PROTEUS

A JOURNAL OF IDEAS

Humor and Culture

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An ancient Greek sea divinity, herdsman of seals, Proteus could be elusive by changing his form at will appearing as a lion, a serpent, a boar, water, or a tall tree. However when those who caught him succeeded in holding him fast, Proteus assumed his proper shape of an old man and told the truth.

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Volume 29   Spring 2013   Number 1

Humor and Culture

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REVIEW EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

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As noted by scholars from various academic disciplines, humor is seemingly an inescapable part of human existence (Martin, 2007; Meyer, 2000). Humor's pervasiveness can been observed in personal relationships (see Hampes, 1992, 1994), places of employment (see Gibson 1994; Ramsey, Knight, Knight, and Verdon, 2011), political and social discourse (Meyer, 2000; Stewart, 2012), and many other contexts of human-based message production and reception. But, what is humor? The Oxford English dictionary has defined humor as "the faculty of perceiving what is ludicrous or amusing, or of expressing it in speech, writing, or other composition; jocose imagination or treatment of a subject" (Simpson & Weiner, 1989, p. 486). Obviously, countless definitions of humor exist. This is also true for the theoretical explanations proposed to explain humor occurrences. The most popular theories of humor are three unique perspectives aptly labeled the *Big Three*.

Plato and Aristotle are credited for introducing the oldest of the *Big Three*, the superiority perspective (Morreall, 1983). Proponents of this perspective believe that humor is merely a product of perceptual superiority. In other words, humor emerges from discourse tied to inferior social status, physical and mental weaknesses, mistakes, errors, defects, or deviant behavior. Examples of humor embodying this perspective include self-deprecatory humor, put-down jokes, and racist and sexist humor. Gruner (1997), a modern contributor to this perspective, proposed that jokes and other humorous messages contain *targets of aggression*. Moreover, he contended that targets of aggression are observable in all humor incidences. Consequently, humorous messages ranging from simple "knock knock" jokes, where the unknowing participant plays the part of the fool, to gallows humor, where the death of a target is imminent, originate from a sense of superiority. Adding support for this perspective, biologists have argued that human-based humor may have evolved from rough and tumble play, physical play where dominant and submissive acts are performed. Such play is observable in a wide variety of animal species (Gervais & Wilson, 2005; Martin, 2007; Panksepp & Burgdorf, 2003). Although the superiority perspective may explain a large portion of humor, like all theoretical perspectives, limitations abound.

The second of the *Big Three*, the incongruity perspective, explains one aspect of humor that superiority theorists typically neglect, the cognitive nature of humor. Morreall (1983) noted that the superiority perspective primarily addresses the emotional and affective; however, "for the incongruity theory [humorous] amusement is an intellectual reaction to something that is unexpected, illogical or inappropriate in some other way" (p. 15). Simply put, humor may be a product of cognitive and/or perceptual shifts. Like the superiority perspective, Aristotle is credited as incongruity theory's initial creator (Morreall, 1983; Martin, 2007); however, this perspective was not fully realized until the eighteen and nineteenth centuries, when the works of Kant and Schopenhauer explicated incongruity humor (Morreall). Much like the superiority perspective, modern scholars have continued to employ incongruity theory in social-psychological works (see Deckers & Devine, 1981; Galloway, 2009; Samson, 2009) and modern communication research (see Meyer, 1997, 2000; Shouse, 2007). Nevertheless, like the superiority perspective, the incongruity theory only offers a partisan approach to humor. Critics of the incongruity perspective have noted that this approach reduces humor to an individualist and cognitive process (Shouse, 2007). Moreover, all incongruous events are not humorous. Car accidents, unexpected deaths, violations of valued social norms are all incongruous, but they are rarely considered humorous.

The last of the *Big Three*, the relief perspective, examines the emotional, affective, and behavioral nature of humor. The relief perspective has inspired modern researchers to examine humor and arousal (see Berlyne, 1960, 1972) and humor as an emotional coping mechanism (see Harzold & Sparks, 2006; Martin, 1996; Wanzer, Sparks, & Frymier, 2009). Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud are credited with the development of the relief perspective (Martin, 2007), which presents humor and laughter as mechanisms for the release of stressors, tension, and excess energy. From this perspective, laughter may be considered humorous or non-humorous (Morreall, 1983). Humorous laughter is experienced when one laughs at humorous stimuli (a joke, an incongruity, or etc.) and feels a sense of relief from excess stressors, energy, or tension. Non-humorous laughter is experienced without humorous stimuli; however, energy, tension, and/or stressors are released through laughter (Morreall). Moreover, relief laughter can be situational (where tension is built and relieved in

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one situation) or cross-situational (where tension builds via multiple events and situations and is relieved at a later time through laughter) (Morreall).

As an early contributor to the relief perspective, Freud (1959) believed that *drives* were responsible for the excess energy, tension, and/or stressors that create humor. He believed that the only *drives* that produce humor are sexuality and hostility; conversely, modern research indicates that almost any number of *drives* may motivate the creation of humor (see Harzold & Sparks, 2006; Vela, Booth-Butterfield, Wanzer, & Vallade, 2013; Wanzer, Sparks, & Frymier, 2009). Like the superiority and incongruity perspectives, the relief perspective is partisan, only accounting for specific humor occurrences. However, when taken as a whole, the *Big Three* perspectives offer humor researchers a firm foundation for empirical and critical investigations. Likewise, the *Big Three* serve as umbrella perspectives for modern theories of humor such as reversal theory, bisociation, expectancy violation theory, instructional humor processing theory, incongruity resolution, arousal theory, and numerous others (see Martin, 2007).

In closing, the current state of humor research is rousing and promising. Modern humor scholars hail from a variety of academic disciplines, and their contributions to humor research encompass a myriad of interesting and rigorous methodological approaches. The interdisciplinary nature of humor research offers scholars, practitioners, and others distinctive glimpses into one of the most fascinating areas of research. This edition of *Proteus* features high quality research and artistic pieces that reflect the best in humor research.

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REVIEW EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

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"Funny" is a tricky thing. A quick online search will lead to a variety of opinions and definitions about what it means to be funny. One such hit led me to a definition stating that funny is anything which causes laughter or provides fun. Another led me to a "wikihow.com" essay that told me, "Being funny is not about mocking others or being disrespectful." How can that be? Despite myself, I have laughed at mockery and disrespectful remarks. So have you, haven't you? I can practically guarantee that you have if you have ever laughed while watching an episode of *The Simpsons* or *Seinfeld.* If the first definition tells us that "funny" is something that causes laughter, how can the second tell me that something that causes laughter, even inappropriate laughter, isn't funny? This is where my co-guest editor, Matthew Ramsey, has clarified theory among the types and functions of humor.

My family of origin employed teasing humor on a regular basis—with the understanding that the teaser must use the "magic touch" on the teased as if to say, "Hey, we still love you and this haptic expression is my proof of that, and this is just a joke." I am momentarily funny with the occasional wry comment or witty observation. While I'm a terrible story-teller, I'm usually pretty good with a wry quip at the right moment (obviously that moment is not right now because I think you just yawned). My husband is more of the overt joker: pranks, stories, jokes, and gags in addition to teasing. My children desperately desire to achieve being funny and ask, "Was that funny?" when they tell a story or "Why was that funny?" when they make us laugh. They want to understand what funny is and how funny works. So do most of the rest of us.

With all of the apparent contradictions, how does one learn what is funny? How does one become funny? Those distinctions between what is funny now and what is funny after some time has passed are incredibly difficult to comprehend. Additionally, the distinctions between who can or cannot be funny about certain subjects add to the difficulties. A recent imbroglio regarding rape jokes has enflamed the comedy world. While critics vocalized complaints about Daniel Tosh's remarks to a female heckler that suggested he would like for her to be raped, those voices were silent, perhaps even supportive, of Sarah Silverman's jokes about rape. Why the seeming contradiction? In all

actuality, this is not unlike jokes involving race, religion, sexuality, ability, etc. Humor expert Gina Barreca suggests that it is all in the empowerment of the teller to tell the joke that leads to its acceptability as opposed to making a victim the butt of a joke.

The importance of humor seems to be commonly accepted in our society. However, there is sometimes a societal pressure that tells us what is supposed to be funny and when we are allowed to laugh. From the sitcoms that direct us to laugh along with a pre-recorded track, to the "groaners" many of us read for years in Reader's Digest, to the witticism behind the cartoons of the New Yorker, we want to be amused and we want to be told what should amuse us. For many years, television told us when to laugh—sometimes quite literally. For shows with live audiences during the early years of television, there were actual signs that told the audience members "laugh." For at-home viewers, we were pressured to laugh by the influence of the canned laugh track. More recently, some sitcoms have taken to reducing or rejecting the use of pre-recorded laugh tracks preferring to let the humor stand on its own. As a child, I remember thinking that the only valid reason to subscribe to Reader's Digest was for the "Laughter, the Best Medicine" and the "Humor in Uniform" columns and that these were the epitome of good humor. Sadly, I also tried to re-tell those jokes in my own attempts to be funny (sorry, world!). As a teenager, I learned that a truly sophisticated view of humor was demonstrated in the often confusing New Yorker cartoons. Everyone seemed to read them, smile and nod knowingly, pretending that the humor was fulfilling and that, just by reading them, we were all a couple of IQ points smarter. We recognize humor is important (after all, it is the "Best Medicine," right?), but we don't always know exactly how or why it reaches us.

Why is it that the act of consuming the work of some writers, comedians, or actors will bring some of us to tears through uncontrollable gasping laughter and elicit a mere grin from others? I remember one particular instance while reading Mary Roach's book, *Spook*, in which I couldn't stop laughing about a scenario in which the author describes a misunderstanding that occurred when she was confused between an "elf" and an "ELF,"

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or extremely low frequency. When I attempted to read the segment to my husband, I laughed until I couldn't breathe, much less continue to read. All the while, he sat and smiled pleasantly, but failed to see the same level of humor in the anecdote that so completely besieged me. Similarly, I encouraged him and others to read a number of books such as Christopher Moore's *Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ's Childhood Pal*, Jenny Lawson's *Let's Pretend this Never Happened (A Mostly True Memoir)*, or Bill Bryson's *A Walk in the Woods: Rediscovering America on the Appalachian Trail* that led me to convulsive bouts of incapacitating laughter but only bemused them.

All of these questions: What is humor?, Why is it so important?, and How does it work?, receive attention in the following essays. This issue of *Proteus* addresses the connection between humor and culture throughout the works contained herein.

In Jennifer Martinsen's "'She remembered that he had yet to learn to be laught at': Humor, Humility, and National Identity in *Pride and Prejudice*," she investigates Jane Austen's employment of both humor and shame as they develop a model of Britishness. Martinsen demonstrates that humor serves more than a function of entertainment, it can also be a teaching tool or mode of instruction to tell us what is or what should be. Beyond demonstrating nationality, humor can also be used to further political ideology as it relates to mockery or "riffing" on political issues. Matt Foy's examination of humor as "Equipment for Riffing: Advanced Text-Reading Tactics and Polyvalent Constraints in *Mystery Science Theater 3000*" provides a consideration of audience agency and ridicule's impact on understanding society. Next, "The Road to Excess Leads to *The Magic Christian*: Comedy, the Grotesque, and the Limits of the Body" offers another exploration of comedy employed as a lens to view British class, society, and culture. In his essay, Kevin Flanagan teases out the nuances of bawdy humor within his cinematic criticism of the 1969 version of *The Magic Christian*.

Sandra Young draws from theoretical and pedagogical experiences in teaching humor as she develops her essay, "'A horse walks into a bar…': The Rhetoric of Humor as Consummate Communication Contrivance." Her discussion of the advanced composition course focused on the comprehension, writing, and performance of humor in the form of stand-up comedy allows readers to both learn more about the rhetoric of humor and enjoy learning about the path Young's students traveled in their quest for successful completion of the course's assignments. The rhetorical emphasis of understanding humor continues in Steven Sherwood's "Intersections of Wit and Classical Rhetoric: Humor as a Rhetorical Enterprise." Like the author of the previous article, this writer also draws on pedagogical experience in explaining the connection between humor and rhetoric. Unlike Young's focus on how students write about and perform humor, however, Sherwood begins with an explanation of how he uses humor as a method to establish credibility in the courses that he teaches. His explication provides a basis which allows him to connect with his students before helping them, and us as readers, understand the approach in classical rhetoric of whether or not it is appropriate to use humor.

"This is NOT Funny: How Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* Corrects its Audience," by Janna Houwen, is our final essay in this collection. Houwen's examination of this film explores the questions of how and when something crosses the threshold of funny and horrifying. To return to the definition of "funny" as described in the opening paragraph of this introduction, this film's disturbing take on funny at the expense of others may lead us to realize the limits of humor. The articles contained within this issue of *Proteus* begin to scrutinize those nuanced layers of humor. What will you find in reading this issue? Exploring what is "funny" is a very serious business.

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"SHE REMEMBERED THAT HE HAD YET TO LEARN TO BE LAUGHT AT": HUMOR, HUMILITY, AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

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Introduction: Jane Austen, National Identity, and Humor

Most critics tend to overlook *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) when discussing Jane Austen's relationship to Great Britain, its national identity, or its Empire, and instead focus on *Mansfield Park* because the novel references Antigua and slavery.[1] Although few would deny that Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy's marriage has intriguing implications regarding class and gender, many ignore the national ramifications of their union. However, I will argue that by combining humor and shame throughout their courtship, Austen provides readers with a standard of conduct that helps to define what it means to be British and offers criteria for a responsible use of power.

By investigating how Austen draws on humor and shame to craft a model of Britishness, I am also suggesting that *Pride and Prejudice* can help us better understand how Austen's novel participates in early nineteenth-century debates about Britain and its responsibilities. Although she never overtly mentions the Empire in this text, Austen attempts to direct her readers toward a judicious use of their influence and authority over others. While it's not my intention to demonstrate how this novel contributed directly to the work of imperialism,[2] exploring Austen's treatment of humor and shame in *Pride and Prejudice* sheds light on how early nineteenth-century writers tried to establish standards for wielding power even though those standards were grounded in idealized British behavior and fell short of the realities of imperial rule.

Merging humor with didacticism, Austen constructs a paradigm for Britishness that encourages readers to mind the effects of their attitudes and behaviors. While humor highlights ways of acting and thinking that need correction, Austen reveals that humor doesn't always work. When laughter fails to make people self-aware, shame

draws attention to misjudgments. By showing the process by which Darcy and Elizabeth learn from their mistakes and each other, Austen illustrates that developing and maintaining self-awareness requires negotiating humor and shame. For Austen, humility—the necessary consequence of this negotiation—comes when people not only learn from their errors but also learn to laugh at them.[3]

Many nineteenth-century writers sought to explain the increasingly complex relationship between British identity and power, especially imperial power. For example, Austen's response to questions about national identity isn't as overt as that of her contemporary Maria Edgeworth. Unlike Edgeworth who tries to define a Britishness that includes the Irish, Austen offers a particularly English definition.[4] Her sense of Britishness seems to privilege maintaining class boundaries, but the criteria she advances about being considerate and taking responsibility for one's deeds is meant to apply to all. Figuring out the meaning of Britishness became more and more important as the Empire started incorporating ever more diverse peoples. By 1815, Linda Colley explains, the "boundaries of the British empire were so extensive that they included one in every five inhabitants of the globe. The question of how these millions of men and women who were manifestly not British, but who had been brought under British rule by armed force should be treated and regarded thus became inescapable" (1992, 323). Determining what constitutes a proper use of power thus became a crucial concern for British identity.

On the surface, *Pride and Prejudice* doesn't seem remotely connected to debates about Britain's national identity. Despite the presence of soldiers stationed in Hertfordshire,[5] the setting is undeniably provincial. The main action occurs at Longbourn, Netherfield and Meryton in Hertfordshire; Hunsford and Rosings in Kent; or

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Pemberley in Derbyshir. Events taking place in London and Brighton are glossed over. Yet, the novel's very provinciality contributes greatly to nineteenth-century conversations about national identity, for the text embodies the centralization of Englishness in definitions of Britishness. According to Claire Lamont, Austen's texts reflect how "the English… created a culture which they regard simply as *normal*" (2009, 312). Therefore, Austen's England "has that monumental quality of simply *being*" (312). By focusing on such a small segment of Britain's population, Austen shows how a fragment often represented a larger whole. As Franco Moretti argues:

> Austen's space is of course too obviously *English* to be truly representative of the *British* nation…. The point is that England has long enjoyed an ambiguous and privileged position within the United Kingdom: *part* of it (like Scotland, Ireland, Wales)—but a *dominant* part, that claims the right to stand in for the whole. Austen's geo-narrative system is an extremely successful version of this opaque overlap of England and Britain. (1998, 15n2)

A synecdochical approach to national identity—particularly one that assumes England can stand in for Britain—explains how Austen's characters are intended to function as exemplars of proper British behavior for all readers.[6]

Humor plays an important part in the model of Britishness *Pride and Prejudice* provides. Austen incorporates comedy into her text to critique and instruct, rather than simply to mock and humiliate. Her approach is subtle: her comedy is witty and ironic, not absurd or ludicrous. She doesn't use stereotypes. Instead, Austen infuses her novel with realistic characters with which readers can identify. By using characters to point out behavior deemed ridiculous, Austen highlights actions that make people visible for the wrong reasons. By placing this message about inappropriate conduct within a comical context, Austen also creates a space for improvement. Subtle humor, combined with a lack of stereotypes, encourages readers to share characters' experiences—not to merely bear witness to them or feel as if Austen is being didactic. Austen's comedy makes receiving instruction pleasurable for readers receptive to reform.

Humor and laughter work as correctives because they have a particularly social function. Henri Bergson suggests that the comic "expresses an individual or collective imperfection which calls for an immediate corrective. This corrective is laughter, a social gesture that singles out and represses a special kind of absentmindedness in men and in events" (1911, 43). Being jeered at exposes people's faults and encourages them to become self-aware (especially if they want to avoid ridicule), and throughout the novel, Austen contrasts Elizabeth and her ability to laugh at herself to Darcy and his apparent lack of humor. This opposition reveals that Darcy needs to become socially cognizant not only of how others perceive him but also of how his refusal to engage with the community at Hertfordshire makes him a comic target. Austen uses Elizabeth's wit to illustrate that humor exposes errant behavior and provides the means for fixing it.[7] Moreover,

humor starts serving as a corrective slowly, which reveals that characters and readers must learn to be receptive to laughter's power to reform. It also shows that developing the openness necessary for humor to succeed as a corrective often takes time and mutual effort on the part of both the joker and the jokee.

Humor as a Gentle Corrective: Elizabeth and Darcy at the Beginning

As Elizabeth and Darcy's acquaintance progresses, the function of humor in their relationship changes. At the outset, laughter primarily exposes impropriety. Elizabeth's wit merely draws attention to Darcy's unsuitable conduct; it doesn't aim to remedy it. Elizabeth's reaction to Darcy's insult during their first encounter exemplifies how this function of humor initially shapes their dynamic. After waiting to catch her eye and then turning away, Darcy "coldly" describes Elizabeth as "'tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt *me*'" (Austen 1813, 9). When she overhears him, Elizabeth responds by telling the story "with great spirit among her friends" (9). Her good-humored response exposes the absurdity of his blatant incivility.[8] However, because Darcy isn't interested in getting to know Elizabeth, he isn't open to experiencing the power of her wit to mock or to mend. Later, Elizabeth's wit aims to make Darcy aware of his mistakes so he can fix them. Although Elizabeth blunders herself, her laughter highlights the importance of taking an interest in how others perceive one's actions. Elizabeth and Darcy both become increasingly receptive to learning from each other as they bother to get to know each other, which better allows humor to operate. Darcy is progressively more engrossed in what Elizabeth says and thinks, while Elizabeth is interested enough in Darcy to point out the absurdity of his behavior to him directly. Just as Elizabeth and Darcy become invested in their relationship, readers become more interested in the characters and amenable to learning from them.

By gradually introducing characters and readers to humor's capacity to rectify errant behaviors, Austen lays the foundation for modeling how power can be used judiciously. She repeatedly shows that people need to be willing to acknowledge and rectify their mistakes. She also demonstrates that learning how to fix one's errors is a continuous process. In this way, her novel offers a model of administration that stresses the importance of being open to emendation. For instance, as the head of his family and a respected member of the landed gentry, Darcy has power over many: his sister, Georgiana; his friends, such as Bingley; and his staff and tenants at Pemberley. Although his parents taught him how to manage his estates and fulfill his duties as a gentleman, Darcy's conceit leads him to make mistakes; consequently, he must figure out how to right them. With the help of Elizabeth's critical laughter, Darcy not only becomes aware of his errors but also discovers the means for correcting them.

Darcy's struggles with self-awareness and governance mirror the struggles of many nineteenth-century Britons,

especially those contributing to the imperialist project. With rapid expansion, representatives of the Empire encountered peoples and cultures completely foreign to anything they had ever known. Inevitably, these Britons erred while figuring out how to live amongst and govern the unfamiliar. Moreover, their political and social position in the colonies operated on an undeniably unequal distribution of power. Although Austen doesn't challenge this inherent imbalance of power, she does reveal throughout *Pride and Prejudice* that the best strategy for amending these self-same faults of pride and prejudice is to take responsibility when one errs, which may require a sense of humor and humility. Austen thus illustrates how humor offers a means not only of saving face, but more importantly, of moving toward a less irresponsible use of power.

Elizabeth and Darcy's conversation about joking illustrates how humor can instruct. Their discussion occurs after Darcy denies Miss Bingley's request to join her and Elizabeth in a walk around Netherfield's drawing room. He imagines that they either want to confide in each other or have him admire them. He asserts, "if the first [reason], I should be completely in your way;—and if the second, I can admire you much better as I sit by the fire" (Austen 1813, 49). When Miss Bingley asks Elizabeth how to punish Darcy for such a "'shocking'" speech (49), Elizabeth suggests they tease and laugh at him because "[i]ntimate as you are, you must know how it is to be done" (49). Miss Bingley refuses on the grounds that Darcy is exempt from laughter (50). Elizabeth, however, exclaims that this is "an uncommon advantage, and uncommon I hope it will continue, for it would be a great loss to *me* to have many such acquaintance. I dearly love a laugh" (50). For Elizabeth, being impervious to mirth is disadvantageous not merely because she "'dearly love[s] a laugh,'" but also because she sees laughing as a sign of closeness and teasing as a gentle mode of correction.[9] Her suggestion that teasing and laughing at Darcy is appropriate punishment supposes that Miss Bingley's friendship with Darcy provides her with knowledge about how to expose his faults without being too hurtful. According to this logic, intimacy based on friendship and mutual respect helps to provide guidelines for deducing what someone is willing to hear. Conversely, it enables the person in need of emendation to know that the other person's impulse to fix errant behavior stems from a desire to help, not humiliate. Elizabeth's proposed solution also presumes that Miss Bingley's friendship with Darcy endows her with the power to point out Darcy's faults because he respects her and will heed what she has to say. As Audrey Bilger claims, "[b]y advising laughter, Elizabeth implies… that intimacy involves a certain amount of critical laughter" (1998, 73). For Elizabeth, knowing someone well enough to joke with him suggests that there is space for humor to correct and unite rather than to humiliate and alienate. Intimacy, to Elizabeth, entails a desire for friends and family to act properly and a willingness to help them do so. Elizabeth's humor also reveals how social interactions can be light-hearted without being disrespectful; her laugh-

ter combined with her desire to help others comes from a place of humility—not superiority. Austen uses Elizabeth to illustrate how humor has the potential to create a sense of camaraderie instead of ostracism and animosity.

Darcy, however, takes himself too seriously and cannot see any benefit to being the butt of a joke. His reply to Elizabeth's claim that she loves laughing suggests that he perceives critical laughter as contemptuous. Darcy contends, "The wisest and the best of men, nay, the wisest and best of their actions, may be rendered ridiculous by a person whose first object in life is a joke" (Austen 1813, 50). Even after Elizabeth explains that she hopes she "never ridicule[s] what is wise or good" but instead enjoys laughing at "follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies"—faults which she ironically supposes he doesn't possess—Darcy declares, "Perhaps [being without fault] is not possible for any one. But it has been the study of my life to avoid these weaknesses which often expose a strong understanding to ridicule" (50). Trying to avoid being an object of ridicule isn't objectionable, but Darcy's methods are problematic. Donald A. Bloom writes, "No one would dispute the worthiness of a program of avoiding blamable weaknesses, but Darcy has adopted a rather skewed value system in pursuit of it. Rather than avoiding doing harm to others or to his own moral standing, he merely wishes to avoid ridicule for looking foolish" (2004, 221). Darcy's desire to avoid ridicule in conjunction with his comment about "the wisest and the best of men" (Austen 50) suggests that he feels a sense of superiority that places him above improvement. Darcy's inflated sense of self-worth makes him a comic target. As Bergson attests, the "man who withdraws into himself is liable to ridicule, because the comic is largely made up of this very withdrawal" (1911, 68). When Darcy proclaims that he tries to be above ridicule, he reveals the extent of his erroneous attitude. Thus, Darcy appears even more ridiculous. Humor in *Pride and Prejudice* doesn't simply accentuate the trials and tribulations of courtship; it helps to convey a model of exercising power that encourages amiable cooperation.

