Outrage Is the New Black [Vimeo password "comedy"]

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Outrage Is The New Black [working title]
By: Derek Scancarelli

Synopsis

In 1964, legendary comedian Lenny Bruce was brought to court on an obscenity charge after years and repeated arrests for using what was then deemed to be sexually vulgar language. Despite the testimony of fellow artists and intellectuals (Allen Ginsberg, Bob Dylan, James Baldwin), Bruce was convicted. The symbolism of what Bruce stood for is way more important than the four months he consequently spent in a workhouse. It proved that comedy has the power to shake the system - make people challenge authority and question the value of parallel thinking. Now – in 2015 – America is obsessed with outrage. We’re a cultural that loves tearing people down – it’s a process of viral shaming perpetuated by the internet, media, and outrage mongers. When this phenomenon starts attacking comedians [Louis CK, Chris Rock, Daniel Tosh, Joan Rivers, etc], it could potentially threaten comedy as an art form as well as the careers of its performers.

Since the 1960s, comedy has been turned upside down by artists such as Richard Pryor, Bill Hicks, Sam Kinison, and George Carlin. These vehement warriors of free speech challenged the authority of the government, religion, race and social construct. They paved the way for free speech and open conversation in an unrestricted way, presenting information in a way that no one had seen before. They did so unapologetically, in the honor of Lenny Bruce. The goal was not to impose their thoughts on people, but to have them serve as social commentary on the world around them. It served as a way to call attention to a subject, but also as a way to cope with and laugh at the things that make us most uncomfortable.

But now comedy is at a pivotal point. America has had an uncanny shift in its sensitivity. Outrage is the new black. The internet era and prevalence of social media has changed the landscape of how we communicate. Language policing and political correctness is alarmingly high and the last bastion of free speech, stand-up comedy, is in harm’s way. We’re at a crux where online witch-hunts have not only threatened the careers of comics, but the integrity of an art form.

Through the story of New York City stand-up Sam Morril’s experience being crucified on the internet as a symbol of misogyny and perpetrator of rape culture, various comics [Jim Norton, Joe List, Godfrey, Leah Bonnema, Dan Soder, Ari Shaffir, and more] and radio hosts [Anthony Cumia, Erik Nagel, Sam Roberts] discuss how our reactionary nature is damning to careers and creativity.

Treatment

Act 1

Outrage Is the New Black begins by quickly establishing America’s obsession with outrage, with examples ranging from the Starbucks’ coffee cups’ alleged war on Christmas and the public trials of Ariana Grande and Raven Simone. It nods that sometimes outrage and public shaming is acceptable, hint hint, Donald Trump.

But it seems that comedy is under fire, which is problematic, as this is an art form that needs to remain unrestricted – insert clip of Amy Schumer, Trevor Noah, Stephen Colbert news clips of outrage. Flashing screenshots of various comedians and their public backlash are rolled through the screen extremely quickly. The list is exhaustive. Next comes a throwback to Lenny Bruce and his trials, with a clip of his stand-up philosophy. There’s a nod to the aforementioned [Ginsberg, Dylan, Baldwin] who stood up for Bruce. So to start, we ask a question, are we losing freedom of speech?
Stand-up comic and Comedy Central *This Is Not Happening* host Ari Shaffir bursts into a tirade about freedom of speech, which is broken up by a lawyer and professor who specializes in the First Amendment. With narration we establish that this public shaming mentality we have actually isn’t a first amendment issue at all, but it’s really just a social phenomenon.

Our main character- Sam Morril- brings us into the piece by establishing comedy’s history and value as an art form, he’s introduced while performing on stage at an alternative room in Brooklyn. Critics Angie Frissore and James Shotwell are then joined by stand-up Dan Soder in establishing what comedy can do – make awful things funny – while we interject with a clip of Patrice O’Neal joking about the notion of white slavery in Obama’s America.

**Act 2**

Soon Soder, Godfrey, and Erik Nagel bring us to a turning point: it seems like comedians can’t say what they want anymore. Narration comes in and Jim Norton is brought in as a comedy and cultural expert for a highly produced 60-minutes style interview with the film’s director. Once introduced, Norton postulates that the immediacy of the digital age is responsible for our obsession with outrage. Next we cut to Sam Morril backstage at a comedy club in Philadelphia, reviewing his notes and preparing to go on-stage. He introduces his ordeal, where a blogger took up in arms after seeing him perform at the Comedy Cellar and making jokes about one of the most sensitive subjects there is: rape. Comic Joe List helps to explain his story. Joke one roles, “The N-Word,” said clip is from Comedy Central’s *The Half Hour*. Morril defends the joke, explaining the context of it and what it means from a technical comedic standpoint. While explaining, Morril is once again backstage in Brooklyn, speaking with a fellow comic. With help from comic Leah Bonnema, Joe List, Jim Norton, Sam Roberts, Dan Soder, Erik Nagel, and Andrew Schulz, we dive deeply into the importance of context in comedy, in sit-down interviews ranging from the CUNY J School to Sirius XM studios at Opie Radio. Morril then shows us his other offensive joke, “Ambien,” this clip was shot live in Philadelphia. He explains his awful joke by comparing it to a joke by Louie CK. That joke is inserted courtesy of Youtube. Sam rides the subway.

**Act 3**

Morril is outside the Comedy Cellar in New York City, bantering with the director (behind camera) about the set he plans to do that evening. Cut to B-roll of Comedy Cellar and Sam hanging out, he explains how he didn’t attack anyone, he was only making jokes, in a basement, where jokes are meant to be made. A bit of stand up is played from the Cellar. Cut to director with Jim Norton, speculating the obsession with the outrage: it relates to feeling powerless and a sense of accomplishment. Morril explains the ramifications of the blog posts backlash on his career, on the screen we see screenshots of Google results and headlines where Morril is mentioned as a villain of rape comedy culture (Guardian, Jezebel, Salon). Cut to B-Roll in ex *Opie and Anthony* host Anthony Cumbia’s home studio- you are seeing his radio boards, cameras, “on-air” sign, program monitors and producers. Cumbia describes what an equal response should be: words should be debated with words, not taking away livelihoods. Feminist comic Leah Bonnema explains that the best way to not have a dialogue is by shaming and pointing fingers at people. Cut back to director with Norton where the discuss Morril’s particular situation, and why Norton decided to go on W. Kamau Bell’s show on FX to debate Jezebel writer Lindy West. Roll clip of Lindy West dropping knowledge about hypocrisy in the power of humor and accountability. Return to Norton to round out his side of the argument, talking about the terrible elements of comedy he addresses himself. To round out the piece, we consider the future of comedy and outrage, and Norton is surprisingly hopeful. To end the piece, he goes with a quirky closer and stares at the camera.
Structure and Style

Outrage Is The New Black will follow a traditional three-act story structure, although each act will have various sub-categories. The narrative of the piece will be driven by multiple characters, but focusing on Sam Morril. Most of it will be in the traditional sit-down interview style; various archival clips and footage of comedians performing comedy will be used intermittently, as well a well produced sit down interview between the director and comedy expert Jim Norton.

Audience

First and foremost, this film is dedicated to and created for true fans of comedy, but is being crafted for the most general of audiences. Anyone who’s read a newspaper, turned on a TV, or has a Twitter account is aware of America’s obsession with being offended. A perspective from the comedy community will speak to those who maybe don’t realize that a politician and a jester shouldn’t be held to the same moral standards for speech.