy does not happen in a vacuum, but serves to drive people to his podcast, where his message produces simultaneous revulsion and reverence. What began as a standup comedy career grounded in the performative act became transformative for acolytes and critics alike.

The same is true of both Dave Chapelle and Hannah Gadsby, both of whom received praise and derision for their most recent televised specials. The derision adds a dimension to the prophetic nature of the comic. Each comedic figure subject to the ridicule of some subset of the

[25] Limon, John. *Stand-up comedy in theory, or, abjection in America*. Duke University Press, 2000.

[26] Research, Edison. "The Top 30 U.S. Podcasts According to The Podcast Consumer Tracker - Edison Research". *Edison Research*, 2022, https://www.edisonresearch.com/the-top-30-u-s-podcasts-according-to-the-podcast-consumer-tracker/.

hypothetical audience is falsified as a prophet by that audience. It is not that Dave Chappelle becomes irrelevant when certain factions consider his words out of bounds. Instead, it seems that he has fulfilled the prophetic role in a different way. His message has been deemed to be untrue and dangerous, worthy of resisting; he is declared by his critics to be a false prophet. This archetypal framework gives room for falsification, or the rejection, of the archetypal figure. The public discourse surrounding the comic's performative material, and the extra-performative words and actions of others like Louis C.K., Kevin Hart, and Cathy Griffin indicate to the astute observer and scholar that there is more to the presentation of the comic than mere words or performance. The prophet is not confined to his message, but to the larger archetypal components of prophethood.

The fact that our social structures seem to hold and evaluate the standup comedian's words in public consciousness, even those intended and acknowledged as performative, demonstrates the existence of a profound participatory experience for the audience, akin to a kind of religious devotion. Using Bill Hicks' standup special *Revelations*, we understand not only Hicks' assumption of the prophetic role, but also the underlying implications of standup comedy as a whole. While there is a difference between Hicks' intentional presentation and that which is essential to the art form, the two are interconnected. Hicks is playing into the larger form, which he acknowledges through his own characterization as essentially marking standup comedy in general. A deeper and more accurate understanding of Hicks' presentation of the self gives insight into the larger cultural moment, and helps us formulate a framework for societal, even individual, reaction to the standup comic as the prophet of the current cultural moment.

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BIO

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