The conversation about joking also raises questions about the connection between humility and self-awareness. Darcy refuses to acknowledge how teasing someone can be beneficial because he lacks the humility to realize that being amused at his own mistakes can be advantageous. When people are willing to laugh at and learn from their foibles, they reveal a level of modesty to which others can relate. Therefore, when Darcy admits that he "cannot forget the follies and vices of others" as soon as he ought (Austen 1813, 50), he shows a degree of arrogance that's alienating. His pride and refusal to forgive errors discourage people from establishing meaningful connections with him. Darcy appears cold, unapproachable, and unsympathetic: qualities that do not contribute to a successful mode of rule (if one seeks willing compliance). Self-awareness also consists of recognizing that looking ridiculous occasionally is unavoidable, so it's better to simply accept it. To do otherwise, like Darcy, and to think that an individual is exempt from looking foolish only makes that person a fool: "Inattention to self, and consequently to others…

[equates] to… unsociability. The chief cause of rigidity is the neglect to look around—and more specifically within oneself…" (Bergson 1911, 72). Darcy's lack of humility stems from a lack of self-knowledge. His obliviousness, in turn, reveals that, besides needing to learn to laugh at himself, Darcy must also become mindful of those around him.[10] Elizabeth's teasing aims to help Darcy become more conscious of himself and others. In illustrating how to negotiate the process that leads to self-awareness, these characters provide readers with a paradigm they can emulate to become better individuals. By learning how to act properly, these individuals will signify what it means to be a good Briton to others within the nation and beyond.

The behavioral models Austen puts forth about how readers should act engage in what Andrew H. Miller calls "moral perfectionism" (2008). As a "particular narrative form (rather than a concept, theory, or disposition)," moral perfectionism depends on the "complex proposition that we turn from our ordinary lives, realize an ideal self, and perfect what is distinctly human in us—and that we do so in response to exemplary others" (Miller 3). The idea that readers look beyond their everyday experiences for ways to improve helps to explain not only how authors can use characters to illuminate what to do but also why readers are open to perceiving these creations as models worth imitating. Moreover, Miller contends that in "describing improvement, perfectionist prose characteristically aims to stimulate it as well, to reproduce in readers the experience it describes" (17). By demonstrating how they learn from and eventually laugh at their mistakes, Darcy and Elizabeth set a precedent: they discover the importance of attending to the appearance and effect of their actions, which teaches readers this lesson, too.[11]

Darcy and Elizabeth's developing awareness about how they treat others reflects a challenge Britons faced as their power expanded. To maintain peace, Britons needed to ascertain how to negotiate social relations among the diverse peoples they governed. If they—like Darcy—dismissed the local community's dynamics and refused to modify their actions, they risked alienating new British subjects and creating an environment ripe for revolt. As mid-nineteenth century colonial rebellions, particularly in India (1857-58) and Jamaica (1865), show, alienating rule was often combustible.[12]

Disrespect for cultural differences played a significant role in both uprisings because British colonizers enacted policies that placed their colonial subjects in politically and legally inferior positions. As history shows, it was only a matter of time before the colonies would challenge obvious and institutionalized inequality and contempt. David Newsome explains that in India, for example, while many Britons believed religious tensions would keep Hindus and Muslims from uniting against British rule, they saw no problem "trampling on [Hindu and Muslim] religious susceptibilities" (1997, 107). By disregarding cultural practices in addition to demanding higher taxes and more territory (Levine 2007, 77), British administrators created a toxic environment, which led Indian soldiers and subjects to

revolt violently against a blatant lack of respect and unfairness. The Morant Bay uprising in Jamaica also exemplifies the dangers of treating those living in the colonies poorly. Although no longer enslaved, the black majority didn't have any political or legal power. Moreover, they were faced with a governor, Edward Eyre, who believed that their poverty was simply a result of "'the idleness, improvidence, and vice of the people'" (qtd. in N. Ferguson 2002, 161). When anger over poverty and unemployment resulted in a riot and the deaths of several white officials, Eyre responded brutally by declaring martial law. While Eyre was reprimanded and relieved of his position as a result of outcry over his violent reaction, Parliament responded to both rebellions by increasing their imperial presence instead of acknowledging and eradicating the inequality and disrespect that contributed to colonial resistance in the first place.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, however, Austen advances an alternative model for British behavior. She encourages readers to imagine a way of interacting with others that stresses having the modesty not only to be considerate but also to be willing to take responsibility for one's mistakes. While many Britons assumed that ruling others was their right, the novel demonstrates that to govern in a manner befitting a Briton means listening to criticism, considering and respecting other viewpoints, and being amenable to change.

Yet, Austen does not suggest that power should be more evenly distributed. Darcy's evolution into a leader of the Bennet family as well as his own implies that, for Austen, power should remain with the elite. Although her paradigm accepts an imbalance of power, it resists the idea of blind subjugation. Often in a subordinate position due to her sex and class, Elizabeth uses her critical laughter to check Darcy's use of power. Through Darcy and Elizabeth's development, readers discover that humility—especially when combined with laughter, thoughtfulness, and accountability—can work to establish a system of checks and balances.

When Humor Fails: The Proposal, the Letter, and the Road to Self-Awareness

Elizabeth and Darcy's bantering in the novel's first half repeatedly demonstrates how humor can expose unsuitable behavior in an effort to rectify it. However, Darcy's first marriage proposal, in volume two, reflects a shift both in Darcy and Elizabeth's dynamic as well as in Austen's narrative strategy. Prior to the proposal, Elizabeth and Darcy's interactions illustrate the process by which humor can help readers develop humility, but now they expose how humor doesn't always work. Laughter can effectively correct *only* when the person needing emendation is open to its capacity to reform. At this stage in their relationship, Darcy is invested in Elizabeth but not enough for her teasing to cause him to change (or even be aware that he should). He lacks the ability (let alone the interest) to look outside himself and consider how others might construe his

behavior. Consequently, Darcy doesn't realize the extent to which his pride and arrogant actions—such as initially dismissing Elizabeth and pompously pronouncing "where there is a real superiority of mind, pride will be always under good regulation" (Austen 1813, 50)—have alienated Elizabeth. Despite Elizabeth's efforts to poke fun at his faults, he still takes himself too seriously. Darcy only starts to become aware of how others perceive him when he experiences shame.

Shame, like humor, can transform. It exposes errors and increases self-awareness because it "is an experience of the self by the self" which "turns the attention of the self and others away from other objects to this most visible residence of self, increases its visibility, and thereby generates the torment of self-consciousness" (Tomkins 1995, 136). Shame forces people to pay closer attention to how they appear, for it painfully and inevitably increases self-awareness. This occurs to "the extent to which the individual invests his affect in other human beings, in institutions, and in the world around him" (159). As Darcy grows more invested in Elizabeth, shame succeeds when laughter has failed.

While Austen focuses on how shame touches individuals, her use of shame pertains to the model of power the novel manifests as well, for shame can work on a national level. With an Empire spanning the globe, Britain was invested in how its interactions with others reflected what it meant to be British. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a sense of superiority stemmed from the belief that Britons were more civilized and, thus, treated their subjects better than other nations. Colley explains:

> For most Victorians, the massive overseas empire… represented final and conclusive proof of Great Britain's providential destiny. God had entrusted Britons with empire, they believed, so as to further the worldwide spread of the Gospel…. Well into the twentieth century, contact with and dominion over manifestly alien peoples nourished Britons' sense of superior difference. They could contrast their law, their treatment of women, their wealth, power, political stability and religion with societies they only imperfectly understood, but usually perceived as inferior. (1992, 368-69).

Believing in and acting on a sense of superiority are clearly problematic. When a nation connects its treatment of others with its identity, however, it invites both shame and the potential for improvement, particularly when that nation becomes aware of inconsistencies. Britain's Reform Act of 1832, which extended the vote to the middle class; the abolition of the slave trade in 1807; and the emancipation of slaves which started in 1833 and ended with total liberation by 1838 exemplify the nation's capacity to become aware of its failure to meet its own standards, to feel shame, and then to rectify its errors.[13] By showing the process by which shame can generate positive change in individuals, Austen's novel sets a precedent for how a nation can and should modify its policies and practices in order to improve upon them.

Darcy's arrogance and lack of awareness blind him to the possibility that his marriage proposal may not be welcome; consequently, Elizabeth's rejection and her reasons for refusing him produce shame which causes Darcy to reassess his behavior. While Darcy's interference in Jane and Bingley's relationship and his supposed ill treatment of Wickham are grounds for Elizabeth's dislike, these reasons are not her most damning evidence against him nor are they overly vexing when he hears them. Instead, her shaming proves most effective when she lambastes his character as a gentleman. By berating him for not acting "'in a more gentleman-like manner'" during his "'declaration'" (Austen 1813, 171), Elizabeth assails what's most integral to how he defines himself. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains, "shame attaches to and sharpens the sense of what one is" (2003, 37). Darcy believes he acts like a proper gentleman. Bernard J. Paris points out that Darcy "has prided himself on behaving in an exemplary manner…. He was given high standards by his parents, and he has identified himself with them" (2004, 178). When Elizabeth—the woman he respects and loves despite himself—challenges Darcy's behavior, he's astounded because "he has always felt himself to be living up to" those expectations set by his parents and himself (178). Elizabeth's brutal appraisal of his character makes him vulnerable to shame. Her criticism of Darcy's behavior as a gentleman threatens the foundation of his identity, and the shame he feels prompts him to reevaluate his character.

Elizabeth's shaming is effective because, in many respects, Darcy's proposal represents a model of colonial conquest. For example, after pronouncing that he cannot overcome his feelings for her despite valiant effort, Darcy begins his proposal by laying out objections to their union. As the narrator explains, Darcy's "sense of [Elizabeth's] inferiority—of its being a degradation—of the family obstacles which judgment had always opposed to inclination, were dwelt on with a warmth which seemed due to the consequence he was wounding, but was very unlikely to recommend his suit" (Austen 1813, 168). Darcy's concern with obstacles *he* has had to overcome with little consideration for what Elizabeth may think or feel is on par with a form of imperialism focused on what the colonizer has to lose (or gain) with no thought as to the potential consequences for those being colonized. The narrator then reveals that Darcy "concluded with representing to [Elizabeth] the strength of that attachment which, in spite of all his endeavours, he had found impossible to conquer; and with expressing his hope that it would now be rewarded by her acceptance of his hand. As he said this, she could easily see that he had no doubt of a favourable answer" (168-69). Rather than present Elizabeth with a sincere request, Darcy's "proposal" exposes his assumption that someone with prestige and power ought and will be rewarded for deigning to love and thus improve someone who doesn't equal that status.

Darcy's obvious disdain for everything Elizabeth holds dear, and his presumption that she will leap at the chance to align herself with someone of his class, mirrors a similar belief that countless Britons had about the colonies.

Many Victorians assumed "that subject peoples would speedily appreciate the advantages of British justice and the privilege of being ruled by the most civilized nation of the Western world" (Newsome 1997, 107). Elizabeth's resistance reveals the lack of cooperation that disrespect combined with arrogance inspires. She doesn't see Darcy—anymore than many colonies viewed Britain—as a benefactor. Elizabeth has the opportunity to refuse, and so she shames Darcy for his presumptions. By demonstrating how individuals can become cognizant of having an obligation to act respectfully towards others, the novel shows how nations can and should learn to act responsibly toward their subjects as well.

The letter Darcy gives to Elizabeth after the proposal represents his first step toward gaining humility. In writing the letter, Darcy demonstrates that now—after encountering shame—he realizes what it means to be held accountable. He responds to Elizabeth's accusations because he can't ignore them. His feelings for her and his identity as a gentleman demand that he vindicate himself. He declares that he writes to her "without any intention of paining [her], or humbling myself" but because his "character required it to be written and read" (Austen 1813, 174). Even though Darcy claims that he isn't "humbling himself," giving the letter to Elizabeth signifies that he's starting to attain some humility: for the first time, he realizes that he needs to justify himself to someone else and that he's capable of inappropriate behavior.

Throughout the letter, Darcy reveals that he's becoming more aware of how others perceive his conduct and the effect it produces. Although he doesn't intend to hurt Elizabeth, he knows his words will upset her. Therefore, before he begins addressing her indictments, Darcy warns Elizabeth: "If, in the explanation of them which is due to myself, I am under the necessity of relating feelings which may be offensive to yours, I can only say that I am sorry" (Austen 1813, 175). Moreover, he foresees that this general apology won't be sufficient, so he apologizes again after telling her that her family's "total want of propriety" (176) contributed to his interference in Jane and Bingley's relationship and yet again after stating that Wickham lacks principles and dissembles his true nature (178). These apologies illustrate that he doesn't write to be vindictive, but rather that her accusation about him "disdaining the feelings of others" made an impression (172).

In realizing that, as a gentleman, he needs to strive to be fair in his treatment of others, Darcy sees that being just also means taking responsibility for his actions and acknowledging his fallibility. He exemplifies a willingness to change and, more importantly, a flexibility that will enhance his capacity to use his influence respectfully and effectively. In short, Darcy starts to model a mode of administration that cultivates cooperation instead of resistance. For instance, Darcy explains that he decided to disrupt Bingley and Jane's courtship because he looked for evidence to confirm that both Bingley and Jane had strong feelings for each other but couldn't detect "any symptom of peculiar regard" in Jane (Austen 1813, 175). However, he quickly concedes, "If *you* have not been mis-

taken here, *I* must have been in an error. Your superior knowledge of your sister must make the latter probable. —If it be so, if I have been misled by such error, to inflict pain on her, your resentment has not been unreasonable" (175). Each "if" combined with deference to Elizabeth's superior knowledge of her sister signifies Darcy's acceptance not only of the likelihood that he erred but also of the responsibility he has for causing Jane pain. For Sarah Emsley, Darcy repeatedly demonstrates his newfound consciousness about what constitutes true gentlemanly behavior because "in addition to explaining his own actions, he is trying to establish what is right… and he is at pains to judge correctly" (2005, 97). Darcy further informs Elizabeth that he "can summon more than one witness of undoubted veracity" (Austen 177) as he begins to comprehend that his class and family background aren't enough to substantiate his character. Throughout his letter, Darcy demonstrates a growing awareness that his identity as a British gentleman depends on his behavior toward others and not just his status.[14]

It's difficult to underestimate the importance of Darcy's letter.[15] It invites Elizabeth to reassess Darcy's character in a way that dialogue with him cannot. According to Lloyd W. Brown, "unlike their personal meetings," Darcy's letter provides Elizabeth with "the opportunity to reconsider initial responses. She can evaluate her prejudice in the light of Darcy's statements and attitudes, now that the epistolary form has literally made them accessible for reexamination" (1973, 163). The epistolary form helps readers, too. Many critics point out that Austen encourages readers to identify with Elizabeth through free indirect discourse and thus base their understanding of other characters on her opinions.[16] Yet, by presenting Darcy's letter as a means for Elizabeth to reevaluate her past judgments, Austen provides readers with the same opportunity to more objectively reexamine theirs.

Furthermore, offering Darcy's letter without mediation from either Elizabeth or the narrator marks a major departure in the novel; Austen removes any narrative apparatus that could influence the reader's ability to interpret Darcy's words. For John Wiltshire, the letter "is a formal turning point in *Pride and Prejudice*, because for the first time [Darcy] comes forward in an independent voice, unconstrained by social occasion, cut free from those responses of Elizabeth that have coloured the reader's attention to him so far" (2001, 113). Because Darcy's letter appears first, without being filtered through Elizabeth's consciousness, readers can not only judge Darcy for themselves but also comprehend the extent of Elizabeth's misjudgments—and possibly their own. Just as Elizabeth feels ashamed when she sees how prejudice blinded her, the experience of reading Darcy's letter followed by Elizabeth's reaction to it aims to produce shame in readers, especially if they allowed Elizabeth or the narrator's opinions to interfere with their ability to read accurately.

Austen uses the shame that ensues when Elizabeth discovers the extent of her misjudgments to show how prejudices limit a person's understanding. A rapidly expanding Empire required Britons to rule diverse peoples.

Britons, therefore, needed to discover an effective method for attending to cultural differences because maintaining their power depended on the assistance of those being ruled. Moreover, the method by which they managed their Empire shaped how others—within the Empire and outside it—perceived them and what it meant to be British. By connecting Elizabeth's reading experience with shame, Austen illustrates the importance of discarding prejudices. Through Elizabeth, Austen calls attention to the dangers of allowing prejudice to interfere with how one perceives and interacts with others.

Elizabeth's response to Darcy's letter reveals that Darcy isn't the only one that must become sensible of his fallibility. Elizabeth also needs to work out how to use her influence. For Elizabeth, increasing self-awareness requires deducing how to reevaluate her previous opinions by reading critically. A detailed description of Elizabeth's reading process exemplifies how Austen's audience can learn to be objective, evaluate thoughtfully, and judge fairly. Her reading practice reveals the necessity of being willing to acknowledge and correct one's mistakes; it exposes how prejudices lead to unfair and inaccurate judgments. This process isn't easy. As Miller notes, Austen "goes out of her way to display the difficulties Elizabeth has as a reader: she must form and re-form an intention to read with patient attention" (2008, 79). Austen makes clear that improving one's ability to assess new information and diverse viewpoints properly requires diligence and fortitude.

Each step of Elizabeth's reading process represents her perseverance and illustrates a stage in her development. When she first receives Darcy's letter, she reads it "with an eagerness which hardly left her power of comprehension, and from impatience of knowing what the next sentence might bring, was incapable of attending to the sense of the one before" (Austen 1813, 181). Yet, when she slows down and starts to "read with somewhat clearer attention" (181), a space for improvement emerges. Upon diligently re-examining each line and then stopping to analyze each piece of information, Elizabeth concludes that although she "had believed it impossible that any contrivance could so represent, as to render Mr. Darcy's conduct… less than infamous," every line "was capable of a turn which must make him entirely blameless throughout the whole" (182). Time after time, Elizabeth must read and then stop to think about what she just learned, for that's the only way she can gather the information vital to judging fairly and accurately.

By its very nature, increased globalization creates encounters between dissimilar cultures; therefore, when expansionist ambitions carried Britons across the globe, those Britons needed to negotiate these differences in order to interact effectively with peoples that did not look, sound, or act like them. Despite the fact that imperialism is an inherently flawed system, the British made a number of particularly egregious mistakes in governance because prejudices shaped their actions. By revealing how Elizabeth comes to reevaluate what she knows and to take responsibility for her errors, Austen offers readers a way to amend their mistakes and/or to avoid making similar errors. As Emsley points out, "It is not just the information Darcy provides that makes it possible for [Elizabeth] to reformulate her judgment, but the fact that this information prompts her to think more carefully about other things she already knows" (2005, 100). Austen demonstrates how being receptive to gaining new knowledge enables readers to reassess what they already know about others and themselves. Her text reveals that openness to new information can lead to self-awareness for an individual, and for the nation, a better understanding of what it means to be British.

Darcy's letter causes Elizabeth shame, but this feeling enables her to adapt. Admitting that she had been wrong about Wickham inspires her to reassess Darcy (Austen 1813, 184). As Elizabeth uses her newfound knowledge to compare and contrast the men, she starts coming to terms with her own fallibility, realizing that "she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd" (185). She acknowledges that her humiliation is "just" (185): she realizes that she's not above making mistakes. Her proclamation "'Till this moment, I never knew myself!" (185) serves as another pivotal event in *Pride and Prejudice*. It signifies that knowing oneself means having the humility to recognize and accept that erring is human. Elizabeth's epiphany also implies that understanding one's identity—as an individual and a citizen—is an ongoing process dependent upon constantly situating the self in relation to others. Thus, experiencing shame starts with admitting that one errs, leads to developing the fortitude to fix those errors, and results in gaining a broader perspective of one's place in the world.

Paving the Way for Laughter's Return: Elizabeth, Darcy, and a Successful Proposal

There is nothing remotely funny about the proposal or Elizabeth's experience reading Darcy's letter. It is shame that promotes mutual recognition between Darcy and Elizabeth, and this mutual recognition is key to the novel's paradigm of power. Just as Darcy and Elizabeth's relationship becomes stronger when they learn from each other and begin to view their differences as assets rather than qualities to assimilate or eradicate, the model Austen's text advocates suggests that Britain can potentially remain strong if it learns from and respects its subjects. Furthermore, as Mary Ann O'Farrell points out, Austen's novel illustrates the "inevitable association of mortification with the narratives that generate knowledge, learning, and education. The moments at which characters experience mortification are moments at which they are forced to recognize themselves in re-tellings of themselves—as merely 'tolerable,' as inferiorly connected, as ungentlemanly, as proud or prejudicial" (1994, 134).[17] These "forced" recognitions prompt Darcy and Elizabeth to pay closer attention to how others regard their actions and attitudes, and thus, to become more self-aware.

Austen's text encourages readers to experience and benefit from characters' humiliation. While taking readers through each step of Elizabeth's reading process and subsequent epiphany, Austen provides an example of

personal development that enables readers to learn from her characters' experiences. Elizabeth's shaming, in particular, functions as an effective method for instruction because shame operates via transmission: "by virtue of the readiness with which one individual responds with shame to the shame of the other, the sources of shame are radically multiplied. The individual can now be shamed by whatever shames another" (Tomkins 1995, 156). Austen invites readers to empathize with Elizabeth because sharing her experiences—rather than simply witnessing them (Castellanos 1994, 120)—makes the lessons she imparts relevant and immediate.[18]

The novel clearly demonstrates that acknowledging one's fallibility is necessary when learning from and righting one's errors; however, the text does more than simply urge readers to realize that making blunders is inevitable. In showing the process by which Elizabeth and Darcy take responsibility for their misjudgments, learn from them, and correct them, Austen establishes a standard for wielding power. As Elizabeth and Darcy discover, their lack of self-awareness regarding their capacity to make mistakes when assessing others leads them to misuse the power they have over others. Yet, as soon as Darcy and Elizabeth realize their errors, they take steps to rectify them and continue to do so during the remainder of the novel. Hence, the model of Britishness emerging within the text suggests that a crucial step toward becoming more responsible and self-aware involves accepting one's own fallibility.

In the third volume, readers see how the ramifications of humiliation shape Darcy and Elizabeth's relationships. Darcy intervenes with Lydia and Wickham not only to please Elizabeth, but because he comes to recognize such intervention as his responsibility. According to the letter from Elizabeth's aunt, Darcy "generously imputed the whole to his mistaken pride, and confessed that he had before thought it beneath him, to lay his private actions open to the world. His character was to speak for itself. He called it, therefore, his duty to step forward, and endeavour to remedy an evil, which had been brought on by himself" (Austen 1813, 284). Readers see the effect shame has on Darcy: it inspires him to transform, to take responsibility for his mistakes, and to do what he can to redress them. In arranging Lydia and Wickham's marriage and, thereby, saving the remaining unmarried Bennet daughters from scandal, Darcy uses his power to help keep the peace within the Bennet family and in their larger social group. Darcy's encounter with shame helps him become a more productive member of society. He learns to use his influence to help others beyond his immediate circle. He realizes that he has an obligation to act fairly towards all—not just a select few.

After Darcy's successful second marriage proposal, Darcy and Elizabeth engage in a critical reading of their relationship, which exemplifies that both continue to learn from their experiences and each other. As Darcy informs Elizabeth, "Your reproof, so well applied, I shall never forget: 'had you behaved in a more gentleman-like manner.' Those were your words. You know not, you can

scarcely conceive, how they have tortured me" (Austen 1813, 326). In quoting Elizabeth's words back to her and vowing to never forget them, Darcy divulges how much her rebuke affected him and how much he has changed because of it. For Sarah S.G. Frantz, Darcy's "direct quotation of Elizabeth's words… stresses his recognition of the validity of her reproach and reveals… how important it was to his progress away from his pride" (2002, 173). His acceptance of the "justice" of her "reproof" (Austen 326) signifies his increased sense of humility.

While their process of reassessing each other is similar to Elizabeth's reading and rereading of Darcy's letter, this time neither ends up humiliated. Both recognize and accept the soundness of each other's critiques. Explaining what motivated them to change produces joy and laughter rather than shame. Elizabeth can laugh at Darcy's assessment of her character because she knows that he's not completely wrong. She admits that her past behavior of "abusing [him] so abominably to [his] face" justifies his appraisal of her as frank (Austen 1813, 326). She realizes that Darcy doesn't fault her behavior because he deems it improper for her as a woman to speak her mind.[19] Instead, he helps her to see that her words might be hurtful. As R.E. Ewin notes, "Elizabeth, as a result of her experience with Darcy, has learned not to let her feelings"—and, I will add, her words—"flow unfettered, but to think about them and their justifiability" (1990, 153). Although the tone of her acquiescence is self-deprecating (which leads some to question the extent of her agreement),[20] Elizabeth reveals that she now has the humility to understand how her bluntness may have appeared and to accept that it may not always be welcome.

Even though Elizabeth may be ready to laugh and remember only that which gives pleasure (Austen 1813, 327), Darcy feels a need to account for his actions. In sharing how his upbringing contributed to his arrogance, Darcy shows that he recognizes the detrimental effects of his pride, for Elizabeth has opened his eyes: "'You taught me a lesson, hard indeed at first, but most advantageous. By you, I was properly humbled'" (328). Darcy changes because the shame he suffers as a result of Elizabeth's rejection forces him to reexamine his attitudes and behaviors. He now knows exactly what produced his arrogant manner and why his actions were harmful:

> As a child I was taught what was *right*, but I was not taught to correct my temper. I was given good principles, but left to follow them in pride and conceit.…I was spoilt by my parents, who though good themselves… allowed, encouraged, almost taught me to be selfish and overbearing, to care for none beyond my own family circle, to think meanly of their sense and worth compared with my own. (328)

Darcy's comments pinpoint qualities—selfishness, self-importance, willful isolation—most detrimental not only to his relationship with Elizabeth but to the world. As a representative of the British elite, Darcy now recognizes that he cannot contribute productively to a society that

continues to diversify if he remains cocooned within his own social circle. Austen repeatedly emphasizes that her characters need to act justly and considerately toward *all*.

Although Elizabeth and Darcy have discovered much about each other, themselves, and humility, Austen suggests that their education will continue as they incorporate laughter into their wedded lives. Indeed, the fact that their relationship culminates in a marriage (instead of friendship) shows that establishing an effective union is a process and, ideally, will improve both participants. For instance, while Elizabeth plans to teach Darcy to laugh at himself, she needs to decipher the most effective means for doing so. When she checks her laughter because she realizes that Darcy "had yet to learn to be laught at" (Austen 1813, 330), Elizabeth demonstrates how she's beginning to understand that laughter has a time and place.[21] The rest of the sentence—"and it was rather too early to begin" (330)—denotes Elizabeth's resolve to work out how best to teach Darcy to laugh at himself. The glimpse Austen provides into their married life indicates that Elizabeth succeeds: "Georgiana… at first… often listened with an astonishment bordering on alarm, at [Elizabeth's] lively, sportive, manner of talking to her brother. He, who had always inspired in herself a respect which almost overcame her affection, she now saw the object of open pleasantry" (345). This momentary look reveals, "Learning to accept the discipline of laughter is a process" that "occurs within marriage" (Fergus 2002, 109). A successful union, then, permits each person to become stronger, together.

Conclusion: Union, Humor, and the Future

Marriage's capacity to offer endless chances for both partners to learn about each other, themselves, and the world mirrors a larger imperialist undertaking. Katie Trumpener contends that what early nineteenth-century authors attempt when they rewrite political union as a national marriage "is not only the cultural rapprochement of a colonizing nation and a colonized one, separated by a huge power differential and a bloody history, but also, more paradoxically, [a] reconciliation…" (1997, 137). Marriage between English and Irish or Scottish characters became an opportunity for the cultures to learn about each other. This knowledge enabled both to benefit from what the other offered. Revealing what reconciliation looks like can lead to recognition of mutual sovereignty because these marriages "imagine a union able to widen the worldview and the historical understanding of *both* partners equally" (137). While Darcy and Elizabeth's marriage does not cross national boundaries, their union provides a behavioral model with national implications. By combining critical laughter, affection, and humility, their relationship illustrates how developing greater respect for and better understanding of others requires a continual willingness to learn about and from those belonging to a different class, gender, or culture.[22]

In coming to understand itself in the nineteenth century, Britain needed to deduce not only how to acknowledge and respect diversity, but more importantly, how to act justly toward its subjects. On a small scale, Darcy and Elizabeth's relationship demonstrates how this can be achieved. Their marriage comes about when they heed how their actions and attitudes appear to and affect each other; consequently, they discard prejudices that caused them to misjudge. Austen incorporates humor and shame into *Pride and Prejudice* to expose the harmful effects of allowing prejudice and a sense of superiority to influence one's behavior, and this exposure encourages positive change. When she combines these two elements to unmask the process by which Darcy and Elizabeth learn to be more self-aware, Austen creates an effective model for helping readers become more self-aware too.

Austen's use of humor and shame to negotiate power in *Pride and Prejudice* lays the groundwork for how writers grappled with the nation and imperialism as the century progressed. According to Tom Fulford, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion* "[anticipate] the imperialist novel of the later nineteenth century" (2002, 178). As the Empire became increasingly diverse, writers such as Austen provided a clear, if idealized, standard of behavior that could be emulated. This standard helped to define Britishness when understanding what it meant to be British was anything but clear. Her ideas regarding not only proper British behavior but more significantly, the power of humor and shame to influence that behavior presages novelists such as Walter Scott and William M. Thackeray who continued to use similar techniques when engaging in debates about national identity, imperialism, and responsibilities that come with great power.

END NOTES

1. For discussion of Austen's treatment of the nation and/or Empire, see M. Ferguson (1991); S. Fraiman (1995); Mandal (2007, 131-167); Perera (1991, 35-57); Said (1993, 80-97);Trilling (1965, 40-43); and Trumpener (1997, 162-192). Stewart's *Domestic Realities and Imperial Fictions* (1993) and Park and Rajan's *The Postcolonial Jane Austen* (2000) offer extensive postcolonial analyses of Austen's works.

2. Many critics focus on how literature did the work of imperialism throughout the nineteenth century. Novels proved particularly effective since they provided opportunities for writers to experiment with form as well as to engage with and possibly shape contemporary debates about nation and identity. For discussion regarding connections between the development of the novel and the modern state, see Moretti (1998, 17); Parrinder (2006, 14-15); and Trumpener (1997, 164). Examining how the institutionalization of novels such as *Pride and Prejudice* in the colonial education system affected colonialism and transmission of national identity also provides insight into the role literature played in maintaining the Empire. For discussion about this topic, see Lowe (1996, 98-99); Rajan (2000, 12); and Viswanathan (1989, 20).

3. Emsley (2005) also analyzes humility in *Pride and Prejudice* (84); however, she focuses on the Christian implications of humility, while I attend to its nationalist ramifications.

4. Critics have compared Edgeworth and Austen since the early nineteenth century. Both were relatively successful women writers (although Edgeworth achieved more financial success) using similar techniques (e.g., incorporating humor to help instruct and correct readers) and writing about similar issues (e.g., contemporary society). For early nineteenth-century comments about both authors, see Mary Russell Mitford's 20 December 1814 letter to Sir William Elford quoted in B.C. Southam (1968, 54); Walter Scott's unsigned review of *Emma* dated October 1815, issued March 1816 in the *Quarterly Review* quoted in Southam (1968, 63-64); and Richard Whately's unsigned review of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, issued January 1821 in the *Quarterly Review* quoted in Southam (1968, 93-94). For twentieth-century comments, see M. Butler (1972, 328, 329, 335, and 347-348); Fergus (1983, 61); and Gilbert and Gubar (2000, 146-154).

5. Fulford (2002) insightfully analyzes soldiers in *Pride and Prejudice*.

6. Undeniably, Austen's novels are about the middle- and upper-middle class and were aimed at that readership; however, accurately ascertaining the makeup of Austen's early audience is difficult. Southam explains: "sales figures on their own are not a sure guide to the size of Jane Austen's audience, for many of the copies went to circulating libraries which supplied town and country subscribers" (1968, 5). While some may see Austen's focus on this class as exclusionary, one cannot deny the influence it had on national identity formation. Kelly claims, "it was people like [Austen] in the broad sense who, beginning in the decades after her death and continuing to our present, founded modern states in Britain, Europe, and beyond" (2002, 123).

7. For discussion of how Austen's humor critiques traditional gender dynamics rather than how it functions as a corrective, see Bilger (1998, 70-71); Castellanos (1994, 3); Fergus (2002); Gillooly (1999, 79-124); Gross (2004, 227); Heydt-Stevenson (2000, 310-313); Heydt-Stevenson (2005, 98); Stewart (1993, 67); and J. Wylie (2000, 62-69).

8. Ruderman sees Darcy's slight as a sign of his disregard for social opinion: "This indifference to social opinion exposes him to ridicule. Elizabeth, although hardly endeared to Mr. Darcy by his refusal to dance with her, can find his action 'ridiculous' instead of upsetting… for it indicates that he does not know (or care) what social rules require. Even his friends laugh at his aloofness" (1995, 102).

9. When discussing this passage, some argue that Elizabeth's efforts to use humor to correct Darcy fail because she's attracted to him. Kay Young sees Elizabeth's response as primarily a competitive reaction to Miss Bingley and contends that Elizabeth's stance on joking signifies desire (2002, 66-67). Heydt-Stevenson also focuses on the sexual dimension of Elizabeth's response (2005, 81).

10. While recent critics point out that Darcy needs to become more socially conscious, especially regarding lower classes, earlier critics often perceived Darcy as representing traditional society. Those who see him as a beacon of social order argue that it's Elizabeth who must learn to engage with society and to conform to social expectations. For discussion of Darcy's role as a representative of social order and Elizabeth's need to conform, see Duckworth (1971, 115-143); Litz (1969, 65); Mudrick (1968, 109); and Poovey (1984, 201). For comments about how Darcy must become more engaged socially, see Castellanos (1994, 139 and 155-156); Ewin (1990, 150); Johnson (1988, 81); Paris (2004, 176); and Sherry (1979).

11. Readers' capacity to learn from characters echoes Nancy Armstrong's claim that domestic fiction provides opportunities to imagine alternative ways of acting and thinking without suffering consequences directly (1987, 29).

12. Barbara D. Metcalf and Thomas R. Metcalf discuss the Indian Rebellion in detail (2001, 91-106). Levine (2007) discusses not only the Indian Rebellion and its aftermath (77-81) but also offers a general overview of colonial resistance to imperialism (94-95). Ward (2008, 226-234) and James (1994, 192-194) offer more explanation about how racial attitudes contributed to mid-century colonial rebellions.

13. Colley (1992) explains connections between British identity and both parliamentary reform (334-350) and abolition of slave trade and slavery (350-363).

14. For Marilyn Butler, Darcy must learn that "we have no innate worth, either of social status or abilities. We have to earn our right to consideration by respect for others, and continuous watchfulness of ourselves" (1975, 206). M. Kramp (2007) also discusses Darcy's function as a gentleman extensively.

15. Several critics see Darcy's letter as a turning point for Darcy, Elizabeth, and readers. Fraiman declares that it indicates a pivotal change in Darcy's role (1993, 79). Woloch comments on its effect on Elizabeth (2003, 101). Sherry focuses on the impact it has on readers by arguing that it signifies a shift both in tone and in how readers interpret the novel (1979, 616-617).

16. Critics often claim that similarities between Elizabeth's voice and the narrator's make distinguishing the two difficult. Readers thus tend to assume that Elizabeth's perspective and the narrator's are identical, which leads many to mistakenly treat Elizabeth as a reliable judge. See Castellanos (1994, 148); Morini (2007, 423-424); Moses (2003, 155, 156, and 159); and Wiltshire (2001, 110).

17. Watt proposes a similar reading (2002, 163).

18. For an exploration of how Austen encourages readers to identify with Elizabeth, see Bonaparte (2005, 159); Brownstein (1994, xxiii and 122); Butler (1975, 216); Castellanos (1994, 155); Davidson (2008, 239); Fergus (1983, 8-9, 93 and 119); and Searle (2006, 23-24).

19. For Frantz, "Darcy has come to appreciate Lizzy's lively nature and cutting wit as much as the reader has, an appreciation that is a vital ingredient to their happy marriage" (2002, 172).

20. Deresiewicz maintains that while Elizabeth "may not believe quite all her self-mockery," her comment "accomplishes several important things: she gives Darcy the rhetorical and emotional space he needs to criticize her himself, she enables herself to receive his criticism without humiliation, and she enables Darcy to continue listening when he does again become the target of her mockery" (1997, 528).

21. Spacks (1988, 74) and J. Brown (1979, 75) both discuss how as Darcy learns to laugh at himself Elizabeth must learn to control her laughter.

22. Most critics agree that their marriage signifies a union between the middle class and landed gentry. However, some contend that the marriage merely maintains traditional social conventions. They argue that Elizabeth accepts being subjugated to Darcy's authority as both a man and a member of the upper class. These critics contend that while Austen ultimately upholds traditional social conventions, she still critiques those conventions by exposing them: Gilbert and Gubar (2000, 161-163); Johnson (1988, 75); McMaster (1970, 730); and Parrinder (2006, 193). Others see their marriage as an attempt to balance sex and class. They assert that Darcy grows to appreciate Elizabeth's judgment and the middle class. For discussion of how the marriage represents union between classes, see I. Armstrong (1998, viii); Butler (1975, 202-203); Duckworth (1971, 117 and 132); Ewin (1990, 152); Fraiman (1993, 75); Poovey (1984, 201); and Thompson (1988, 110). Brownstein (1994, 118) and Emsley (2005, 102) examine how the marriage embodies balance between sexes.

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EQUIPMENT FOR RIFFING: ADVANCED TEXT-READING TACTICS AND POLYVALENT CONSTRAINTS IN *MYSTERY SCIENCE THEATER 3000*

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Since the dawn of the mediated spectacle—from film and television and into the postmodern age of intensifying media saturation and convergence—popular culture has been both creator and reflector of social reality; it seems there is no longer an objective social reality we can access without mediation.[1] Our capacity for decoding mediated reality is inextricable from our ability to make sense of the social world. Debates over audience agency and the roles mediated texts play in the lives of readers have been at the center of a long-running debate among Critical, Cultural, and Rhetorical Studies scholars, among them Michel de Certeau, Celeste Michelle Condit, John Fiske, Stuart Hall, and Henry Jenkins, whose contributions to this dialogue call into question both the possibilities and constraints of media consumers who read pop culture in ways that speak to their own lives while noting that these readings cannot be disentangled from readers' experiences and material realities. What degree of interpretive agency do readers possess? How capable are readers of comprehending and resisting texts containing oppressive discourses? If popular mediated texts are vital in constituting what it means to belong to a particular culture, is media consumption a tool by which readers can resist or subvert dominant ideologies?

A great deal of discourse on questions such as these emerged in the 1980s, a decade which saw key texts such as de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Condit's "The Rhetorical Limits of Polysemy," Fiske's *Television Culture*, and Hall's "Encoding/Decoding." It is also during this period of cultural flux that the cult television show *Mystery Science Theater 3000* (often abbreviated *MST3K*) entered the U.S. cultural lexicon. During its initial production period (1987-1999), *MST3K* emerged from humble origins as a cable access program at KTMA 23 in Minnesota's Twin Cities to run ten seasons on the Comedy Channel/Comedy Central (1988-1996) and the Sci-Fi Channel (1997-1999), also spawning a 1996 feature theatrical film. *MST3K* carved out such a legacy that it was named as one of *TIME Magazine's* 100 best TV shows of all time—gushed *TIME*, "This basic-cable masterpiece raised talking back to the TV into an art form"(Poniewozik 2007). *TV Guide* twice anointed *MST3K* among the top twenty-five cult shows of all time. *MST3K* earned a Peabody Award in 1993, as well as Emmy, CableACE, and Saturn Award nominations. The show remains popular in home media and cultural practice well into the 21st century.

MST3K is primarily known for introducing the art of *movie riffing* into the cultural lexicon. Riffing a film or other cultural text, broadly defined, is the act of consuming that text and *in the process of doing so* appropriating it—tactically "poaching" it from its original author(s), context(s), and purpose(s) (De Certeau 1984; Jenkins 1992)—by employing speech acts in ways that actively and conspicuously remake and reframe its meaning. Much of what separates riffing from other interpretive reading practices and models of textual criticism is the fact that the performance of its application (i.e., the bodily acts that constitute the *doing* of riffing) unfolds in real time along with the machinations of the text being riffed. Movie riffing takes its form in marking and responding to specific symbolic content of a film with comments or gestures, often humorous, sarcastic, or informative. Regardless of tone, these riffs palpably (often cumulatively) make new sense of the film. Performative movie riffing, regardless of its tone or delivery, creates an entirely new audiencing experience that is implicitly political; it attempts to usurp the film as the primary medium of entertainment and source of meaning. Although riffing is projected *toward* the film, it speaks *to* the audience, potentially opening avenues for new dialogues on the nature of film, culture, and reality.

Today's cultural marketplace supports two professional riffing troupes, Cinematic Titanic and RiffTrax (both comprised of *MST3K* alumni), as well as riffing acts such as Cinemasochism, Cineprov, Doug Benson's Movie Interruptions, Master Pancake Theater, Movie Masochists, and Riff Raff Theater, in addition to dozens of creative amateurs who share their riffing talents online at the RiffTrax-hosted iRiffs forum and elsewhere online. As a cultural critique, riffing's rise in popularity as ritual performance compels me to wonder if some of *MST3K*'s cultural appeal is related not only to style but to discursive function. I believe the influence of *MST3K* is related to the notion of audience agency.

On one level, *MST3K* is built upon a fantastic dramatic premise. Its principle characters—humans Joel Robinson (Hodgson), later Mike Nelson, and robot sidekicks Tom Servo and Crow T. Robot—are trapped in space aboard the Satellite of Love (SoL) and forced to watch "cheesy" movies (as per *MST3K*'s theme song) on implied penalty of death as part of a mad scientist's experiment to pacify the world with one perfectly awful film. Joel/Mike and the 'Bots endure films that range from merely mediocre to historically execrable by *riffing* their way through each film: ridiculing its shortcomings with rapid-fire commentary. But *MST3K* is more than a single cultural text to analyze for its own sake. On an allegorical level, I suggest *MST3K* can also be read as a metaphorical representation of both the possibilities and constraints of appropriating and reading pop culture texts. Joel/Mike and the 'Bots are subjected to films against their will, only to riff their way through them (with varying degrees of whimsy and ease) thanks to their pop sensibilities; within the context of the show, they survive and transform mediated experiences with creative reading tactics. Each episode of *MST3K* is a dramatization of both the possibilities for resisting pop culture texts and the constraints placed upon the reader.

While *MST3K* has been the subject of considerable news media and increasing scholarly discourse, I am unsatisfied with the amount of attention paid to how the show's riffing functions rhetorically in relation to the texts riffed by the show's characters—ethnomethodologically, we know how riffing looks and sounds but know less about what makes it work (and hinders it from working) as a discursive tactic. With 197 episodes and one feature film, there is no shortage of text produced by *MST3K* with which to approach this gap in knowledge. In this essay, I undertake a close textual reading of *MST3K*'s characteristic movie riffing and consider the show as a dramatic representation of these possibilities and constraints. Each episode of *MST3K* serves as a dramatization of, in Burkean language, *equipment for living* (1937, 296), of both the possibilities for riffing as a tool for talking back to pop culture and the challenges faced by the reader who attempts to do so. *MST3K* offers rhetorical tactics that can be utilized to aid in a motivated riffer's ongoing efforts to make sense of and potentially challenge ideologically loaded texts. Yet at times, the discourse created by the show also showcases problematic attitudes that can be read as destructive or offensive in ways that suggest ridiculing a text is

not necessarily the same as subverting it. If *MST3K* is an allegory for our lives as postmodern text readers, it is wise to look to the show for what to do and what not to do as oppositionally minded readers.

This essay is organized as follows: I begin by discussing different theoretical conceptions of ways in which audiences make sense of mediated texts; my literature review suggests critics disagree on how much sense-making agency audiences possess. I follow this by discussing key components of *MST3K* as a text, including its formal conventions and characters. I then explain my data pool and methodological protocols, which guided my close reading. Finally, I discuss key themes which emerged from my reading of eleven *MST3K* episodes, exploring ways in which riffing can be understood as a text-reading ethic which offers hope and/or draws concern over possibilities for oppositional reading (Hall 1980) of ideologically loaded texts.

The Theoretical Debate: Audience Agency and the Debate on Textual Polysemy

The history of scholarly discourse on audience agency features significantly disparate opinions on audiences' capacities to actively make sense of mediated texts, effectively creating a theoretical continuum on which media consumers range from helpless, homogenous sheep to tactically ambitious culture jammers. The earliest discourses on film subjugate the audience to the power of the medium. Among the earliest enduring anecdotes of audiences' relationship to film is the legend of audiences' terrified reaction to the Lumière brothers' 1895 short film *Arrival of a Train at the Station*[2]: according to legend, audience members screamed and ran for their lives out of fear that a train was truly rolling into the room. As Tom Gunning notes, the image of turn-of-the-century French audiences fleeing in terror out of the inability to distinguish a real train from a filmed train has been trotted out over the years to support the notion that audiences are generally naïve and that they passively and uncritically consume mediated messages.[3]

Writing from the Frankfurt School critical perspective, which conceives of messages channeled through mainstream media as necessarily bound to reinforcing the dominant culture, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno grant popular culture, including film, the power to overwhelm subjugated audiences: "The sound film, far surpassing the theatre of illusion, leaves no room for imagination or reflection on the part of the audience… [Films] are so designed that quickness, powers of observation, and experience are undeniably needed to apprehend them at all; yet sustained thought is out of the question if the spectator is not to miss the relentless rush of facts" (1972, 126-127). Here, the combination of the Culture Industry and film's power as a medium grants the reader little capacity for comprehending or resisting the ideological content of the text bearing down upon him or her.

Cultural Studies scholars such as Fiske, Hall, Jenkins, and Janice Radway grant significantly more power to audiences, suggesting that texts are *polysemic* and that

by filtering pop culture through their own experiences and politics, readers are poised to make and remake texts in ways that satisfy their own appetites. With this turn, film no longer inevitably overwhelms the hapless reader but assumes a more malleable form that can be appropriated—tactically "poached" from its original purpose, in de Certeau's terminology—and potentially used for purposes both political and pleasurable. This situates the reader at the forefront of the meaning-making process, which becomes kinetic and takes on the potential for liberatory practices.

Fiske explicitly resists granting audiences absolute power to control the meaning of texts: "This polysemic potential is neither boundless nor structureless…. Polysemy is always bounded and structured, for polysemy is the textual equivalent of social difference and diversity" (1987, 16). Still, Condit critiques Fiske and Radway for overreaching, suggesting they "oversimplify the pleasures experienced by audience members.[4] As many of the preeminent scholars in critical audience studies themselves admit, audiences are not free to make meanings at will from mass-mediated texts" (1999, 494). As an alternative to the *polysemous* text, Condit offers the concept of *polyvalence*: "when audience members share understandings of the denotation of a text but disagree about the valuation of those denotations to such a degree that they produce notably different interpretations" (497). If two persons with conflicting political beliefs or positionalities read the same text, they will read the connotative meaning of that text in ways inexorably enabled and constrained by their identities and experiences. Mediated texts are theoretically open to reader interpretation but in reality are open only insofar as the reader is rhetorically equipped to make sense of them.

For this study, I embrace the term *polyvalence* over *polysemy* for the former's explicit foregrounding of conflict in text reading, though I do not read Fiske's tempered use of *polysemy* as problematically as Condit seems to suggest. With either term, the pertinent issue is that the imbalance of cultural capital in pop culture is distributed disproportionately: neoliberal, bourgeoisie, white, heteronormative, masculine discourses dominate mainstream media. Film is no exception: Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner note individualism (self-reliance, distrust of government), capitalism (competition, upward mobility, social Darwinism), patriarchy, and racism as common Hollywood themes noted by radical critics (1998, 1). The cultural consumer who identifies with a hegemonic normative worldview (i.e., those characteristics noted above) enjoys easier access to mediated pleasure and worldview reification; the consumer who exists at odds with the culturally dominant has his or her identity attacked at every nearly turn in the marketplace of mainstream media—which, as discussed earlier, is increasingly the primary conduit by which social reality can be accessed in the postmodern age.

Making meaning out of a cultural text always requires work on the part of the reader—because texts are polyvalent, this work is intensified for readers who do not identify with dominant texts—and this work should not be taken for granted or sublimated to text-authorship. There is no such thing as passively reading a text. Roland Barthes notes that reading "is a form of work" and "is not a parasitical act, the reactive complement of a writing which we endow with all the glamour of creation and anteriority" (1974, 10). Whether aligned with or against the political status quo in a particular instance, readers make sense of mediated messages through a *decoding* process: translating the symbolic content *encoded* into the text into ideas translatable to everyday life. Hall identifies three positions from which readers decode mediated messages: *dominant-hegemonic*, *negotiated*, and *oppositional* (1980, 171-173). The dominant-hegemonic reader "accepts the dominant codes bestowed upon the text by producers and reads the hegemonic message accordingly" (171). The oppositional reader understands both the denotation and connotation of the discourse but rejects the latter, opting instead to reflexively "retotalize the message within some alternate framework or references" (173). The negotiated reader operates between these two poles, accepting the premise of the dominant-hegemonic norm but modifying it to better fit into her or his worldview. Dominant readings require the reader merely to identify with the text in ways that reify his or her worldview; conversely, oppositional reading requires the reader to re-historicize and denaturalize the dominant discourses embedded in the text while supplying her or his own counter-discourses for points of identification and refutation.

Hall's encoding/decoding model has been critiqued as missing many of the subtle nuances of postmodern media consumption. Among the critiques levied against Hall's encoding/decoding model are arguments that (1) we cannot assume class is unitary and all readings cleanly fall into Hall's three categories; (2) not all cultural texts reinforce dominant ideologies; and (3) to suggest readers read oppositionally implies they understand the preferred meaning (Staiger 2005, 83). Although Hall's categories remain useful guides in thinking about pop culture reading as a site of sense-making, we should not assume that readers always consciously choose sides and read purposefully. I suggest the task of gathering and making sense of textual and discursive fragments can be completed with varying degrees of competency, which presents the possibility that readers can develop skills for oppositional reading. I suggest, in theory, the more skilled the oppositional reader in the art of achieving coherence with gathered textual fragments, the greater his or her capacity for denaturalizing myth in hegemonic texts.

What can a television show featuring wisecracking robot puppets and cheesy movies teach us about the possibilities and perils of oppositional reading? I suggest *MST3K* is a culturally relevant text because it is equipment for reading *other* mediated texts. To draw again from Kenneth Burke, the show's model of movie riffing functions as a *representative anecdote* (1966) for everyday reading of mediated texts in ways that are, to the reader, heuristic and/or pleasurable in ways not explicitly supplied by the text.

The Text: *Mystery Science Theater 3000*

While characters and side-plots in *MST3K* came and went—the show rarely featured a traditional narrative arc that spanned more than a single episode—the basic format of the show remained constant: Servo, Crow, and Joel/Mike are forced to watch a bad movie selected by their captors as part of Dr. Forrester's ongoing search for a film painful enough to break the SoL crew's will; Dr. Forrester (later, his mother, Pearl, took over as chief antagonist) planned to unleash that film upon the world's population as a tool of domination. But rather than enduring the experiment in silent agony, Joel/Mike and the 'Bots riffed their way through the film as a defense mechanism against its offensive nature. Although they occasionally encountered a film so wretched they emerged from the theater in tears and sobs, Joel/Mike and the 'Bots never cracked as intended by their captors, and more often than not they skewered the film with relative ease and returned from the theater in good spirits and as sharp-tongued as ever. Despite being exposed to the worst that the vast cesspool of pop culture could muster (within the show's universe, at least), the SoL crew's text-reading skills were always enough for them to emerge victorious. Cumulatively, their voices were always more powerful and resourceful than any text they encountered. If we were all so fortunate, media literacy would not be an issue.

I read the recurring dramatic premise of *MST3K* allegorically: as U.S. pop culture consumers, we are all faced with a barrage of mediated messages on a daily basis. Our mediated reality is ideologically loaded and requires that we exercise our abilities to read and at times resist the poisonous messages we encounter. *MST3K* suggests that mediated reality can poison our minds and weaken our bodies if we fail to resist—Dr. Forrester represents the Culture Industry that uses the power of mediated spectacle to distract us from forces that exert power over us. Joel/Mike and the 'Bots, in this allegory, represent the powers and the necessity of media literacy: of savvy tactical discourse and oppositional reading skills that empower us as readers not only to resist oppressive dominant discourses but to also communicate to one another alternate possibilities for being. Joel/Mike and the 'Bots do what they do better than Dr. Forrester, and thus they endure and improve; at the end of the series they outwit their captors (and one last movie), break captivity, and return to Earth, where they continue to watch the same cheesy movies they always have but do so by their own volition: the final scene of the final episode depicts Mike and the 'Bots willingly sitting together to watch and riff *The Crawling Eye*, the same film featured in the first episode of the series' syndicated history. They never escape mediated reality (because there is no unmediated reality to return to), but they become fully realized as empowered readers of pop culture.

As equipment for living, then, *MST3K* invites its media-inundated audience to embrace the challenge of oppositional reading and thus to challenge the Culture Industry of mediated hegemony. This task should not be taken for granted: we are not free to simply synthesize or conjure any meaning we choose from any text. But before concluding that *MST3K* is an empowering, subversive text, a paradigm of text-reading prowess, it is vital to study its model of riffing not as an abstract concept (it is not a simple *doing* that produces *nothing*) but as context-specific webs of utterances with political implications. Riffing is both a recognizable mode of discourse—there exists a set of behaviors associated with riffing—and every time one riffs, one produces performative language that does something in specific interplay with the texts one references. The latter, I argue, is overdue for scholarly inquiry.

With this in mind, I argue that what *MST3K* (and, by extension, any discourse produced in the act of riffing or embodied audiencing ritual) says at the micro level is too important to ignore for what is too often assumed (or, perhaps, even hoped) it does at the macro level, lest we make the false assumption that riffing as an performance technique is independent of the discourse it produces. With this in mind, I turn my attention to the discourses produced by *MST3K*'s riffing to better understand precisely what rhetorical tactics the show employed, and how the repetition of these acts interacts with the films they riffed.

Data Gathering and Analysis

In an effort to better understand *MST3K*'s movie riffing as equipment for tactical text reading, I offer a close reading of eleven episodes, one from each season (beginning with "Season 0" on public access KTMA and extending through seasons 1 through 10). The episodes in my data pool were selected based on a fan rating system (zero to five stars) on the official *Mystery Science Theater 3000 Information Club* website (www.mst3kinfo.com); each selected episode was rated highest in its respective season by site users as of March 21, 2012. Selected episodes include (listed by episode number and featured film): "K20: *The Last Chase*," "110: *Robot Holocaust*," "212: *Godzilla vs. Megalon*," "312: *Gamera vs. Guiron*," "424: *Manos: The Hands of Fate*," "521: *Santa Claus*," "604: *Zombie Nightmare*," "703: *Deathstalker and the Warriors From Hell*," "820: *Space Mutiny*," "904: *Werewolf*," and "1002: *Girl in Gold Boots*." By selecting popular episodes across the show's history, I hope to capture a cross-section of the show's most resonant efforts within the riffing community. That said, my experiences with the other 187 episodes of *MST3K* suggest I could have selected any other eleven episodes across the show's trajectory and would have detected similar, though not identical, themes.

My data gathering process entails watching each selected episode multiple times and taking note of discursive patterns and rhetorical tactics that stand out to me as disrupting the film's narrative or that encourage me as a reader to read the film differently than I would without Joel/Mike and the Bots' commentary. In other words, I focus on the more political aspects of *MST3K*'s discourse: the speech acts that communicate attitudes and ideologies with implications greater in scale than the immediate signifier, particularly those that compel me to accept those values and integrate them into my worldview mov-

ing forward. Here, it is important that I re-foreground my cultural positionality: as a white, Midwestern, middle-class male, my identity markers are generally similar to those of *MST3K*'s writers and cast, as well as the overwhelming majority of the show's fan base. As such, and as a long-time aficionado of *MST3K*, I find myself easily identifying with the show's characters and patterns of rhetoric, making it easier to personally derive pleasure from the show and negotiate its forays into dangerous discourse in ways that do not sour my esteem of the show and its performers.

The next step in my process involves drawing out recurring themes across my data. I attempt to study the show from as grounded a position as possible. Although I deliberately resist making specific connections to episodes not featured in my data pool, I am unable to totally shut out my experiences with the other 187 episodes of *MST3K*, and thus my reading of these eleven episodes is subjective and does not coalesce in a vacuum. This affirms Keith Grant-Davie's argument that data coding, even from a grounded perspective, "is always shaped by what the researcher is looking for" (1992, 273). By looking for certain rhetorical elements within *MST3K*'s discursive field, those which can be understood as potential tactics for oppositional reading or those which illuminate the opportunities and/or constraints of reading polyvalent texts, I inevitably missed others, some of which I hope to return in future essays.

Riffing Tactics: Declustering Symbols and Animating Mythologies

Within *MST3K*'s fictitious universe, Joel/Mike and the 'Bots rely on tactical riffing to refuse the agony intended by Dr. Forrester's ongoing parade of bad movies. While the premise that a bad movie could dominate the world is absurd (as it is no doubt intended to be), in the *MST3K* universe the pain inflicted by bad movies represents the Frankfurt School's concerns over the Culture Industry's power of dominance cranked up to ludicrous volume. But just as *MST3K*'s premise is an over-the-top dramatization of real-life concerns about media's potential for the mass communication of oppressive discourses, the show's iconic riffing can be understood as symbolic equipment for competently reading and subverting the power of those texts. Reading a polyvalent text is an act of negotiation: the reader crafts her or his own reading through the lens of the text's constructed reality and attempts to reconcile the two in ways that may or may not be accessible through the text alone.

The rhetorical tactics employed by Joel/Mike and the 'Bots empower them to read film in ways that not only stave off subjugation but also constitute a heuristic vocabulary that expands over time: with each film riffed, the riffers have more points of reference upon which to draw when a new exigency emerges. Of good criticism, Barry Brummett writes, "Theory and method need to explicate this example, this object of study, but they also need to explicate the next example, to teach us how to understand the next rhetorical event that comes along"

(2003, 366). Joel/Mike and the 'Bots answer this call by riffing in ways that not only aid them in reading the text at hand but also in approaching future texts. Text reading (particularly oppositional reading, which requires more work) is a skill that builds with practice; hence, riffing can and should be epistemic and should communicate ideas that are useful in other situations. Joel/Mike and the 'Bots' demonstrated talent for invoking texts past and present, high- and low-brow, iconic and obscure, presents them to the at-home audience as ideal riffers and oppositional readers: their resolve may occasionally waiver, but they never allow themselves to fall under the spell of any text that is hazardous to their wellbeing. Their journey into space and back is an upward trajectory of text-reading competence.

An exhaustive teasing-out of *MST3K*'s rhetorical themes, along with a structural representation of the relationships between riffs and the film's textual elements with which they correspond, could easily fill several hundred pages. My primary aim in this essay, however, is not to pass judgment on *MST3K* but rather to identify discursive tactics which can be transplanted from the show's fantastic fictional universe and practiced by everyday riffers and/or oppositionally minded readers of cultural texts who strive to employ riffing for political purposes in addition to entertainment or *MST3K* mimesis. That said, discourse matters, and the language produced by *MST3K*'s riffers cannot be cleanly disentangled from their tactics.

The overarching discursive tactic across the sampled eleven episodes is the isolation and magnification of troublesome elements of the film-as-text. Put another way, Joel/Mike and the 'Bots appropriate the text's symbolic clusters (which are assembled by the text's producers in ways that appeal to the reader as coherent and sovereign) but manipulate, mangle and make strange the most vulnerable elements (those which do not blend seamlessly into the film's artificial reality) until the text is warped beyond any capacity to fulfill its author-intended symbolic message. The end result of this systematic declustering is a completely new audiencing experience, one that more closely fills the audiencing desires of the riffers. As Ora McWilliams and Joshua Richardson observe, "Once a film has been viewed in a riffed condition… it is often permanently altered in the viewer's mind" (2011, 115). The work of Joel/Mike and the 'Bots, can never be undone or un-experienced; for the audience, the film does not revert to its unriffed state after the end credits. This does not mean riffing a film injects permanent, static meaning in the reader's mind, either—new texts and new experiences mean no text is ever permanently closed—but after experiencing the riffing of a film, the reader will not experience the film as she or he did pre-riff, even if she or he chooses to reject the rhetoric of the riffer(s).

Over the course of these eleven episodes, five more context-specific recurring rhetorical themes emerge, which I argue should be understood as avenues by which polyvalent texts can be declustered and their ideological content denaturalized in ways that favor the possibility of oppositional reading. These recurring riffing tactics include:

(1) Shades of Gray as Hierarchical/Archetypical Subversion: Films position their audiences in ideological vantage points; they call upon audiences to accept their articulations of reality and privilege particular characters as vessels for identification. When reading traditional narratives affirmatively, the reader identifies with the protagonist and shuns the antagonist, taking pleasure in Good's triumph over Evil and seizing salient elements of the hero's path to victory as equipment for living. In all eleven episodes, Joel/Mike and the 'Bots refuse this call to identification by introducing shades of gray into the text's structural portrayals of Good and Evil, thereby effectively challenging the film's preferred points of identifications and sources of equipment for living.

Through riffing, Joel/Mike and the 'Bots resist identification with perfectly good protagonists by rhetorically superimposing sinister motivations. In *Gamera vs. Guiron*, the lovable police officer Kondo (whose name Joel and the 'Bots purposefully mishear as "Cornjob" in response to incomprehensible dubbing—another common riffing tactic) is framed by Joel as "the goofy twisted man Mom said we [the child protagonists] shouldn't talk to," implying the film's only compassionate authority figure actually endangers the children he is supposed to protect. Santa Claus's joyous laughter, an iconic aural symbol of joy and giving, is made dark and covetous when Mike follows with a maniacal "I will rule the world!" Santa's legendary watching of all the Earth's children takes on similarly ominous tones when Crow riffs: "Increasingly paranoid, Santa's surveillance hinders everyday operations," suggesting either that Santa abuses his power of surveillance or employs it for purposes other than bringing toys to good boys and girls.

Inversely, Joel/Mike and the 'Bots make buffoonish clowns of evil characters, thus resisting alignment against what was intended to be perfect evil. In *Robot Holocaust*, a villainous crab-like monster is humorously dubbed "Crabby" and a "Crustafarian" who "would taste good with drawn butter," thereby severely undercutting the character's menace. In *Godzilla vs. Megalon*, Crow portrays the giant monster Megalon's gyrations to those of a Vaudevillian performer, chiding the audience to see his show, implying that the creature's destruction of inhabited space is an act of entertainment; later, the film's climactic battle between the good duo of Godzilla and Jet Jaguar and the evil duo of Megalon and Gigan is narrated by Joel and the 'Bots as if it were a mid-80s World Wrestling Federation tag team match. In *Zombie Nightmare*, Mike and the 'Bots resist performing outrage over a psychopathic teen killer and would-be rapist, and instead repeatedly ridicule and belittle him, often when he is at the precipice of violent antisocial behavior—for example, during a trivial scene in which he childishly throws cooked spaghetti at his mother. Through riffing, villains against whom we are supposed to align become laughable, just as the heroes with whom we are supposed to align get similar treatment. The intended vessels of identification are stripped of their full capacity to contain our admiration or loathing. The hierarchi-

cal structure of Good versus Evil becomes symbolically muddled; identification becomes blurred, and traditional narratives become more difficult to accept. This breakdown of mythologies becomes useful when reading problematic films such as *The Last Chase* and *Space Mutiny*, which offer violent, neoliberal everymen as heroes.

(2) Introducing the Mundane into the Fantastic, and Vice Versa: Commercial films assert the rules of engagement through cinematic devices including narrative framing. Some films are dark and urgent (e.g., *Robot Holocaust, Manos, Space Mutiny*) while others are light and fun (*Godzilla vs. Megalon, Gamera vs. Guiron, Santa Claus*). *MST3K* adopts a contradictory stance whatever the occasion, alternately lowering the stakes of dire films and raising the stakes of lighthearted fare in ways that complement their aforementioned tactic of inverting the motivations of the characters that drive their respective plots.

Domesticization and introduction of the mundane play key roles in the riffing of *Manos*: the film's pseudo-Satanic lodge is riffed as if it were an unremarkable motel, complete with swimming pool and magic fingers; the satyr-esque caretaker Torgo (perhaps *MST3K*'s most prominently manufactured riffed icon) is treated not as a sinister Satanic henchman but an incompetent, sexually frustrated bellhop. When *Manos*'s cranky protagonist asks to stay at Torgo's lodge with his doomed family, Joel explains Torgo's reticence to allow him to stay with the absurd riff, "Look, we have a convention in town, I'm sorry," even though there is obviously no town or fellow guests. Servo further clips Torgo of his menace: "I'll have to run it [staying at the lodge] by my sales manager." In *The Last Chase*, the SoL crew riffs a long shot of writhing, suffering masses of a postapocalyptic dystopia with an extended Beatlemania metaphor; if riffing induces us to laugh at the film's attempts to portray mass human suffering, how can we invest in the film's "one man against the shadowy government" tale of rugged neoliberal triumph? In *Robot Holocaust*, a post-apocalyptic drama, Joel pulls a similar trick when he scoffs at the film's low-budget portrayal of dystopia: "I think it looks like a roller coaster, like Six Flags Over Armageddon." During the climactic fistfight of *Girl in Gold Boots*, Servo and Mike's biggest concern is fear that a fallen antagonist might get hair grease on the pool table. At the times when these films call upon their readers to feel sorrow or tension while being drawn further into the film's fantastic universe, Joel/Mike and the 'Bots' lower the stakes by evoking images to guide the audience back into the dregs of desensitized triviality.

Conversely, *MST3K*'s riffing uses morbid frame changing to introduce the sinister into the ostensibly benign. After Crow's humanizing of *Godzilla vs. Megalon*'s titular antagonist in an aforementioned earlier scene, Joel continues to modulate the film's mood, this time toward the darker, when he connects the iconography of the film's white-clad Seatopian dancers to the Ku Klux Klan; extending the metaphor and further tinkering with the mood, Crow breezily riffs: "Now that Twyla Tharp has joined the Klan, Anna Kisselgoff [*New York Times* dance critic]

will give them a good review." Continuing the children-in-mortal danger motif of *Gamera vs. Guiron*, Servo narrates horrifying lyrics over the film's whimsical soundtrack, singing: "Let's watch the kids go to their fate / They'll disappear into the woods / It will be days until they're found / Cornjob will be blamed." The sum effect of such frame-changing, in these examples achieved through a variety of means including the manipulation of narrative elements such as visual imagery and music, is the further disruption of identification and the hindrance of the text's capacity to sediment, to be read as coherent or familiar. Such riffing works to keep the reader in a liminal space and foregrounds the text's inherent state of instability and malleability. When a text cannot satisfy the audience's desire for coherence and pleasure, audience members are free to venture elsewhere, to roam outside the inadequate elements provided by the text for those very purposes.

(3) Illuminating the Artificiality of the Medium: Ryan and Kellner note that pop culture texts, specifically films, "impose on the audience a certain position or point of view, and the formal conventions occlude this positioning by erasing the signs of cinematic artificiality" (1998, 1). Joel/Mike and the 'Bots frequently use riffing to draw attention to the flaws and seams in the film construction process in ways that work to draw the viewer out of the film's universe. For example, in *The Last Chase*, Joel chastises the film by questioning how, in a dystopian future in which the government has taken away all cars, our hero (a former racecar driver escaping in his old car) is able to readily access nitro-burning gas at an apparently abandoned gas station. In *Robot Holocaust*, Servo refuses to suspend his disbelief and contradicts the film's dystopian landscape: "I guess it's a wasteland if you ignore that city behind them." Later, Joel says, "If I was skeptical, I would say that's Central Park." Joel and Crow point out the use of day-for-night lighting (a common technique in low-budget filmmaking) in *Godzilla vs. Megalon*; Joel notes "it must be a blue moon tonight." In *Space Mutiny*, Mike and the 'Bots find extended humor in a continuity slip in which a character who was killed in a previous scene sits unharmed at her workstation in the next (Mike: "alright, look alive everyone—oh, sorry").

On the surface, these riffs come across as simple ridicule, the kinds of obvious commentary that does not resonate beyond a dismissive critique of the text itself. Given that they do not require a high degree of rhetorical complexity or intimate knowledge of the text, I am not surprised to find that jokes such as these are most common in amateur and improvised riffing. But riffing on flaws in the text's iconography should not be dismissed as lesser riffing because it works to keep the seams of the text construction process visible. Keeping the text-construction process visible serves to remind viewers about how texts do not occur naturally but are always assembled and done so with purpose, varying degrees of skill, and care. Also, calling attention to the elements of construction, particularly when it does so at the expense of embracing more privileged elements of the text, such as plot or character,

encourages the reader to stay vigilant and keep questioning the elements by which the text has been assembled.

(4) *Historicizing Familiar Faces*: With the exception of sequels, prequels, and remakes, films are constructed to draw audiences into a complete, coherent, self-sufficient universe; one can argue that sequels and prequels do so even more, as they demand that the reader remain even more immersed by situating the events on-screen in ways that are consistent with other installations of the story. For the most part, commercial film of the U.S. provides audiences with the dramatic elements (characters, setting, plot, etc.) and pieces together the elements of narrative and visual imagery into a complete, coherent, and pleasing text. As cultural texts, films construct and provide their own histories through dramatic conventions; the mythologies and tropes upon which they draw are repackaged and presented as something new and vital.

MST3K pierces this veil of self-sufficiency by introducing competing histories into the narrative, and the conduit for these histories is often a famous (or infamous) actor. To varying degrees, Joel/Mike and the 'Bots saddle familiar actors with stigmas of past (or future), more well-known works, effectively adding layers of history and discourse to the narrative. One of the earliest episodes, *The Last Chase*, stars Lee Majors and Burgess Meredith; the former is noted by Servo for having been in *The Six Million Dollar Man* and *The Fall Guy*; the latter's history in the *Rocky* films is evoked when Servo rhetorically ponders, "Doesn't he have boxers to train?" Later in the show's trajectory, Joel/Mike and the 'Bots embrace this evocation of ancillary texts as an artistic choice. For example, Adam West's villainous role in *Zombie Nightmare* evokes numerous unflattering Batman references. Mike and the 'Bots make the creative choice to portray West not as brave and heroic but as washed-up, drunk, and deeply bitter over not having been cast in Tim Burton's *Batman* film; here, the riffers demonstrate multiple layers of interpretive agency in choosing not only which textual threads to introduce into the fray but which elements of those threads to emphasize. *Werewolf* briefly features Joe Estevez (brother of Martin Sheen, uncle of Charlie Sheen and Emilio Estevez), who is mocked for being a lesser member of his family despite his considerable filmography. Although Estevez plays only a small role and his character disappears early in the film, the evocation of his more famous family members draws disproportionate attention to his character. Estevez is a fine and prolific actor, but the riffers punish him for who he *is not,* implying that the producers of *Werewolf* were too cheap to obtain the services of Martin, Charlie, or Emilio. The ridicule of Joe Estevez, in the context of riffing *Werewolf*, represents not a condemnation of his career but of the film's limitations and shortcomings.

When there is no celebrity actor present, Joel/Mike and the 'Bots create their own simulacra of celebrity, often noting physical resemblances to celebrities and accordingly superimposing *their* ad hoc histories into the narrative. Through this wordplay-by-association, riffing improbably transplants facsimiles of David Lee Roth

and Emmett Kelly into *Robot Holocaust*; Oscar Wilde and Tim Conway (specifically, Conway in his persona of incompetent athlete Dorf) into *Godzilla vs. Megalon*; and Richard Burton and Ernest Borgnine into *Gamera vs. Guiron* (Servo notes Borgnine's resemblance to Gamera, the friendly flying monster-turtle). Joel even reflexively notes their tendency to employ this tactic in *Gamera vs. Guiron*, performing "another skit based on a character's weak resemblance to a Hollywood star"—even Joel and the 'Bots acknowledge they are stretching by burdening one of the film's child protagonists with Burton's likeness and legendary affinity for alcohol consumption.

Introducing celebrity histories, even if by simulacra, allows Joel/Mike and the 'Bots to introduce competing text fragments into the text's narrative structure. As Jenkins notes of this fragment-gathering practice, "The reader is drawn not into the pre-constituted world of the fiction but rather into a world she has created from the textual materials. Here, the reader's pre-established values are at least as important as those preferred by the narrative system" (1992, 63). This poaching from other texts, often more beloved and well-known texts, keeps the reader at the fore of the text-assembly process. Given the fact *MST3K* rarely features films for which iconic actors are best remembered, the process of evoking more visible texts also functions to undercut the epic posturing of the text at hand. This kind of riffing privileges media literacy: the more one is familiar with a performer's work, the more potential threads one can draw into the text at hand.

(5) Audience Agency Through Idiosyncrasy: Keeping Jenkins's argument that poaching empowers the reader, *MST3K*'s riffers at times reject a strict signification system by occasionally interjecting idiosyncratic riffs whose presence is less concerned with exposing or declustering specific symbols in the film and more about simply expressing the riffer's attitude toward a particular phenomenon. In *MST3K*, this frequently results in a negative outburst, as a riffer may go out of his way to put down a text or text producer he dislikes. During the ending credits of *The Last Chase*, Crow notes that the film was produced in Canada and says "that explains why it sucked" without elaborating on why he equates Canada with inferior cinema. A nondescript piano tune in *Gamera vs. Guiron* evokes dread from Servo: "Oh no, it's a Mark Russell song, run!" A song in *Manos* again draws Servo's ire: "Yuck, it sounds like Jerry Reed." In both of the latter examples, the symbolic connection to the musicians disparaged is tentative; the point of both riffs is to put down Russell/Reed rather than to comment on the soundtrack's role in the film.

Such references need not be negative, though, as there are instances in which Joel/Mike and the 'Bots reference a beloved text or performer with tenuous signification to an element of the film. For example, *Godzilla vs. Megalon* includes a recurring reference to an obscure motorcycle-themed television show *Then Came Bronson*: the otherwise forgotten television program was frequently, almost reflexively, evoked in motorcycle scenes across *MST3K*'s early history, though there any number of more widely accessible texts featuring motorcycle culture. Beloved avant-garde musician Frank Zappa is referenced in both *Gamera vs. Guiron* and *Manos*. While these are not full-fledged floating signifiers, they do reflect an earnest interjection of the reader's idiosyncratic tastes into the reading process. As I discuss in the following section, the impressive array of reading tactics and fragments gathered and introduced into the text structure is largely dependent on the *intertextual* chops of the reader.

Opening Texts Through Intertextuality

Upon receiving its Peabody Award, *MST3K* was cited as "an ingenious eclectic series" that references "everything from Proust to *Gilligan's Island*" (qtd. in Holtzclaw 2010, 181). This noted ability to draw on a wide base of external references—applying them in specific contexts to alter the reading of a particular text—is another way to note *MST3K*'s *intertextuality*. As McWilliams and Richardson note, *MST3K*'s "[e]xterior references situate the program in the center of a web of texts, interrelating it to the entire history of popular culture" (2011, 114). In the annals of television history, no program has even been more overtly reliant on drawing on an eclectic array of references to *other* pop culture texts to derive sense from its premise, and this shared talent among the show's characters stands out as a key tool in their survival kit.

Consider, for example, *Deathstalker* (a fantasy adventure set in medieval times), in which Mike and the 'Bots reference: Dr. Seuss's *Horton Hears a Who*; Men Without Hats' music video for "The Safety Dance;" *American Gladiators*; the Oakland Raiders; the marriage of Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton; *Lord of the Rings*; *The Sound of Music*; prop comic Carrot Top; *The McLaughlin Group*; *Oliver Twist*; tennis player Bjorn Borg; Ike and Tina Turner; Mother Teresa; Bill Clinton; *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*; *Starsky & Hutch*; *The Simpsons*; Christian metal band Stryper; Luciano Pavarotti; the Gutenberg Bible; the video game *DOOM*; David Hasselhoff; *Ladies Home Journal*; *Jesus Christ Superstar*; Barabbas; and NAFTA—to name perhaps a third of the show's external references. They spend at least as much, if not more, of the film talking about other texts as they spend talking about the text in front of them; in doing so, they simultaneously talk about both the text present and others present-by-proxy.

For another example, *Werewolf* (a film which evokes the American Southwestern legend of the yanaglanchi, a lycanthrope-esque skinwalker) includes references to: *Billy Jack*; the Marshall Tucker Band; *Curious George*; the *Mir* space station; *Walker: Texas Ranger*; Chia Pets; *The English Patient*; *Cheers*; Bruce Jenner; Bob Vila; Janet Reno; *Taxi Driver*; Fidel Castro; *The Sheltering Sky*; Robert Bork; *The Pirates of Penzance*; Neil Young; St. Paul of the *New Testament*; Son of Sam; Frank Zappa; *The X-Files*; Pearl Jam; *Great Expectations*; Jackson Browne; Bob Dylan; Johann Sebastian Bach; *Hustler Magazine*; J.D. Salinger; *Guernica*; neurologist Oliver Sacks; and Jimmy Carter—again, this is only a sample of the external references evoked in a single episode. Somewhat incredibly, most of these refer-

ences are deployed with purpose and in ways that relate to elements of the film (as opposed to the idiosyncratic pseudo-floating signifiers discussed earlier). There is no denying that the discourse produced on *MST3K* is built on an impressively vast knowledge of popular culture.

While *MST3K* draws liberally on external references (as demonstrated at length above), the show is also note-worthy for its internal references, also known as *callbacks*, in which the show's characters reference riffs and char-acters from past episodes. In addition to serving to both constitute a form of series continuity and reward repeat viewers, callbacks help to make *MST3K*'s intertextual mode of discourse coherent in ways that a hopelessly eclectic intertextuality cannot achieve. They establish iconic characters and lines of dialogue into riffing's heu-ristic vocabulary, which would otherwise be forgotten. Without the necessary textual fluency, internal references become indecipherable codes that exclude participation. But by so frequently harnessing both external and internal intertextuality—a literacy that consistently mushroomed as the show went on—*MST3K* speaks about culture to virtually the same degree it speaks about the text at hand.

Discussion: Perspective by Incongruity or Dom-inant-Hegemonic Reification?

It is misleading to suggest *MST3K* contradicts or sub-verts the films they riff, at least in a sense that *MST3K*'s riffing constitutes an overt oppositional reading of their films. Rather, it is more accurate to say that *MST3K* chal-lenges the meaning of its targeted films through *perspective by incongruity*. Burke, likening its practice to "verbal atom cracking" (1937, 308), explains perspective by incongru-ity as "a constant juxtaposition of incongruous words, attaching to some name a qualifying epithet which had heretofore gone with a different order of names" (1935, 90). Teresa Anne Demo suggests perspective by incon-gruity can be used as a tactic by which comedy can be employed for political action, noting the "highly charged nature of the symbolic alchemy produced when differing rhetorical/ideological orientations mix" (139). "Verbal atom-cracking" is indeed an apt metaphor for *MST3K*'s brand of rhetorically alchemic perspective by incongruity.

Rather than directly denouncing the film's problem-atic content, Joel/Mike and the 'Bots often temporarily co-opt the film's problematic attitudes and rhetorically magnify them to such a degree that an earnest dominant-hegemonic reading becomes laughably absurd. Articulated another way, rather than standing overtly in opposition of the film and its ideologies, Joel/Mike and the 'Bots often *over*-perform a dominant-hegemonic reading, effectively cracking the atoms of the film's message together so brashly that the ideologies undergirding the film collapse.

And yet, the challenges brought on by textual poly-valence reemerge here: whether the reader decodes the show's over-the-top abrasive riffs as perspective by incon-gruity—critique masquerading as ignorance—or simple reification of hegemonic discourses—ignorance masquer-ading as critique—depends mightily on the reader, as well

as the rhetorical artistry with which the riffers assemble their over-the-top performance. The ways readers move through the world, coupled with their relationships to the texts involved, open a large possibility of the show being decoded as reinforcing the problematic ideologies of the films being riffed or even spreading discourse more ethi-cally toxic than those of the films.

MST3K's riffing at times can be read as abrasive and destructive. At times it is denotatively racist, sexist, nation-alistic, sizeist, ableist, homophobic, or generally cruel enough to dissuade identification with the riffers if one is not pre-inclined toward such identification. For example, Joel and the 'Bots attack the lead child protagonist in *Godzilla vs. Megalon*, Roku (dubbed "Roxa" in the Eng-lish version and deliberately misheard as "Roxanne" by the SoL crew), who is riffed harshly for his squeaky dubbed voice. The riffers order Roku to "shut up" frequently, and Joel even urges Roku to ride his bike into traffic; when Roku bemoans the fact that his caregiver cannot use the heroic robot Jet Jaguar to summon Godzilla to help fight Megalon (which eventually does happen), Crow com-plains, "it's a pity we can't kill you [Roku] and get away with it." When *Santa Claus* begins with a procession of crudely racist stereotypes of children working in Santa's workshop (e.g., sombreros and ponchos for Mexican chil-dren, bone jewelry and tribal paint for African children, turbans and bindis for Indian children), Crow joins in and (over?)performs racism with malicious glee: he notes that kids from France "stink to high heaven," and English children "have rotten teeth," later half-heartedly attempt-ing to atone for his racism by dismissing kids from the United States as "too spoiled and lazy to help Santa." To their credit, Mike and Servo are outwardly offended by Crow's behavior, suggesting the at-home audience ought to feel the same. In *Space Mutiny*, Servo describes a woman serving drinks at a party as follows: "Yes, she's a graduate of MIT, yet she still has to serve drinks to men" and delivers the line with a disturbing tone of satisfac-tion that would be hard to dismiss if not already invested in the Servo character (as well as Murphy, who operates Servo). To laugh at cruel riffs such as these, to read them as not offensive but rather as indicative of an incongruent over-identification with the film's offensive attitudes, it is at times necessary to have developed a positive relation-ship and a trust with *MST3K*'s characters or to actually identify with their utterances.

The rhetoric of *MST3K*'s movie riffing, while frequently cited as progressive for its age and medium, is still lit-tered with utterances that reflect problematic dominant-hegemonic ideals. The show is articulate and literate in comparison to most any television program of any era, but still reads as white, midwestern, male, heteronormative, middle class, and at least foregrounds (though does not necessarily promote explicitly) Judeo-Christian discourses. It is remarkable and telling that even the vaunted masters of movie riffing, whose demonstrated collective intertex-tuality is arguably unmatched in breadth and depth in the annals of U.S. television, are still clearly constrained by their positionalities to the point that the show is remark-

ably more accessible to White Straight Midwestern Male audiences, myself included, than any other. This is not to suggest that the makers of *MST3K* purposefully privilege White Straight Midwestern Male audiences but merely to note that it is not coincidental that the positionalities of the show's cast of writers match the demographics of a majority of their audience.

My reading of *MST3K*'s characteristic rhetoric does not indicate direct hostility toward identity groups who do not fit the demographics of the show's cast, and yet it seems the artists who craft that rhetoric cannot help but project a degree of insensitivity in their utterances that I understand to be disinviting to readers whose identities and experiences do not correspond with their own. I suggest this is striking evidence of Condit's critique of the notion of the polysemous text: sophisticated intertextual reading does render a text more open than an insular reading, but *MST3K* suggests that even skilled, politically motivated readers cannot escape the constraints of their own identities. To be truly intertextual in a way that can use comedy as a method to challenge hegemonic discourses, readers must actively verse themselves in texts that contradict or challenge their own conceptions of reality.

Conclusion

It is certainly debatable whether *MST3K* is itself an oppositional text, or even if the show's articulation of reality constitutes a welcome voice in the lexicon of popular culture. Michael Dean argues, "Even if the riffing done by the *MST3K* host aims largely for laughter rather than a specific political or historical critique, its willingness to violate the sanctity of a movie's frame and challenge the movie's terms of engagement can be seen as setting an empowering example for all audiences" (121). While this may be true, audience empowerment does not necessarily imply oppositional reading or even a socially responsible reading. The empowered riffer may or may not communicate ethically and may or may not empower others through their performance. If, in popular usage, *MST3K* empowers amateur riffers to pollute the air with racist, sexist, and other hateful discourses that are just as problematic and oppressive as those of the films they riff, that empowerment to speak has not been for the social or cultural betterment of the audience. On the tongues of the ignorant and hateful, *MST3K* threatens to become, in everyday practice, a tool for distributing destructive rhetoric, and this should not be.

MST3K demonstrates that polyvalent texts can be at least partially declustered by skills such as intertextuality and tactical rhetoric, and these concepts as media literacy tools ought to be recognized as important skills that are worthy of both theoretical and practical development within the academy. As scholars and media consumers, we ought to recognize that students and scholars of popular culture can and should conceive of media literacy as a cluster of skills that can be built and expanded with intention. In theory, consumers of popular culture can work to become more intertextually fluent, more acutely aware of how producers construct texts and imbue them with ideology, and more aware of how those constructions can be dismantled. I hope this suggestion will not be misinterpreted as being too naïve to disparities in access to mediated reality or to the fact that performative riffing is not the only method by which we can interpret and work against problematic pop culture texts. As cultural critics, we ought to continue to study how hegemonic discourses within popular media can be denaturalized and potentially opposed, but we should also remember that we cannot completely escape our own frames of reality from the texts that surround us. One prime lesson to glean from *MST3K* is that even bottomless intertextuality from a single cultural positionality will fail to account for the experiences of others. By entering into earnest dialogue between Self and Other, critics within and outside of the academy can work toward a communal heuristic vocabulary that is capable of promoting oppositional reading practices that can be put into everyday use. Through continual dialogue, we can engage with voices both within and outside our own cultures.

END NOTES

1. I am basing my arguments and assumptions upon my experiences and interpretations as a U.S.-born, middle-class white man. While not all U.S. populations enjoy equal access to technology and thus to mediated reality, one of the principle assumptions of cultural studies scholarship is the ubiquity and constitutive nature of commercial media.

2. Full English title: *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station*. Translated from the original French: *L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat*.

3. Gunning questions the factual legitimacy of the *Arrival of a Train at the Station* legend and suggests that early film audiences willingly suspended their disbelief in exchange for the thrill of the illusion: "The audience's sense of shock comes less from a naive belief that they are threatened by an actual locomotive than from an unbelievable visual transformation occurring before their eyes, parallel to the greatest wonders of the magic theatre" (1995, 119).

4. In both cited texts, Fiske and Condit write primarily about television and not as often about commercial film. As the ways in which films and television programs change and, perhaps more importantly, as films are increasingly viewed in the home rather than in commercial theaters, distinctions between how we audience film and how we audience TV continue to blur.

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THE ROAD TO EXCESS LEADS TO *THE MAGIC CHRISTIAN*: COMEDY, THE GROTESQUE, AND THE LIMITS OF THE BODY

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Humor might well be a management tool but it is also a tool against the management.
(Simon Critchley, *On Humour* [2002])

Terry Southern's novel *The Magic Christian* (1958) follows the exploits of eccentric billionaire Guy Grand, a provocateur whose episodic pranks seem to exist solely to discern how easily people can be made to embarrass themselves and jeopardize their bodies in the pursuit of money, commercial goods, or vulgar fame. According to Southern's biographer Lee Hill, "Guy Grand is a Zen master of subversion unconcerned with any interpretation of why he does what he does—believing instead that the pranks and their planning already embody a critique" (88). Grand's bald exposure of hypocrisy—whether through his utilization of a massive howitzer cannon on a hunting excursion or through his luring of the wealthy elite onto his nightmarish maiden voyage of the S.S. Magic Christian luxury liner—amounts to an ideologically confused, even self-conflicted anarchism. The smug, confident Guy Grand is "the prankster, the trickster, the master of the put-on" (Tully 2010, 74). In fact, the recent study *Terry Southern and the American Grotesque* even puts forth that "Guy Grand is Southern's clearest alter-ego in his fiction" (74). Further, "the purpose of [Grand's] con is to expose all other cons, to expose all beloved cultural poses and institutions as arbitrary illusions easily manipulated; to expose—the true Decadent tradition, the 'mad tradition'—that all culture is artifice, and the only truth is hungry, ravaging, abundant nature" (75). In Grand, Southern created a consciousness on whom to focus his comic fantasies about a sick (and silly) society.

Southern's *The Magic Christian* reads like a scattershot riff on the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup* (1933, Leo McCarey), a confident exercise consisting of equal parts

grotesque unmasking, socially observant satire, and the dogged liquification of sacred cows.[1] It should come as no surprise, therefore, that it is not to all tastes. Lee Hill characterized the novel's critical reception in Britain, for example, as tending "toward the fussy damning-with-faint-praise side" (90). American audiences, at the time attuned to the "Great American Novel" tradition of home-brewed naturalism, remained largely indifferent.

The book did find ardent supporters, perhaps most notably in British actor Peter Sellers. Sellers worked with director Stanley Kubrick on a film adaptation of Vladimir Nabokov's lauded *Lolita* (1962). The two were collaborating on the early stages of *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), but remained at a creative impasse in the preliminary steps of the process. According to Sellers biographer Ed Sikov, "the aesthetic solution occurred because someone had given Peter a copy of a strange and flamboyant novel called *The Magic Christian* by the American writer Terry Southern" (191). The book immediately struck a chord. Sellers, who had built a career on playing extremely nuanced comic types—sometimes in multiple roles (oddly estranging in their familiarity, yet each unique) as in *The Mouse that Roared* (1959, Jack Arnold) and *I'm All Right Jack* (1959, John Boulting)—had much in common with Grand. Quixotic, jocular, and restless to a fault, he shared Grand's guerrilla mentality, often thriving on the comedic excesses of in-character improvisation, in his pursuit of destabilizing humor. Sikov further relates that "Peter, flush with excitement over finding a kindred worldview, began doling out copies as gifts to all his friends" (191). Kubrick, Sellers, and Southern would proceed to work

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together on *Dr. Strangelove*. Sellers delivers a tour-de-force performance in multiple roles, at times clearly channeling Grand's latent megalomania.

This biographical introduction is not meant to suggest that the onus of Southern's later career as a Hollywood scenarist and screenwriter is entirely built around his alliance with Sellers. Nor is it to claim that *The Magic Christian* is only noteworthy as an introductory calling-card in anticipation of more popularly celebrated projects like the much-loved *Easy Rider* (1969, Dennis Hopper) or his naively pornographic comic novel *Candy* (1965, written in collaboration with Mason Hoffenberg). Rather, this essay puts forth that the trans-Atlantic meeting of minds between Southern and Sellers was a profitable exercise, resulting as it did with a rather spectacular *film maudit* in the form of the cinematic version of *The Magic Christian* (1969, Joseph McGrath), shot in Britain with Sellers in the role of Guy Grand and soon-to-be-Ex-Beatle Ringo Starr in the newly devised role of Youngman Grand, a former vagrant adopted by Guy as heir apparent to his fortune. Despite the essentially American origins of the story, the film version of *The Magic Christian* is localized to Britain to an astonishing degree. Although overshadowed by the frequently discussed, canonical sources of postwar British comedy—the work of stage satirists *Beyond the Fringe*, the radio routines of Sellers's own *Goon Show*, the playful sight gags of Richard Lester's mid-1960s youth films, and the astute zaniness of television and film instantiations of *Monty Python's Flying Circus*—it manages to suture social and political satire with a noteworthy focus on bodily function. In fact, *The Magic Christian* simultaneously participates in the longer tradition of corporeal humor, a tendency famously traced by Mikhail Bakhtin from the work of the Greek thinker Menippus through a full, polyvocal realization in Francois Rabelais's text *Gargantua and Pantagruel.*

The film of *The Magic Christian* recasts the terms of Southern's novel and instead levels biting criticism against a Britain still rigorously bound to sharp delineations of social class. According to Arthur Marwick, "distinctions of class probably interpenetrate the rest of British life more extensively than elsewhere" (246). While the trend throughout the 1960s and 1970s was toward a widely discussed, but narrowly defined, "class mobility" (the dream of middle class or elite attainment through fame, wealth, or hard work), there remained behavioral proprieties and developed tastes attached to social class.[2] Uncharacteristically, *The Magic Christian's* laughs reside somewhere between what Jeff Nuttall and Rodick Carmichael refer to as "us" humor (the humor of "survival," embodied working class comedy that is bawdy, enlivened by its capacity to confront abjection and lower body strata) and "me" humor (a comedy of esoteric and witty reference, in which the joker makes a point to demonstrate their superiority, in the form of self-serving "sovereign gesture") (24-25).[3] In fact, in its explicit foregrounding of class and economic issues (upheld by the near-schizophrenia of Sellers's Grand, who is simultaneously the wealthiest man in the

country and the man most eager to abolish all wealth) the film challenges its audience with an apparent paradox. Against the "appropriate" comedy thought to be the preserve of the monied classes—genteel, wry, witty, and reliant on a shared cultural legacy of *noblesse oblige*—*The Magic Christian* (lead by Guy Grand, one of their own, as a catalyst) forces the privileged to confront the "lower strata" of the body, in the process of directly tying the obsessive desire for money to a series of terrifyingly affective physical responses.

Thus, *The Magic Christian* will be examined in that longer comedic tradition of disruptive bodily excess—constituting such diverse examples as *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, lithographs by William Hogarth and Thomas Rowlandson, "bawdy" novels like Fielding's *Tom Jones*, and the explicitly working class tradition of music hall—and in relation to the above-mentioned comedic zeitgeist of 1960s Britain. The next section scrutinizes *The Magic Christian* with regard to how it challenges and punishes the body through its almost pathological elevation of the power of money. In particular, I will analyze sequences that show Guy and Youngman Grand pushing their subjects to the absolute limit of bodily stability in their bids for wealth and prestige. The unruly transgressions put forth—gluttonous over-eating, sensory deprivation, and (most memorably), the mixing of "free" money into a vat of urine, animal blood, excrement, and offal—provide an anarchic corrective to the longstanding "comedy of manners" thought to be appropriate to Britain's wealthy.

Although it is beyond the bounds of this essay to enumerate every difference between Southern's novel and the film, a provisional signal of major changes is useful for understanding how the text came to be fashioned into a continuum of specifically British humor. Some of the changes are enacted through Sellers's performance, while others have to do the script's incessant re-writing. Southern originally adapted his own script, which was later substantially rewritten (a total of at least fourteen drafts in all) by director Joseph McGrath, Sellers, and by collaborative duo Graham Chapman and John Cleese, by now seasoned television writer/performers who were soon to make their mark with *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (Hill 2001, 184-185).[4] Ed Sikov relates that this process caused ire with Southern, but that the two had been brought aboard at Sellers's insistence in his attempt at playing the part of Grand more squarely as an Englishman. Chapman and Cleese—both middle class professionals with Cambridge credentials—were well-positioned to ape the monied elite (293).

In Southern's novel, Grand is a billionaire through family wealth, "a man who had inherited most of his money and had preserved it through large safe investments in steel, rubber, and oil" (10). What's more: "For one thing, he was the last of the big spenders; and for another, he had a very unusual attitude towards people—he spent about ten million a year in, as he expressed it himself, 'making it hot for them'" (10). Grand's "making it hot for them" is but one of several examples of his extremely cavalier atti-

tude toward his own wealth, which can best be regarded as casual to the point of caricature. He regularly says things like "Grand's the name, easy green's the game," or "Show me the man who's above picking up bits and pieces—and I'll show *you*: a fool" (13; 62). Southern describes him as a "fat, roundish man," who we learn lives with two spinster aunts (they are his sisters in the film) (10-11). Grand's schemes range from the relatively harmless—his attempt to buy a hot dog from a street vendor with a five-hundred dollar bill—to the pervasive and complex, such as his mysterious supermarket, which sells goods at absolutely rock-bottom prices, yet maddeningly closes down and changes location after each day, much to the consternation of his thankful-yet-perplexed customers (6; 145-146).

Most immediately apparent in the film is Grand's change in demeanor. No longer a grotesque, weaselly riff on the exploitative corporate tycoon, Sellers instead casts Grand as a disingenuous (yet debonair and sympathetic) raconteur. Although he later admitted to playing Grand like a British Groucho Marx, Sellers's Grand also cues the persona of the novel's author: "Sellers's performance is nothing less than a portrait of Southern himself, right down to the hair, the guffaws and the mock-English accent Southern loved to affect" (Sikov 2002, 293; Tully 2010, 165). This characterization brings Grand in line with David Castronovo's concept of the "English gentleman" type, an exotic or eccentric relic whose sense of personal decorum simultaneously aligns him with a tradition of wealth while (again, paradoxically) putting him in a prime position to continuously undercut himself and anyone who seeks similar status (4). Further, the merging of class privilege with assured success in business comments on the degree to which the two remained intrinsically interconnected, even by 1970. While wealthy American elites largely move (and merge) within a small, self-selecting group (the confluence of New York "High" Society, Ivy League education, and Wall Street dominance), the reality of the situation in Britain is even more stark.[5] For example, economic historian David Kynaston discusses a 1971 sociological study by Richard Whitley of the power elite in the City of London (the financial center of Britain). At this time:

> Over four-fifths of the directors [of banks] in his sample had attended fee-paying schools, with Eton easily dominant; Oxbridge was by far the favoured place of higher education and nearly half belonged to one or more of London's nine most prestigious West End clubs …There were also, of course, manifold kinship relationships, and in all Whitney felt able to conclude that 'by outlining and measuring degrees of connection and commonalities between members of the financial elite' he had 'indicated a certain homogeneity of background and closeness of connection which enables us to treat them as 'elite'. (422)

The findings can be effortlessly overlaid onto Guy Grand, or his other great fictional counterpart from the time, the unassailably smug Sir James Burgess (Ralph Richardson) from Lindsay Anderson's film *O Lucky Man!*

(1973). But while Burgess uses all resources at his disposal—including charm, poise, and cloying politeness—in order to maintain power, Grand does his best to undercut and question his own authority, through his tasteless, vulgar, and nihilistic stunts.

While I will mention further productive inventions, transpositions or alterations in my later discussions of specific sequences in *The Magic Christian*, the addition of Youngman ("young man") Grand has wide consequence, further complicating Guy Grand's motives. In the novel, Guy is a loner, generally plotting his schemes without collaboration. Although he uses his vast wealth to hire associates for his different lampoons, he answers to no one but himself. While the film still positions Guy as the originator of each of the put-ons, he uses Youngman as a sounding board. Youngman's presence even adds picaresque elements, as his time spent with Guy grooms him to exact corrective revenge on a society which had treated him unfairly. Youngman rises from destitute tramp to man of wealth, in the process encountering representatives of all tenable class-positions.

At the beginning of *The Magic Christian*, Youngman is an abject, pitiful figure. A homeless, poorly groomed, and luckless youth, he is shown sleeping in a public park. Guy encounters Youngman loitering on a bridge, whereupon he makes the seemingly arbitrary and baseless decision to adopt this stranger as a son. Guy invite Youngman into his mansion, gives him a stake in his corporation, and trains him to disrupt bourgeois proprieties. This odd regard for others demonstrates a strangely altruistic streak not found in the novel. That the film eventually ends with Guy and Youngman's decision to embrace homelessness as an alternative to purely ostentatious wealth further illustrates the degree to which the interplay between Guy and Youngman prompts a more radical relationship to disruptive pranksterism.

Despite its inventiveness and uncommonly committed reliance on its central ideas, *The Magic Christian* (book and film) clearly owes a great deal to a long tradition of socially engaged comedy, traceable from ancient times through the contemporary moment. While comedic kinship can be drawn against representative works from around the world—from Rabelais to the Brazilian film *Macunaima* (1969, Joaqim Pedro de Andrade)—there are an extraordinary set of examples from a specifically British tradition, which partially explain *The Magic Christian's* effectiveness at addressing issue of British identity during a period of gradual economic decline.

The governing logic behind the set of texts in question is a relationship to what Mikhail Bakhtin has called "Menippean satire," an approach to the comic put forth by the philosopher Menippus of Gadara, who saw in works like Petronus's *Satyricon* and Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* a sense of humor "profoundly rooted in the Saturnalian tradition" (Stam 1989, 97). In his reading of Bakhtin's *The Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929, translated into English 1984), Stam usefully summarizes some "essential traits" of this modality, which include:

the constant presence of the comic element; an extraordinary freedom of plot and philosophical invention; an emphasis on the adventures of an idea and its passage in the world; the fusion of the fantastic, the symbolic, and slum naturalism; the foregrounding of philosophical universalism and "ultimate questions"; a three-planed structure involving heaven, earth, and hell; a fondness for the experimental and the fantastic; an emphasis on moral-psychological experimentation, split personality, insanity, and abnormal psychic states showing "the unfinalizability of man" and "his noncoincidence within himself"; a fondness for scandal and violations of decorum; a love of sharp contrasts and oxymoronic combinations; elements of social utopia; the wide use of inserted genres; a polystylistic language and approach; and overt and hidden polemics with various philosophical, religious, and ideological schools and mockery of "masters of thought." (Stam 1989, 97-98)[6]

Bakhtin's primary example of this type of writing comes through his famous evaluation of Francois Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, a comic work with explicitly anti-clerical and anti-hierarchical dimensions. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin valorizes this example of Menippean satire for its celebration of polyphony, the social inversions of carnival, the glorification of the lower body strata (those areas referred to in *Monty Python's Flying Circus* as the "naughty bits"), and its wide-net of subversive criticism of entrenched power.

In Britain, this genre of literary work could arguably be allied with Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, a 14th century blueprint for the comic grotesque. These dimensions are especially evident in Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1971 adaptation of a select set of stories from Chaucer. Throughout, Pasolini focuses on fleshy, excremental elements. This is best exemplified in one of the film's final sequences, a fantasia equally steeped in horror and comedy: Pasolini visualizes an almost science-fictional interpretation of hell, where flatulent demons expel terrified monks from their bottoms. Pasolini's selection of tales emphasizes Rabelaisian elements like carnival and the suspension of laws (occasioned by festival), but casts them in contemporary genre terms: historical ribaldry presented to viewers as *Carry On* sex farce.

While Pasolini (through his visual approximation) and Bakhtin (in passing reference) single-out the paintings of Pieter Brueghel the Elder and Hiernoymous Bosch as visual primers on this Menippean sensibility, the closest British adjunct from before the 20th century is probably William Hogarth (Bakhtin 1969, 27). Like Bosch, Hogarth was a moralist who used the comic grotesque to expose human folly and correct dangerous behavior. While his prints often have a degree of implied condemnation to them, they also invite the viewer to sympathize with (or even inhabit) the realm of vice, drunken rudeness, and excess. Paul Williamson has productively reverse-engineered this duality, which he describes as the "Strangelove Effect," a disjunction between rational-moral response and bodily-affective spontaneity (80-81). For example, he reads Hogarth prints like *A Midnight Modern Conversation* (1732/33)—a scene of boisterous drinking—as potentially capturing viewer attention, amusement, and envy through their embrace of rude carnival (81). This correlates to the effect produced by Peter Sellers in his actualization of Dr. Strangelove, "whose body erupting periodically in uncontrollable Nazi salutes, refuses to be restrained by his mind" (80). In Hogarth, as with this comedic lineage more generally, grotesque bodies shatter received piety and decorum in order to force recognition of the incontestably material. This "Strangelove Effect," moreover is appropriately ported to the film adaptation of *The Magic Christian*, whose very premise correlates with this understanding of performative gesture, as a confrontation with (and unmasking of) social mythologies.

The most explicitly comic of 19th century lithographers, Thomas Rowlandson, provides an historical connection to the ideas of R.D. Laing, who in the 1960s was known for his arguments connecting psychological eccentricity to the diagnosis of social malady. In works like *A Medical Inspection, or Miracles with Never Cease* (1814), Rowlandson casts all bodies—the pregnant woman receiving diagnosis and the lecherous doctors—as ruddy-faced, pock-marked caricatures of well-known social types. The print suggests that the arbiters of health and normality (the supposedly morally upstanding and credentialized doctors, as well as "Parson Towser," the impish manifestation of organized Christianity) are in fact complicit quacks who have abused their accepted position in society in pursuit of personal vice. In this instance, as in the sorts of exposures rendered in *The Magic Christian*, "Sex, medicine and fringe religion are all tarred with the same brush" (Porter 2001, 103). These sentiments were common amongst the work of Rowlandson, James Gillray and George Cruikshank, all of whom employ aspects of the bodily grotesque in their comments on the state of the nation. Thus, Roy Porter finds that many visualized "a symbolic Britannia languishing, diseased, neglected or poisoned by false doctors (read: politicians)" (19). This sensibility—concern for the body politic, whose views are constituted through the expert proclamations of an abusive elite able to modulate definitions of normality—resonates with the popular work of R.D. Laing, a psychologist whose ideas on society often played into the thematic mix of cinema sympathetic to the 1960s counterculture. Laing advocated eccentric, individualist behavior as an affront to the controlling, alienating edicts put forth by a "sick" society.[7] As such, in his books *The Politics of Experience* and *The Divided Self*, he called for a reevaluation of clinical schizophrenia and other medical categorizations that sought to parcel experience into accepted states like "sane" and "insane." Like Foucault's later work in *Discipline and Punish*, Laing saw structural problems in the way that society organized its concepts of normality (1976, 227-228). The subversion of diagnostic, commonsensical sanity—from Rowlandson through Foucault—relates directly to Guy Grand's oddball exposure of received hypocrisies. Were he not so wealthy and powerful, he would likely be committed to Bedlam.

The film of *The Magic Christian* can be further situated into its historical milieu through an examination of the popular front of postwar comedy in Britain. Inasmuch as the movie version took on especially British resonances with a longer historical trajectory, it also played into many recognized impulses that have since achieved widespread fame. As mentioned previously, the film is rare in its wholesale reconciliation of resolutely "low" and unmistakably "high" modalities.

The "low"/populist tradition (with its evident resonances with Rabelaisian carnival), as Leon Hunt notes, can largely be traced through eloquent defenses of heavily class-inflected cultural practice, for example George Orwell's essay "The Art of Donald McGill," a celebration of bawdy seaside postcards resonant with Northern working class identity (34). Hunt reserves specific praise for Nuttall and Carmichael's above-mentioned *Common Factors/Vulgar Factions* (1977): "here," he writes, "was a book about Blackpool, sex, pubs, sport, Harry Ramsden, chip shops, 'laffs'," written against the grain of much academic criticism, yet nonetheless remaining guilty of the two widespread flaws of 1970s British "permissive populism," which include problematic assumptions about hypermasculinity and misogyny, as well as an overly simplistic, inflexible understanding of "high" and "low" (34-35). To this can be added eloquent defenses of the "music hall" tradition such as John Osborne's elegiac play *The Entertainer* (1957), as well as Tony Richardson's bawdy adaptation of Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1963), which plays both as a contemporary vision of the picaresque and as a blockbuster sex romp, replete with over-cranked (sped-up) camerawork and endless sequences of lecherous men chasing women. All of these sources privilege physical comedy, *double entendre* (often in tandem with Cockney rhyming slang), and, as with the "high" tradition, exaggeration. This lineage encompasses franchises like *Carry On* (1958-1978) and *Confessions…* (1974-1977), as well as popular television series such as *On the Buses* (1969-1973).

These sources shed light onto *The Magic Christian's* lapses into pure vulgarity. While each of the film's gags remains in some way attached to Southern's larger set of goals relating to the exposure of bourgeois folly, some moments have less overtly political resonance than others. The film's transposition of the hot dog vendor sequence is something of a case in point. Here, Sellers-as-Grand affects his most priggish and waspish accent, as he leans out of the window of his train car to buy a hot dog from a nearby vendor. The man wheels his cart over and negotiates Grand's bumbling order. Grand occasionally ducks back into the car to deal with snippets of a conversation between his sisters and an acquaintance. Grand then attempts to pay for his nine pence snack with large bank note. The vendor protests, as he is unable to make change. Grand adds further insult to injury by donning a plastic pig mask and oinking at the man, who by this time is running alongside the now-moving train, attempting to finish the transaction. But Grand keeps the man running until he falls off the platform, as the train speeds away from the station. In addition to being rather mean-spirited, this sequence uses incongruities of the "laffs" variety: clear demarcations of class difference (cued by accents, but enforced by Grand's vertically perched position in the train), slapstick (man falling down, soda bottles exploding), and delight in pain (Grand seems overjoyed to let this otherwise innocent man suffer) trump social commentary.

The "high" comedic tradition of the 1950s and 1960s largely derives from the cast of *The Goon Show* who fused aspects of standardized radio performance (derived, in part, from the genres of verbal address found in music hall) with a truly subversive sense of humor. Their work constituted "a radio comedy series which remains unsurpassed for inventiveness, sheer craziness and an explosive use of the medium which did not so much break conventions as trample them underfoot" (Wilmut 1980, xvii). Beginning in 1951, Spike Milligan, Peter Sellers, Harry Secombe, and Michael Bentine delivered explicitly surreal, sometimes nonsensical, and always silly send-ups to British imperialism. Humphrey Carpenter claims that "Milligan's Goon scripts brought anarchic army humour to the nation's loudspeakers," suggesting that the Goons were, in fact, inflecting and amplifying an intrinsic type of critical humor directly tied to shared national experience in World War II (52). In his comprehensive study of British comedy from 1960-1980, Roger Wilmut notes that "*The Goon Show* was a major influence on the 'third wave' of comedy—the university comedians" (xvii).

These "university comedians" (most famously, the cast of *Beyond the Fringe* and the group who came to be known as Monty Python) are read by Nuttall and Carmichael as the most obvious heirs to "me" humor—previously the provenience of Oscar Wilde or Noel Coward—whose comedy is mainly built on wit and range of reference (24-25). This, of course, overlooks their continued reliance on slapstick, bodily confrontation, and gendered performativity (the ubiquitous use of "drag," particularly men dressed as women), all of which are present in the "low" tradition. In 1960, Peter Cook, Dudley Moore, Alan Bennett, and Jonathan Miller debuted their satirical revue *Beyond the Fringe* at the Edinburgh Festival. Based on a sketch format popular at university "smoker" events, and inspired by Miller's work with the Cambridge Footlights performance troupe, *Beyond the Fringe* took explicitly contemporary and political subjects to task (Carpenter 91-111). A favorite target was Prime Minister Harold Macmillan. Although the case is sometimes overstated, Cook *et al*s collaboration, combined with the launch of print outlets like *Private Eye* (1961-), is thought to have instigated a "satire boom," which culminated in the mid-1960s with The Establishment comedy club and television shows like *That Was the Week That Was* (1962-1963) and *The Frost Report* (1966-1967).

The performers in Monty Python, including *Frost Report* alums like John Cleese, fashioned a more wildly exploratory experience in their television series, combining Goonish surrealism, *Beyond the Fringe's* contemporary relevance, the pervasive bawdiness of the low tradition,

and a multimodal delivery that mixed studio and filmed segments with Terry Gilliam's innovative animations.[8] Fittingly, Robert Stam has commented on the almost unbelievably direct connections that can be forged between the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin and the later work of Monty Python: "the films of Monty Python, for example, can be seen as purely ludic prolongations of some of the traditions of which Bakhtin speaks" (111). Suffice it to say that this reconciliation of modalities of humor most closely approximates the anarchic range of *The Magic Christian*.

As a film, *The Magic Christian* navigates varied streams of comedic production, but harasses them in service of Terry Southern's initial attempts at plotting a satire that variously shatters most vestiges of elite morality. This sense of humor is motivated by exposing the potential for money to corrupt, absolutely. While the film as a whole is conceptual, the illustrations of this principle are shockingly material. Grand's gags are designed to effect the body. He desires disgust, physical illness, and unmitigated laughter.[9] Given this unifying logic to ideas which, in practice, are all over the place, Linda Williams's much cited essay on "body genres" becomes useful. While Grand has almost no instance in the "weepie" category associated with melodrama (the "too late" affect that yields tears), his schemes do get at the pornographic/sexual (a forced confrontation with the "on time" reality of sexual desire) and, most frequently, the horrific topoi (the "too early" shock of violence, putrefaction, and gore) (Williams 1999, 275). In each instance, grotesque behavior is positioned to shock a "square" (diegetic) audience into recognition.

The most recurrent set of gags cause incredulous responses because the decorum and rituals of a place are not explicitly followed. In each case, Grand is able to make his point because of his ability to bribe the arbiters, employees, or gatekeepers into complacency. For example, in a sequence not present in Southern's text, Guy and Youngman plot to sabotage the annual Oxford/Cambridge rowing race on the Thames. They cut through the supposed moral fortitude of the Oxford side by presenting them with a briefcase full of money. Guy and Youngman then plant themselves in one of the observation boats, which is full of alums who rowed in previous races. After a late start, Oxford rams the Cambridge boat, cleaving it in half. Guy and Youngman feign surprise, in the midst of a profoundly offended audience. The Oxford team then appears to go back to offer help, but instead causes further chaos by continuously pushing their rivals back into the water. Another of Grand's disruptions comes at Sotheby's, the celebrated auction-house which caters to the rich. He quickly bribes the auction master (he will later enter into a heated bidding war with a clueless American tourist), but before disrupting the live event, sets his sights on a Rembrandt self-portrait. He and Youngman approach the painting while speaking loudly so as to betray an apparent cluelessness. An annoyed employee (John Cleese) tries to explain what they are looking at and how much the painting is expected to sell for at auction. Guy buys it on the spot, at several times over the expected amount. He

brandishes a knife and begins to cut Rembrandt's nose off the canvas.[10] The employee, an art connoisseur, gives a look of abject terror. Cleese's performance suggests a guttural reaction: he stoops, gives a look of fixed amazement, and sells his terrified response by dwelling on his body's sub-intellectual despair.

Many of Guy's ploys revolve around the forced confrontation of sexuality, cast in both normalized and grotesque/transgressive lights. In one early sequence, Guy and Youngman agitate a man who is riding in the same train car as them. The man initially becomes angry at the compartment's open window, but soon becomes paranoid that something is afoot. Whenever the man looks down or away, something in the room changes, most notably the body of the Asian man sitting next to him. Their side of the compartment is built as a revolving wall (which explains why the body of the Asian man keeps changing), and the agitated man eventually finds out what is on the other side. The new room approximates a psychedelic freak-out, with people dressed in all manner of costume— biker, scuba gear, Sellers (but *not* Sellers-as-Guy) dressed in drag as a nun—gyrating to music and a strobe lights. The agitated man from before is now cast into a situation of terror and arousal. There is a nude stripper dancing next to him, tempering an already kaleidoscopic outpouring of confusion. Later, passengers fleeing the S.S. Magic Christian (after Guy essentially cues it to self-destruct) are directed into an "engine room," where they confront one of the film's famous cameos, which doubles as a sight gag. These passengers encounter what essentially amounts to a slave galley—a room full of topless women, who are made to rhythmically row gigantic oars—while Raquel Welch (skimpily dressed, to approximate her famous role in *One Million Years B.C.* [1966, Don Chaffey]) yells and brandishes a whip. The sequence generally serves to offer incongruous titillation to undercut the destruction of the ship. One of the passengers, however, reads the encounter as an occasion for an S&M fantasy. He does away with behavioral decorum and kneels before "The Priestess of the Whip," demanding to be beaten. Thus, however crudely rendered, Guy's actions cause people to publicly confront their sexuality.

This is even more pronounced in sequences positioning men as the objects of desire. In the first, Guy, Youngman, and Guy's two sisters attend a production of *Hamlet* (which seems to have been funded, or at least organized, by Guy), starring Laurence Harvey. The production seems typical, until the famous "To Be or Not to Be" moment, at which time Harvey-as-Hamlet begins to ceremoniously strip in front of the confounded audience. Although the diegetic audience typically offers patently offended looks, some regard him with pleasure. This can be understood as a gag typical of *The Magic Christian's* different registers of comedy—it relies on a recognition of the play, the appropriate behaviors of theater-going, and on knowledge of the actor Laurence Harvey, yet avoids "high" affectation through its reliance on an almost universally recognizable sort of sex gag. Later, in the dining area of the S.S. Magic

Christian, Guy is seated near a man negatively coded in the most parochially bourgeois way, who loudly voices his racist opinions while projecting an air of confident masculinity. This is soon undercut: a black man and a white man, both bodybuilders wearing nothing but small underwear, begin a kind of dance routine. Of course, they direct many of their gestures at this man, who evinces both revulsion and titillation. Finally, the film contains a famous encounter between two celebrities. Roman Polanski is sitting, forlornly, at the ship's bar, when a heavily made-up woman approaches. In the eloquent words of Ed Sikov, "through the haze of Polanski's cigarettes, she begins to sing 'Mad About the Boy,' parades theatrically around the room, and pulls her wig off to reveal the head of Yul Brynner" (295). In each of the cases just put forth, the gag seems to be positioned to maximally achieve a shock of recognition. Director Joseph McGrath does not window-dress these sequences with any kind of stylistic subtlety: each is more-or-less shot from a fixed, theatrical/proscenium perspective. Moreover, these sequences do not offer nuanced approximations of desire (male-female, female-male, female-female, or male-male): their duration seems to last only as long as the shocking punch-line.

The Magic Christian challenges audiences to literally digest the indigestible. Beyond confronting uncomfortable, rude, and incongruous situations, the film contains several sequences that position food and eating as a site of excess. James R. Keller has made the case for considering "culinary" cinema as something akin to one of Williams's body genres: "Food cinema…invokes the gustatory appetite in a fashion similar to the arousal of the libido through romantic and sexual imagery, accessing the full sensory experience of the actor and, subsequently and vicariously, of the audience" (1). Aside from the hot dog vendor moment mentioned earlier, there are two primary instances of eating in *The Magic Christian*. The first, which features a cameo from *Goon Show* collaborator Spike Milligan, has Guy and Youngman arrive back at their car as a traffic warden (Milligan) is in the process of issuing them a ticket. After a nonsensical exchange in which each party confuses the other, Guy offers to pay this man 500 if he will eat the ticket. Part of the actualization of this joke is in the man's not-seeming-to-mind-doing-so once such an amount of money has been mentioned. He eats the (inedible) piece of paper without much protest. More directly in line with the carnivalesque tradition is Guy's Gargantuan feast. Guy, his sisters, and Youngman go to an exclusive, expensive restaurant. Guy sits alone, in the center of the dining area (all the while bribing the wait staff). He is presented with a very rare and expensive wine, which he gargles; dons a full-body bib, outfitted with straight-jacket-like restraining belts (he calls this "*un chemise gastronomique*"); and sets about preparing a very expensive caviar dish. After assembling the mixture, he forms it into a kind of snowball with his hand, and promptly smashes it into his own face. His eating consists (partially) of actual eating, but primarily results in him slinging food around the room, soiling the walls and generally nauseating other diners. This sequence presages the

grotesque overeating of *La Grande Bouffe* (1973, Marco Ferrari), or the famous Mr. Creosote sketch from *Monty Python's Meaning of Life* (1983, Terry Jones) in its cavalier disregard for the proper function of food.

Shock, terror, revulsion, repulsion, and compulsive greed all come together in the "vat of money" sequence, which trumps the actual voyage of the S.S. Magic Christian in its synthesizing of specific social comment and bodily excess. In Southern's novel, this sequence comes early in the book, and seems to only be positioned such that it prefigures the finale of the big voyage. In the film, however, this sequence serves as a rousing finale, and is Guy and Youngman's last act before (implied) retirement.

The scene is set with Guy and Youngman chanting "now getting it ready for *you*" through loudspeakers. They are dressed in lab-coats and are in an abandoned lot on the South Bank of the Thames, in close proximity to the City of London, Great Britain's financial center. Pedestrians, most of whom are dressed in business attire (women in dresses, men in black suits with bowler hats), become intrigued and converge on the site. Guy oversees the preparation of the vat: it is filled with offal, blood, excrement, and urine from a slaughterhouse. Meanwhile, Youngman writes "FREE MONEY HERE" on the side. Police approach Guy to investigate, but they are summarily bribed. Guy drops huge stacks of paper money into the vat and stirs it with a gigantic oar. The ropes are cut, and the crowd—mainly white, middle-aged bankers and businessmen—rushes onward, diving into the tub with flailing limbs in hopes of capturing the free money. Guy and Youngman's point (itself a kind of epigram governing the entire film) comes about in a brief exchange of dialogue:

Guy: A bit literal, I suppose, if one goes into it.

Youngman: And they're certainly going to!

The symbolic claim, obviously, is that money is shit. This idea has deep cultural resonances and is not unique to Grand's personal views—although he may be the world's most enthusiastic advocate for the notion.

In his reputed assessment of psychoanalysis, *Life Against Death*, Norman O. Brown devotes a whole chapter to investigating money's conflicted status for civilized man, stranded as it is between rationalized instrumentality and gilded luxury (234-304). Put simply, Brown has derived a theory of the irrational pursuit of wealth (in a contemporary capitalist economy based on surplus) which synthesizes Marx and Freud, tying the corrupting influence of wealth to human compulsions of anality, hoarding, and Thanatos. He writes "and finally, in its famous paradox, the equation of money and excrement, psychoanalysis becomes the first science to state what common sense and the poets have long known—that the essence money is its absolute worthlessness" (254). Like Grand (and R.D. Laing), Brown wants to reverse society's tendency to rationalize monetary gain as normal, moral, and functionally healthy. He finishes this analysis of "filthy lucre" by saying: "The love of money as a possession—as distinguished from the love of money as a means to the enjoyments and realities of life—will be recognized for

what it is, a somewhat disgusting morbidity, one of those semi-criminal, semi-pathological propensities which one hands over with a shudder to the specialists in mental disease" (304).

Further, this climactic sequence from *The Magic Christian* resonates with the cultural and economic reality of Britain—specifically of the City of London—at that late moment in the 1960s. While Southern's version of this prank does not really specify who, in its downtown Chicago location, would be after this free money, the film takes aim squarely at the economic banking elite, the absolute top-tier of its varied targets. According to David Kynaston, "the late 1960s represented a time of increasingly chronic financial instability," which included everything from the devaluation of the British pound on the world stage, an acceleration of mergers, buy-outs, bank conglomerations, and the increasing presence of American financial interests in the City (395-396; 391-392; 402-403). The coda to *The Magic Christian* plays out as a kind of *götterdämmerung* for the assured financial certainly of a formerly robust British economy. With the rampant financial unrest of the 1970s just around the corner—which famously meant three day work weeks, further devaluation, reduced welfare benefits, and the privatization of public services as a bid at keeping them solvent—the blackly comic end to the film seems perhaps more prescient today than it did then.

As Guy and Youngman proceed to resign themselves to homelessness, a diegetic voice-over notes that "There must be a simpler way." Until this moment, *The Magic Christian* grandly (but not always effectively) takes a comically complicated road in order to arrive at this insight. Its humor—a curious mixture of familiar tropes of "high" and "low," put in service of bodily confrontation—wants to leave physical traces (sickness, disgust) as a byproduct of its deliverance of an ideologically messy anti-capitalist message. In Grand's own words, "these are strange times we live in, son."

END NOTES

1. Throughout, I am basing my definition of the "grotesque" in the expansive sense put forth by Ralf E. Remshardt in his book *Staging the Savage God: The Grotesque in Performance* (2004). Originally deriving from the Italian grottesche (grotto-esque), it came to be used to describe ruinous (sometimes monstrous and sublime) figures (4-5). Remshardt writes that "the grotesque has thus… been charted into the lowest stratum of the epistemological geo/topography, in its debasement far from, and at odds with, the beauty, perfection, and holiness of the divine" (7). Later, he writes of the grotesque's penchant for visual and verbal accumulation, where this "excess is the scourge of proportion and classical harmony" (27). The grotesque is a problematic category in that it is partially defined by its indeterminability and messiness (26).

2. Arthur Marwick adds: "Up to the late 1970s, under the influence of the war, deliberate government policy, and a general public ethos of consensus (even if not always privately subscribed-to), the trend was towards higher status and better conditions for the working class, within an unchanging class structure, and toward greater opportunities for mobility out of the working class" (246-247).

3. In further characterizing "me" humor, Nuttall and Carmichael write: "Wit is treated by the aristocratic attendants of death as the licence to laugh. Pale spirits filled with vision, about to evaporate in mists of self-evaporating self-regard, are usually threatened by humour. The crafty chuckle is as far as they can go. They prefer the smile or even a wry wince. Humour for them needs a ticket. It must show skill or sharp intelligence or special knowledge. It must have a cutting edge, be satirical, ultimately show that it is that humour which derogates life rather than celebrates it" (24).

4. Script rewrites were a lucrative side-bet for other members of Monty Python. Writing team Terry Jones and Michael Palin spent time in April 1970 rewriting the script of *Percy* (1971, Ralph Thomas), a film about a man who gets a penis transplant (and whose penis, in the process, gains consciousness and a narrative voice) (Palin 2007, 23).

5. Southern saw this as an enabling connection that would allow the film to be set successfully in Britain: "[I]t works just as well set in England, because the materialism which it treats is just as strong there" (qtd. in Tully 2010, 163).

6. I slightly altered the format of Stam's list. In his original text, each factor is given a separate line and begins with a number.

7. In *The Politics of Experience*, for example, he writes "We are born into a world where alienation awaits us. We are potentially men but are in an alienated state and the state is not simply a natural system. Alienation as our present destiny is achieved only by outrageous violence perpetrated by human beings on human beings" (Laing 1967, 13). Later, he writes: "What we call 'normal' is a product of repression, denial, splitting, projection, introjection and other forms of destructive action and experience… it is radically estranged from the structure of being. The more one sees this, the more senseless it is to continue with generalized descriptions of supposedly specifically schizoid, schizophrenic, hysterical 'mechanisms'" (27).

8. It is far outside of the scope of this essay to enumerate all of the successful aspects of *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. For a comprehensive account of their legacy, consult Marcia Landy's "TV Milestones Series" volume on the show.

9. While the film does present sexualized material, both Guy and Youngman are portrayed as almost asexual. Neither pursues sexual or romantic love, and nether seems in the least bit to care.

10. This shocking act is perpetrated before John Berger's similar gesture, which famously opened the first episode of his television series *Ways of Seeing* (1972). In that context, Berger took a blade to a reproduction of a painting in order to outrage viewers from the first and to prove a point about the presumed value of works of art. Of course, Berger destroyed a reproduction.

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"A HORSE WALKS INTO A BAR . . .": THE RHETORIC OF HUMOR AS CONSUMMATE COMMUNICATION CONTRIVANCE

Sandra Young
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" … and the bartender says . . ." This is how I begin the class, and I'm giggling because

I know the punch line, and I know that my students probably won't get the joke, or understand the history, significance, and beauty of it.

"… why the long face?" I'm in a full-out laugh now. My students are laughing too—laughing at me. That's okay. I throw back my head and bray like one of James Thurber's malevolent female characters. When I tell them I'm a Thurber character, they don't make the connection to Thurber's "cat-bird seat" reference, so I'm laughing more. I'm in that cat-bird seat, and my very old joke sets up this semester's plan: students reading, analyzing, and writing about humor; and the *piece de resistance*—writing and delivering their own 5-minute stand-up routines. Yes, this semester would be the communication trifecta: reading, 'riting, and the 'rithmatic (O.K., really "rhetoric"—but give me a break, I'm on a roll here!) of stand-up, a "near-perfect" blending of language, rhetorical strategies, semantics, audience analysis, pragmatics, history, and philosophy. Plus some really good jokes.

This essay discusses the theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings of an advanced composition course based on the rhetoric of humor, and through the use of students texts demonstrates how the emphasis on writing, revising, and preparing for the stand-up worked to un-do my "near-perfect" communication contrivance. In their obsessive quest for getting their stand-up routines right, my students did engage in the audience analysis, semantic, and rhetorical strategies I was hoping for, and a few student texts displayed a keen sense of communicatory glee, but too many students lacked the thorough discipline of writing about humor that transcends just getting the jokes right. Pedagogically, the semester's writing emphasis suffered.

But the jokes were terrific.

All good jokes start with a narrative. So this is how the germ of the idea for this semester started. I was in the last stages (I hoped not throes) of putting my tenure file together, and my bleary-eyed-bordering-on-nervous-breakdown objective was to try to get as far away from thinking about the tenure process as possible. I'm a strong proponent of the concept of trying to find humor in just about all situations, so I figured that a semester of humor would be exactly the tonic I needed for what I was sure would be a dyspeptic wait for tenure news. Thus, the rhetoric of humor. I gave the course the oh-so-pedantic branding of "rhetoric" to remind myself (and students) about the seriousness of advanced composition. Here's another old joke: a conference packed with psychologists who study humor is noted for being the most boring of all the boring conferences. I knew from experience that even when you start off loving a topic, studying it often kills its joy. Remember how excited we all were about our dissertation topics? I didn't want to murder the mayhem of humor, so I treaded lightly with the theory of humor. Although I assigned the text *The Language of Humor* by Alison Ross, I also knew from experience that students would, at best, skim it. I did, therefore, what we all do—I explicated the text for them, bringing in the considerable (one must blow one's horn) research I did on humor (and thereby almost killing the joy of it for me). I also used many of the text's exercises.

In the spirit of all academic writing, let us begin with theory. Ross says that there are four cogent theories to explain why we find something funny: it relieves tension (witness the number of taboo and bathroom jokes that we all say we hate, but almost secretly love) (63); it involves the incongruity of the unexpected: Question to W.C. Fields: "Do you believe in clubs for young people?" Answer: "Only when kindness fails" (7); it contains an ambiguity of double meanings, thus breaking the nor-

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mal expectations of language (27): Woody Allen: "I was thrown out of college for cheating in a metaphysics exam; I looked into the soul of the boy sitting next to me" (29); and it reinforces the superiority of one person laughing at another (53): African-American comedian Dick Gregory once said that the "definition of a Southern moderate is a cat who'll lynch you from a low tree" (60).

Note on the use of old jokes and comedians: I had to explain who W.C. Fields and Dick Gregory were. Some knew Woody Allen, but didn't know about his early career as a writer of jokes for others and then for his own stand-up. Indeed these explanations posed yet another sad point of my career. The things these kids don't know boggles the mind. Am I channeling Sid Caesar?

Yet, to my glee, my students were following me. And laughing at the jokes. I invited them to tell their own jokes to illustrate the four theories. (I must pause here to mention that at the beginning of class, I discussed the ground rules for the class: there was no censorship of any kind [truly]. They could tell any joke, no matter how offensive, but I reminded the would-be joke tellers that they would, in the long tradition of joke-telling, live or die on the response from the audience. There was one hard and fast rule: no jokes about me. Another factoid: I began the class with 10 students; when I told them about the stand-up requirement, one student didn't return for the second class, but another, learning *about* stand-up requirement, took her place. At Sacred Heart University, with a disproportional female-to-male population, this class had exactly five members of each gender.)

And so we began. Each class started and ended with jokes—all kinds of jokes; all kinds of good and bad jokes; all kinds of disgusting and silly jokes; all kinds of racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic jokes; all kinds of jokes that bashed all kinds of religions; all kinds of political jokes; and all kinds of sex and relationship jokes. In the middle of the joke-a-thon, I would slip in a little compositional theory. Even with all of the jokes, and the looming spectacle of the stand-up, my students wrote five essays; they also wrote and revised and practiced their stand-up routines throughout the semester.

But the one writing that students seemed to enjoy the most was a completely impromptu exercise prompted from the other text we read, Gene Weingarten's and Gina Barreca's *I'm with Stupid*. It all started with Chapter Five of *I'm with Stupid*. Gene and Gina are doing their usual fighting, but this time, they're fighting about how men and women write differently. Gene and Gina decided to write a joint novel (Weingarten and Barreca 50). Sounds like a joke itself. Their plan was to write alternating paragraphs, and the rule was that each of their paragraph's content must build from the previous paragraph (51). Hmmm. Maybe I'd jumble things up a bit and take advantage of my evenly balanced gendered playing field. The class would write a short story, alternating paragraphs—boy/girl/boy/girl—but they must write in the "voice" of their opposite gender, and each paragraph must build on the previous one. I chose the starting line-up. I had no idea

where this would wind up; in fact, I expected the kiddos to hate it, because it was, after all, MORE writing—an exercise that even wasn't listed on the syllabus.

Sandy's Pedagogical Theory #1: Never turn your back on a class.

Sandy's Pedagogical Theory #2: When a class *can* surprise you, it *will* surprise you.

They loved the exercise. They not only loved writing in the voices of the opposite genders, but they turned their writing into parodies of each other's voices, personalities, and phobias; they trucked in such huge sexual stereotypes that Freud would be proud, and maybe blush. They proved Gene and Gina were kind of right—men and women *can* write together—especially if they can bash each other over the head with their writing. This exercise also created enough material for me to analyze the sexual stereotypical semantics of rhetoric, should I be so inclined.

I thought we'd stop after one example, but they wanted to keep going. Think about this: when was the last time YOUR students wanted to write MORE?

Defense exhibit A: The short story is begun by Pam, then Brian, then Christine (who gave me permission to use their writing and to create aliases for them). Each student was trying to write how they thought the opposite gender would write.

Caution: Profanity ahead.

Here's Pam writing like she thinks a boy would write:

> *"A night to remember … or not …"*
>
> "Dude I was fucking hammered last night." Freeman said to me as we were walking down the halls of Sacred Heart …
>
> *"Yeah, I know, you fucking made an ass out of yourself singing and dancing on the bar, then you puked all over that hot freshman chick with the nice ass." Freeman smiled, so proud of himself… .*

Here's Brian writing like he thinks a girl would write, and continuing Pam's story line:

> "Listen," Freeman said, "Even if you can't remember her name, you should at least give her a warm smile and wave 'hello' politely.
>
> "I guess you're right bro," I replied. I hadn't considered that I might hurt the poor young girl's feelings if I simply ignored her… .

Here's Christine in boy-writing-mode:

> But then I saw her hot friend walking behind her. She was all curves, long lean legs meant to wrap around my hips, a rack that make me drool, and an ass that was begging to be squeezed. And I got that warm tingly feeling just imagining all the ways I wanted to fuck her… .

I think you get the picture. Had I created a monster? Ten monsters?

Back to theory. In their scatological short stories, my students neatly summarized the four theories of humor: taboos, incongruities, double meanings, and laughing at others. They were brilliant. But could they also accomplish

the other little peculiarities of advanced composition, like style, audience analysis, and research? We English faculty can be such sticklers for the rules. Now, their essays. And then on to some more theory, which helped prepare them as they wrote and revised their stand-ups.

They wrote five essays. Plus the four impromptu short stories. Plus the stand-ups. If you look at numbers, just numbers, these kiddos wrote a lot. Really. Yes, a few managed to combine both the art of writing with the discipline of rhetoric. Yet, too many students lacked the thorough discipline of writing about humor that transcends just getting the jokes right.

And, I regret that I cracked down on the sometimes-less-than-terrific-writing with my usual zeal. Tenure-wait jitters, maybe. I did, however, give more Cs than I had given before in an advanced composition class.

Five essays. Each, except #3, included research; each required the usual complement of drafts, workshops, revisions, and conferences with me.

Essay #1—the interview/analysis of advancing a theory (one of the four) of humor. Tell a joke to two people of opposite genders and analyze their responses.

Pedagogical talking points: primary research, an abiding understanding of the theory to be advanced, and analysis of results.

The good news: Some had never conducted primary research, and this kind of primary research, telling a joke to a selected group of people, would be a little tricky. More good news. Students had to truly understand which of the four theories of humor they would be testing with their jokes.

The bad news: Their analysis was, at best, scant. Question: "Why is the joke funny?" Answer: "It's funny because it's funny." No follow up.

In Amber's essay, she chose theory #4—a joke is funny because it shows the joke teller's superiority over people. She writes: "I chose a simple joke... The joke is 'Yo momma is so fat, her blood type is Ragu.'... This joke may not be the funniest joke in the entire world, but I found it hilarious because... it's simple and stupid."

When she tries to analyze why her audience found the joke funny, she writes: "This joke... makes the listener feel inferior to the person reciting the joke.... In this joke, it's even funnier because it's about someone's mother. I don't know why it's funny to make fun of someone's mother, but somehow it's become very typical." She doesn't delve into the psychology of the insulting-mother/wife/husband/etc.-joke, but concludes that the insult-joke is one kind of joke that works.

It's the first essay. Relax, I told myself.

At this point in the semester, students were also writing and revising their stand-up routines. A few students per class period would try-out their working scripts. Then they would revise. Writing and more writing. For a class of mostly average students, these kids were writing like mad.

Essay #2—analyzing, evaluating, researching a comic's style. Any comic. Nice range of choices, from Phyllis

Diller to Robin Williams to Dane Cook to Sarah Silverman to Daniel Tosh. We Googled and YouTubed comic routines, we drew up a list of categories/criteria to evaluate (for example: the use of self-deprecating humor, physical humor, political humor, sexist/racist humor, family humor, observational humor, the use/abuse of profanity, and the use of props). And we laughed.

Pedagogical talking points: research, analysis, evaluation.

Good news: They researched well.

Bad news: Their categories/criteria often blurred, and students rehashed the problems I found in Essay #1: "Why is this comic funny?" "Because he's funny."

Lindsay's essay about Phyllis Diller, however, stood out as a well-researched and analyzed piece of rhetoric. She begins: "Phyllis Diller is the original female standup comedian. She is the first woman to perform standup comedy and make it her living. She has a style that cannot be copied or replaced. She is truly her own woman. Phyllis Diller is successful because her comedy appealed to everyone, males and females, alike. Phyllis Diller is a comedy icon."

As Lindsay concludes her essay, she succinctly summarizes the appeal of Phyllis Diller: "Phyllis Diller can teach a great deal to young comics today. She is an icon because her comedy was incredibly smart and she changed with the times. She did not do the same joke for forty years. Diller understood that the world was changing and she was able to change her comedy while still keeping her comedic integrity and morals intact... . Phyllis Diller never lets her audience down. She always delivers."

OK, thought I. Only the second essay.

Essay # 3—writing their own funny story, a creative writing assignment. This assignment seemed to work. Although this essay coincided with the scatological short story writing, most students played it safe and wrote funny, family-based stories.

Pedagogical talking points: know your audience, write to your audience.

Good news: The writing was improving.

Bad news: No ground-breaking comic geniuses were emerging.

Be patient.

The semester progressed. Students continued to write, practice, and then re-write their stand-up routines, and occasionally I was able to toss in some theory. Here I turned to D. Diane Davis's *Breaking Up (at) Totality* and her exegesis of the theory of kairos, the gift of knowing just the right time to say just the right thing in order to produce just the right effect (Davis 29). Timing is the quality that makes or breaks the stand-up. Timing—that twinkle in the comic's eye—is when all the pieces of a joke join to crack-up the audience.

To the rhetorician, kairos joins that nifty Greek line-up with logos (logic), ethos (ethics), pathos (emotion), bathos (sentiment), and nomos (norms and customs)—terms we use to both explain and/or obfuscate our own writing. To

the budding comedian/rhetorician, kairos is the linchpin used to make fun of those other Greek terms. So, kairos involves both the comical and the rhetorical. For the comic, kairos is everything. For the audience, kairos—the timing of when we laugh—can have strange outcomes.

Davis says that the rhetoric of laughter is all about cracking up (22), being caught in that great cosmic sweep of outside forces which manifest themselves in bursts of uncontrollable and irresistible laughter. She references the classic "Mary Tyler Moore" episode where Mary laughs unexpectedly and hysterically during the funeral of Chuckles the Clown, who met his fate in a particularly bizarre manner: while dressed as a peanut during a parade, Chuckles becomes lunch for a hungry and confused elephant (22). At the funeral, Mary loses it. She breaks up laughing. She cannot control her laughter. She becomes the victim of kairos—she succumbs to kairotic laughter, which "arises from the overriding (non-rational) realm of play" (29). My students laughed at the 1975 episode.

When we are struck with kairotic laughter, Davis tells us, we are overwhelmed. Our sense of reason is lost in the laughter, and the more we try to stop laughing, the more we laugh. (See Mary Tyler Moore.) The laughter takes over, and becomes reason (logos) in and of itself. We, quite simply, break up. We cross those hard-kept borders (well, most of us keep them hard) of respectability and restrictions about what is proper and what is not. When we succumb to kairotic laughter we celebrate the non-rational joy of the seduction of laughter—the performance and irresistibility of laughter. And laughter will always win.

Unless you're one of the (thankfully) very few people who are completely humorless. Or any number of university administrators. But I digress.

How to teach timing? Actually, it's (forgive me) rhetorical. Timing is rhythm. Rhythm is choosing the right word for the right situation. So is rhetoric. I did *not* tell this to my students, of course. Why ruin a perfectly good pedagogical moment by reminding them that it was a perfectly good pedagogical moment?

The writing teacher in me rejoiced. My students were writing essays, writing their stand-up routines, and after practicing them, they revised. Practice. Just like revision. God's way of telling us that we can have do-overs in life. My students wrote and revised and practiced their stand-ups up until the day before the stand-ups were to be performed. In this regard, they were acting just like the stand-up comedians we studied. In fact, in Jason Zinoman's online *New York Times* article, "A Stand-Up Joke is Born," he writes about up-and-coming comic, Myq Kaplan's almost obsessive reworking of joke material. He writes that for the comic, "every word matters." So true.

I must take another pause here.

Recall that I said that there would be no censorship (except for jokes about me). Well, in my zeal and temporary insanity, I forgot where I was. I was here. At a Catholic university. How about academic freedom, you say? OK. That's fine. For me. What about the students? Would they worry about being offensive? Worry about being scolded? But there was no stopping this train I'd boarded.

Back to the essays.

Remember, timing is everything. I'm going to keep you hanging with regard to the students.

Essay #4—analyzing and evaluating a comic strip.

Pedagogical talking points: analysis, evaluation. They'd done this kind of rhetoric before with the comic's style; now they had a chance to perfect their skills.

Good news: Better analysis; better writing. More in-depth research. Interesting range of comic strips, from "BC" to "Zits." Again, we drew-up a list of categories to study: the number of panels in strips, the purpose of strips, the theory behind strips, audience analysis, and the longevity of strips.

Bad news: Research wasn't at the upper-division level. I read them my version of the rhetorical riot act.

But again, one student's love for "Ziggy" resulted in a well-crafted essay. Pam writes: "Ziggy's unlucky, single-celled cartoon life reminds its audiences of all the ways the world can knock you down, but also of the importance of acting like Ziggy and never losing sight of all the world's wonders. Ziggy's soft, loveable form has been enchanting readers since the early 1970s, and this is because America loves this underdog character who never loses his good spirits despite all of his troubles and short fallings."

In Pam's analysis and evaluation of the appeal of Ziggy, she concludes that "Ziggy's audience is the whole world. He is not a champion for human causes or a superhero, but he is a loveable loser. He is a small figure in a great big world. He never ages, however time changes around him. The artist includes bits of popular culture in the strip. Tom Wilson [the artist] said once in his website that 'I see Ziggy evolving and changing with the times, and he always has,' and this allows the audience to laugh at ourselves and our styles… . Ziggy reminds us that we mustn't let humanity make us bitter when there are so many great wonders in life."

Essay #5—the last one; the big showcase essay—the rhetoric and psychology of humor as demonstrated in the analysis, evaluation, and interpretation of a comedy movie before 1960.

Pedagogical talking points: all of the above talking points, plus argumentation (arguing their positions about the film).

Good news: It was the last essay. Nice range, from *A Night at the Opera* to *Some Like It Hot*.

Bad news: Still too many so-so essays.

But Chris's essay neatly summarizes what he'd learned throughout the semester. In writing about *Some Like It Hot*, Chris's rhetorical strategies at work include asking rhetorical questions; describing and narrating important scenes from the movie to remind audiences of why he thinks it's a classic, and apt analysis and evaluation of the movie's place in the world of comedic films.

Chris writes: "Gangsters, men in drag and Marilyn Monroe, what more could you ask for in a movie? Not much, and that is why *Some Like It Hot*, is said by some, to be the greatest comedy every made. The film combines mobster film violence with some of the best slapstick com-

edy to ever hit the big screen. Its dynamic comedy duo of Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon has set the stage for countless films in the decades that have followed, and this is one movie that has certainly endured the test of time."

Chris continues: "When it came out in 1959 *Some Like It Hot* was advertised as the movie 'Too hot for words' (Dirks), but what did this refer to? It could have been referencing a number of things, the jazz, the sex, the costumes, the characters, or maybe even all of these things. The ambiguity of this slogan can also be applied to the movie."

In his analysis and evaluation of the movie and its influence on today's movies, Chris quotes Roger Ebert: "'The movie has been compared to Marx Brothers classics, especially in the slapstick chases as gangsters pursue the heroes through hotel corridors.' However, not like the 'slapstick' we find in modern comedies. Although this early slapstick has influenced movies of today, modern films have bastardized it. They push the limits on what is funny and what is flat-out wrong. With the advent of reality television our society finds more entertainment in shock value… Though some may find this style of humor funny it never would have been successful 50 years ago, and it is unfortunate that there is a demand for it today. We have strayed away from the entertainment value that these films were built upon. Some movies no longer make the viewer think, but almost seem to dumb them down."

And now, ladies and gentlemen, the stand-ups.

I scheduled them for 3 p.m. on a Friday afternoon. A safe time, I thought. Most faculty are long gone. More importantly, so are most administrators.

The venue—the little room we laughingly refer to as the "Faculty Lounge."

And at show time, the little room was packed to capacity. Students spilled into the halls.

The "master of ceremonies" (the friend of a kid in the class) performed his own little stand-up to get the audience in the mood, and since this fellow wasn't in my class, he was thereby free to flaunt my #1 rule—no jokes about me. So this fellow, for what seemed like forever to me, entertained the class with a few too many Sandy jokes.

Then it happened.

Each of my students took turns wowing the audience with the rhetoric of humor, communicating to them how humor was the consummate communication contrivance, and demonstrating the four theories of humor in performances that included sex, roommates, hometowns, drunken friends, illegal activity, more sex, and other assorted activities performed in PG to X rated language.

The audience was stunned. I was at the back of the room, and students nervously craned their necks in my direction to witness what they thought would be me shutting down the show at any second.

I didn't.

And as each student comic performed, the audience continued to be convulsed in kairotic laughter. Their laughter began as flat-out, out-of-control fits. Hands flew to their mouths to stop the escaping spasms of giggles.

Heads continued to jerk in my direction. I could imagine the audience thinking: "Where am I?" "Am I hearing what I'm hearing?" "There's a professor in the room!"

Then, when the audience realized that the show was to continue, when they saw that the campus police weren't going to raid the place, they relaxed. They stopped watching for my reaction. The audience quite simply gave into the force of kaiotic laughter.

And my kiddos. They practiced what they had learned.

I was so proud. They performed their routines. My worries about them were unfounded. In fact, my students worried more about getting the jokes right than about getting a scolding about the risqué language.

My students tell me that they had fun, oh, and they learned a lot, too. Don't you love schmoozers?

Good news: I didn't get fired.

Bad news: I actually miss those kids. It's like your first time…

I'll end with a student's lines from one of the short stories: "Shit," I said aloud, "What the hell am I gonna do now?"

OK. I'm not quite finished. This course is really three courses.

One course, without the stand-up routines, is appropriate to advanced composition, a course in which students truly analyze the rhetoric of humor. I'd add to the essay topics discussed here, as well as TV sit-coms and political cartoons. I'd focus on the writing, as would befit a composition course.

Another course, with the stand-up routines, would be a special topics communication course, a course beyond the standard introduction to public speaking or even advanced public speaking. Students would still write, of course, but the pedagogical focus would be the ways in which the rhetoric of humor combines both written and oral communication. Students would analyze comics' styles in four mediums: texts (there's a slew of books out there by working comics), CDs, DVDs, YouTube; each analysis requires different, yet similar pedagogical strategies, and each demonstrates how the particular communication transcends its medium. I would also have students write jokes for others – a practice that even the most successful of comedians still employ. And, of course, the communications course's end-of-the-semester free-for-all: the stand-up routines.

Recently my university eliminated both freshman composition and public speaking and combined them into a first year seminar course that's taught by Arts & Sciences faculty, a kind of WAC on crack. (This is another story/paper, of course.)

A third course could be a hybrid of composition-public speaking. The first time I taught the first year seminar, I revisited, revised, and restructured the rhetoric of humor to work for a freshman audience. I tweaked the assignments. Instead of the Ross, Weingarten and Barreca texts, I used *Laughing Matters* by Marvin Diogenes, and in place of individual stand-up routines, I let them choose partners for three and four person sketch routines. To prepare stu-

dents for their sketch routines, we YouTubed lots of "Saturday Night Live" and I did a mini-lecture about the long history of sketch comedy. But this course still retains the essential elements of that advanced composition course.

My freshman performed their sketch routines in a large classroom on a Friday night last December. This time I invited all freshmen and first year seminar professors. This time the room was crowded, but not packed. This time one other faculty member showed up to support my kiddos.

Yet, it is the stand-up routine or its cousin, the sketch routine—that thing, that force unto itself—that blends the rhetorical power of language, semantics, pragmatics, history, philosophy, politics, interpersonal relationships, race/class/sex, and keen audience analysis—that is the consummate communication contrivance.

Comic Myq Kaplan, as Zinoman reminds us, worked and reworked his material. I had worked and reworked my course, and I rejoiced at my students' success, but still, as Kaplan ruefully noted, "nothing was more fun than the first time."

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INTERSECTIONS OF WIT AND RHETORIC: HUMOR AS A RHETORICAL ENTERPRISE

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A well-known scholar of classical rhetoric often begins his graduate seminars with a bit of self-deprecatory humor, telling his students that his wife insists he must leave his rhetoric books home during their family vacations. "But I usually manage to smuggle a couple of volumes under the passenger seat of the car," he says. The students, nervous about starting a daunting graduate course, usually laugh. The witticism serves a number of purposes at the start of the seminar: it puts students at ease by drawing a self-portrait of the professor as an ordinary human being, it assures students they will on occasion have fun in the class, and it serves as an *ethos*-builder for the professor. After all, the story reveals his love for and dedication to the profession, indicating that reading about the history of rhetoric is for him not simply work but also play. As he often tells his students, if they are to thrive in the profession, studying rhetoric must become something they prefer to do above all other pursuits. Among its other purposes, then, the anecdote about smuggling rhetoric books to read on vacation reinforces this important lesson.

The use of humor as an instrument of rhetoric and pedagogy by a scholar of classical rhetoric should surprise no one. Although frowned upon by Plato, whose literary persona Socrates objects when Polus refutes a point by trying "to laugh it down, instead of disproving it" (*Gorgias* 1914, 473e), humor has a long history as a rhetorical device (and Plato himself used it to good effect). The earliest known statement about the utility of wit comes from Gorgias of Leontini, whom Aristotle credits with saying "'the orator should defeat his opponents' seriousness with laughter, and their laughter with seriousness'" (Grant 1924, 18). Somewhat more recent thinkers, including John Locke and John Quincey Adams, however, echo Plato's ostensible disenchantment with humor, contending that wit plays no significant role in "serious" discourse. Adams portrays humor as "always a formidable, but not always a fair antagonist" (1810, 56). Although Locke acknowl-

edges that wit may serve a purpose in speeches "where we seek rather Pleasure and Delight than Information and Improvement," he argues that rhetorical figures and techniques, including wit, aimed at anything other than clarity and communication of important concepts are a "perfect cheat," which rhetors use to "insinuate wrong Ideas, move the Passions, and thereby mislead the Judgment" (1975, III. x. 508). At best, Locke implies, wit is a mere ornament; at worst, it is an immoral instrument of deception.

As this essay will argue, humor is far more than an ornament aimed at misleading an audience's judgment. Indeed, humor and rhetoric have a number of deep and intimate connections because humor is not simply a rhetorical device but also a rhetorical enterprise, subject to and illuminated by the principles of classical rhetoric—such as *kairos, enthymeme, dissoi logoi,* and *stasis topoi, plain style, sermo,* and *urbanitas*—that helped guide the orations of classical rhetoricians. Like rhetoric, humor is a persuasive art form. After all, one cannot force an audience to laugh; one must win an audience's laughter through persuasion.

Among the many qualities that make humor a significant rhetorical art form is its ability, on occasion, to provide the most humane and appropriate response to a particular rhetorical circumstance—a response that can win agreement without rancor or violence. The sort of wit that serves as an effective tool of persuasion is not prefabricated but grows out of the particular rhetorical situation. The needs and moods of members of the audience—their tolerance of humor and their willingness to participate in it—will often determine its effectiveness.

Any study of the rhetorical nature and uses of humor and wit would do well to begin with a look at key terms and concepts. There is no universal agreement, for instance, even on the meaning of the terms *humor* and *wit*. In contemporary usage, *humor* has become a catchall term that encompasses actions, speech, and representations that people find amusing or laughable—ranging from slapstick

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to the most cerebral of satires. By contrast, *wit* has come to stand primarily for the sort of sophisticated verbal jest that reveals a humorist's cleverness and intelligence.

For the purposes of this essay, references to *humor* generally indicate something closer to *wit*. After all, rhetorical uses of humor will most often involve speech or text—and therefore involve verbal rather than physical jesting. And such witticisms will more often than not have purposes that go beyond mere entertainment. One of the most useful distinctions between simple humor and sophisticated wit comes from the Greek and Roman rhetors—including Plato, Aristotle and Cicero—who differentiate, based on notions of propriety,[1] between the clownish, clumsy, ill-timed jokes of the buffoon and the tasteful, well-timed, and clever witticisms of the cultured orator (Grant 1924, 9-11). Such an orator uses wit sparingly, makes jokes that "seem to spring from the character" (Aristotle 1926, IV viii, 3) and has the judgment to "regulate [his or her] wit" (IV viii, 10). By contrast, buffoons "itch to have their joke at all costs, and are more concerned to raise a laugh than to keep within the bounds of decorum" (IV viii, 11). The notion of appropriateness, or *to prepon*, therefore plays a key role in the rhetorical effectiveness of humor.

A number of other terms are also useful in a discussion of the persuasive uses of wit. Chief among them, of course, are *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos,* which represent rhetorical appeals to character, emotion, and rationality. A number of classical rhetoricians, including Aristotle and Cicero, agree that a rhetor's use of humor can affect, positively or negatively, an audience's perception of his or her character, or *ethos*. They likewise agree that appealing to *pathos* by stimulating emotions, including amusement, in an audience can be of benefit to a rhetor. Although these rhetoricians do not speak directly to the point of using humor or wit to make an appeal to *logos*, they imply links between wit and *logos*—if only because witticisms often reveal an opponent's irrationality.

Other important terms to examine include *kairos*, *enthymeme*, *dissoi logoi*, *stasis*, *topoi*, *plain style*, *sermo*, and *urbanitas*. These terms are familiar to students of classical rhetoric but may strike many others as unfamiliar and unnecessarily technical. However, they and the concepts they represent are nevertheless pertinent both to an understanding of classical rhetoric and to an understanding of wit as a rhetorical enterprise. Of these terms, perhaps the two most central to the rhetorical uses of wit are *kairos* and *enthymeme*.

Kairos

Wit is opportunistic and its impact hinges on timing and circumstance. For this reason, what is amusing—and persuasive—in one rhetorical situation will often not amuse or persuade in another. The impact of a jest or witticism will depend on timing, the surrounding circumstances, and the audience to whom a rhetor delivers it—in short, it will depend on *kairos*. A governing principle of sophistic discourse, *kairos* has several definitions, including the following: "fitness for the occasion" (Bizzell and Herzberg

1990, 44), "situational context" (Carter 1988, 98), and "opportune moment, right time, opportunity" (Poulakos 1995, 57).   Historians of classical rhetoric describe *kairos* as encompassing both the context out of which a rhetorical need develops and the rhetor's act of inventing a response to this need. As John Poulakos says, "Springing from one's sense of timing and the will to invent, *kairos* alludes to the realization that speech exists in time and is uttered both as a spontaneous formulation of and a barely constituted response to a new situation unfolding in the immediate present" (1995, 61). Poulakos also links this sense of timeliness to a sense of appropriateness by citing George Kennedy, who says of *kairos* and *to prepon*: "The two together constitute what may be called the artistic elements in rhetorical theory as opposed to the prescribed rules" (qtd in "Toward" 1999, 29).   Since each rhetorical situation unfolds in a unique, unpredictable way, an inflexible, prefabricated response will not serve. A sense of *kairos*, along with a sense of appropriateness, helps a rhetor understand the social context surrounding the act of speaking or writing and provides clues as to how to proceed. As Poulakos says,

> The rhetor who operates mainly with the awareness of *kairos* responds spontaneously to the fleeting situation at hand, speaks on the spur of the moment, and addresses each occasion in its particularity, its singularity, its uniqueness. In this sense (s)he is both a hunter and a maker of unique opportunities, always ready to address improvisationally and confer meaning on new and emerging situations. (1995, 61)

Some of these new and emerging situations will call for a humorous or witty response. A given situation will also determine the type of wit an audience finds appropriate. As in other rhetorical situations, then, *kairos* serves as a guiding principle for the appropriate use of wit. Although he does not refer directly to *kairos*, Chris Holcomb describes the same phenomenon when he writes about "jesting situations" described by the authors of early modern rhetoric manuals. As he says, the manuals "recognize that the success of the speaker depends on his ability to observe decorum and adapt his jesting to the particular occasion as well as to the larger social context, even if that means refraining from jesting altogether" (2001, 28). Thomas Farrell, too, makes clear that an attention to *kairos* is crucial for the rhetor who would have an audience not simply laugh at a witticism but also understand the serious purpose behind it. Farrell says,

> The fact remains that eloquence in conversation is realized in the mastery of the moment—what the Greeks called *kairos*. In rhetoric, which often begins with the urgency of the moment, eloquence moves beyond wit to the virtue of propriety—what the Greeks called *phronēsis*. (1993, 236)

Although Plato does not discuss *kairos* in his works, Bizzell and Herzberg have pointed out that he unveils his version of this concept in the *Phaedrus* while putting forth his notion of tailoring speech to fit men's souls (1990, 59). As Socrates says, a wise speaker seeks

an understanding of the nature of the soul…, discovering the form which fits each nature, and so arranges and orders his speech, offering a complex soul complex speeches containing all the modes, and simple speeches to a simple soul—not before then will he be capable of pursuing the making of speeches as a whole in a scientific way, to the degree that its nature allows, whether for the purposes of teaching or persuading. (1986, 277B-C)

Plato's approach would perhaps work best in dialectic—where a speaker converses with a particular individual and can adapt his or her discourse to suit this individual's particular needs. Rhetors addressing larger audiences will, obviously, be unable to understand the soul of each member of an audience. Thus, while Plato's advice to Phaedrus may not apply to all situations, it can serve many as a way of judging the appropriate words with which to instruct or persuade a particular audience. And this advice applies to the use of humor or wit just as it does to the use of serious discourse. For example, in *De Oratore*, Cicero cites a jest that failed because of the rhetor's inattention to circumstance and audience. As Cicero tells it,

> A very small witness once came forward. "May I examine him?" said Philippus. The president of the Court, who was in a hurry, answered, "Only if you are short." "You will not complain," returned Philippus, "for I shall be just as short as that man is." Quite comical; but there on the tribunal sat Lucius Aurifex, and he was even tinier than the witness: all the laughter was directed against Lucius, and the joke seemed merely buffoonish. (1942, II lix, 245)

Jests told without regard for the proper occasion and audience, then, may strike unintended targets and have unintended effects—in this case embarrassing a judge, whose opinion will affect the outcome of the case, and making the rhetor himself look foolish. Although not foolproof, a sensitivity to *kairos* can help one determine whether to use or avoid using humor while addressing a particular audience.

Enthymeme

After *kairos*, perhaps the most important term in a discussion of humor as a rhetorical art form is *enthymeme*. Also known as the rhetorical syllogism, the enthymeme is Aristotle's primary focus in the *Art of Rhetoric*, and his discussion of logical and emotional appeals pertains to their use within the enthymeme. Therefore, one must understand the purpose and mechanism of the enthymeme before one can understand how humor functions within its framework. Gaining this understanding is not easy, though, because, as Lloyd Bitzer has said, Aristotle provides "no unambiguous statement defining the enthymeme" (1968, 179). As Aristotle indicates in the opening chapter of the *Art of Rhetoric*, a rhetor uses the enthymeme as a demonstration of proofs—appeals to logic, character, and emotion—aimed at leading an audience to probable knowledge. An important trait of the enthymeme is its

ability to persuade listeners without the rhetor's having to present all the premises of an argument. As Aristotle says, "if any one of these [premises] is well known, there is no need to mention it, for the hearer can add it himself" (1926, I ii,13). As some scholars have suggested, much of the persuasive power of the enthymeme relies on this missing premise since it invites the audience to actively participate in completing the argument, thus helping the rhetor to construct probable knowledge and, in the process, becoming a stakeholder in the argument.

By using an enthymeme, Bitzer says, a speaker "does not *lay down* his premises but lets his audience supply them out of its stock of opinion and knowledge…. The successful building of arguments depends on cooperative interaction between the practitioner and his hearers" (1968, 187, emphasis in original). The ability to supply the missing premise hinges on the audience's possession of cultural knowledge. For example, most people would accept the premise that "self-control is good, for lack of self-control is harmful" (Aristotle 1926, II xxiii, 1); therefore, a demonstration of self-control on a rhetor's part and of a lack of self-control on an opponent's part will invite the audience's arrival at the missing premise: that the rhetor is a person of good character and his or her opponent a person of poor character. In essence, then, guided by the rhetor, the audience applies common laws, beliefs, or knowledge about proper and improper behavior to infer the missing premise and arrive at a judgment. Through this act of collaboration between speaker and audience, "enthymemes intimately unite speaker and audience and provide the strongest possible proofs…. Owing to the skill of the speaker, *the audience itself helps construct the proofs by which it is persuaded*" (Bitzer 1968, 188, emphasis in original). Facilitating this collaborative effort is, Bitzer adds, the enthymeme's "essential character" (189).

In *Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity*, Jeffrey Walker reveals that the enthymeme is not the exclusive invention of Aristotle but a stylistic device described by pre-Aristotelian rhetoricians. One version of the enthymeme, described by Isocrates, depends on an element of surprise and has intimate links to *kairos*. As Walker says, "Isocrates' enthymematic turn… is meant to strike its audience as a brilliant, inspirational, impressive, and persuasive stroke of insight, a decisive stance-projection that brings suddenly into focus and gives memorable presence to a specific line of inference and attitude made possible by *kairos*. . ." (2000, 179). When the skilled rhetor uses all of his or her artistic and stylistic abilities to construct an impressive, unexpected, and memorable enthymeme, Walker says, this construction becomes "the rhetorical move par excellence for guiding an audience's inference-making and attitude formation in a particular direction" (180).

The enthymeme can also be the rhetorical move *par excellence* for a rhetor guiding an audience to laughter. In much the same way as an argument, a piece of humor is enthymematic—in the Aristotelian meaning of the term—because it remains incomplete until an audience supplies an unstated or missing premise. Consider, for example,

Oscar Wilde's famous maxim: "Work is the curse of the drinking classes" (Pearson 1946, 170). To find this statement humorous, one must bring to the situation a certain amount of cultural knowledge—first, in order to recognize the statement as a reversal of the standard maxim of "Drink is the curse of the working classes" and, second, to see this reversal as perversely logical and appropriate to the person uttering the statement. If one is ignorant of the standard maxim, one has no basis for perceiving the cleverness of the reversal and may take the statement seriously. Those who supply the missing premise, though, participate in the construction of the witticism, share in the laughter, and become stakeholders in the idea.

A jest is also enthymematic in the sense that it combines appeals to *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* in an attempt to win a judgment—in this case, the judgment that the jest is funny. This appeal to *logos* is often backhanded—by way of illogic or logical inconsistency. Because the rhetor's proposal is clearly illogical in some way, the audience engages its own sense of rationality, compares this sense to the one proposed by the rhetor, and understands that the rhetor is insane, foolish, or joking (or perhaps all three). This understanding often hinges on the audience's judgment of the character (or *ethos*) of the rhetor, based on what he or she has so far said and done. If the rhetor has demonstrated cleverness and good sense, the audience may accept the irrational proposition as a joke and detect within it a hidden rationality, such as a drinker's conception of himself as a member of a social class cursed not by alcohol, but by the need to interrupt his drinking to earn a living. If not, and the rhetor's *ethos* leaves open the possibility that he or she is a fool, the audience may assume the rhetor is seriously proposing the irrational idea—and may laugh, if at all, in derision. As Aristotle says, an audience tends to like a rhetor who uses humor cleverly and in good taste, and the result is an enhanced *ethos*.[2] The reverse is true of a rhetor who uses humor clumsily or in poor taste. A jest likewise makes use of appeals to *pathos*, sometimes directly, by way of ridiculing a target, but perhaps more often indirectly. In the case of Oscar Wilde's humorous maxim, one may pity the deluded drinker or secretly sympathize with his dislike of work even as one laughs at him. Or consider, for example, a self-depreciating rhetor who derides her own faulty memory. The rhetor is asking an audience to laugh at this minor fault, based on an understanding that it is human to forget, and therefore sympathetic, forgivable, and funny. This understanding, and the laughter that results, relies on the audience's ability to supply an unstated premise—perhaps in this case that the rhetor, who has so far demonstrated a reliable memory, is speaking ironically.

The Isocratic meaning of *enthymeme* applies to wit in several ways. First, the shock of surprise—or the "sudden, dramatic sense of opening prospects" (Walker 2000, 179)—on which Isocrates's enthymeme depends for maximum effect resembles the surprise on which wit often depends. After all, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* says, a witticism involves an "apt association of thought

and expression, calculated to surprise and delight by its unexpectedness,"[3] while enthymemes, Walker says, "will not be fully predictable, will not follow as inevitable conclusions necessitated by the 'premises' preceding them" (179) but will lead the audience to see a conclusion as unexpectedly reasonable (as is true of the Oscar Wilde quip cited above). A related application involves the use of emotions since an enthymeme "exploits a cluster of emotively resonant, value-laden representations and systems of opposition… in order to generate in its audience a passional identification with a particular stance" (180). A witticism often exploits not simple or pure emotions but complex mixtures of emotions, rooted in societal values that combine opposites—for example, the degrees of pity and scorn one might feel for someone who makes a social blunder. And as humor theorists suggest, instances of wit and humor hinge on emotive, value-laden systems of opposition that are similar—if not identical—to those exploited by enthymemes. For example, D. H. Monro says, "What is essential in humor is the mingling of two ideas which are felt to be utterly disparate" ("Theories" 1988, 352). In an earlier work, Monro argues, "The neatness, the suddenness, the directness with which the two universes can be linked is an essential part of the joke. There must be an immediate contrast which shocks the mind" (*Argument* 1963, 65). This shock has the potential of changing perspectives and attitudes. As Monro notes, laughter brings about "the abrupt dissolution of… an attitude of mind… The mind is as it were wound up ready to proceed in a definite direction: it is suddenly wrenched off its path and turned in a different direction" (147). Citing V. K. Krishna Menon, who calls such a shift in attitudes "hopping," Monro says this shift generally occurs between points of view separated by "a direct and violent opposition" (225). And he argues that humor is both the catalyst for and the product of this attitudinal shift, which gives humor a distinct resemblance, on several levels, to the Isocratic enthymeme.

Dissoi Logoi, Stasis

Other terms from classical rhetoric that involve the blending of opposite ideas, or incongruities, and therefore share essential qualities with humor are *dissoi logoi* and *stasis*. The term *dissoi logoi* literally means "two-fold speeches" (Kennedy 1963, 34), but scholars also define it as "the notion that on every issue there are two arguments opposing each other" (Poulakos *Sophistical* 1995, 58). The *Dissoi Logoi*, an anonymous text written "at some time subsequent to the Peloponnesian War" (Sprague 1972, 279), makes the case that "Any given problem involves choice or compromise between two antitheses" (Kennedy 66). The author of the *Dissoi Logoi* lists situations that appear evil from the perspective of one time, place, and perspective and good from another. The author sums up this concept by describing a principle similar to *kairos*: "everything done at the right time is seemly and everything done at the wrong time is disgraceful" (Sprague, 283). As George Kennedy explains, a rhetor can resolve

the dilemma posed by *dissoi logoi* only by resorting to *kairos*, choosing the thesis that best fits the circumstances, and thus finding the way to "relative truth and to action" (66-67). The concept of *dissoi logoi* applies to humor not only because humor often involves a fusion of opposite objects, actions, emotions, or ideas, but also, as stated earlier, because an audience's perception of humor will shift with the circumstances.

Stasis theory provides a "heuristic for finding the point at issue in a dispute" (Enos 1995, 50), and like *dissoi logoi* the term *stasis* shares a number of similarities with *kairos*. As Michael Carter says, although *kairos* developed during the sophistic, pre-Socratic era and *stasis* during the later Stoic era in Greece, both concepts hinge on "the role of opposing forces," "both act as a stimulus for rhetorical action," "both imply an initial standstill… but both provide the means to break the deadlock of the standstill through rhetorical action," and "both are concerned with the rhetorical situation" (1988, 106). Otto Dieter focuses a significant amount of attention on *stasis* as a "transitory state" or "immobility" (1950, 217) between two conflicting forces, motions, functions, or changes. This immobility is fleeting and serves, Dieter says, as both a transition between the conflicting forces and a stimulus toward a resolution of the conflict—including the conflict at the heart of an argument (217, 220). As such, Dieter suggests, the point of stasis provides a perspective from which a rhetor can view the conflicting movements in a debate, identify what is at stake, and prepare an appropriate response to his or her opponent.

Like an argument, a witticism has a point of stasis, a stopping point on which the opposing movements or forces of the witticism hinge. To understand a jest, the audience must pause to ask what is at issue—or where the conflict, comparison, or contradiction lies. In a simple "knock, knock" joke, for example, the point of stasis often rests on a pun, a word that has at least two meanings (e.g., "Knock, knock." "Who's there?" "Orange." "Orange Who?" "Orange you going to let me in?"). The hesitation one feels in determining the most appropriate meaning is the joke's stasis. In *De Oratore,* Cicero says that a rhetor's artful uses of ambiguous, equivocal, or antithetical language are especially clever and useful forms of wit. To illustrate ambiguity, Quintilian cites Nero's commentary on a dishonest slave: "'No one was more trusted in my house: there was nothing closed or sealed to him'" (1942, VI iii, 50-51). Such a jest depends on an unexpected resolution to the conflict posed, at the point of stasis, by the ambiguity, equivocation, or antithesis. The stasis point comes between opposing interpretations of the rhetor's sincerity—based on the issue of whether Nero means what he says literally or ironically. Audience members must judge, from tone of voice and what they know about the circumstances, that Nero knows his servant is a thief.

A potentially false compliment involves a similar dynamic, with the stasis point resting on opposing interpretations of intent. An employer who tells a worker, "Nice work!" may mean this compliment literally, may

be engaging in mild sarcasm, or may be issuing a harsh criticism. The employee who listens to this remark must hesitate long enough to compare what she knows about the job she's done to what her boss might think, listen carefully to the tone of her boss's voice to detect the level of sincerity, and judge how to interpret the statement. The stasis lies at the point where the boss's suspected intent and the employee's knowledge intersect. And most instances of wit and humor, especially those based on incongruous elements, not only hinge on a point of stasis but also require an audience to comprehend and resolve the conflict in order to "get" the joke.

Topoi

In classical rhetoric, the *topoi* (topics) or *loci* (the Latin equivalent) represent places where a rhetor can discover arguments appropriate to a particular situation. In Aristotelian rhetoric, William Grimaldi says, "The topics are the source material for argumentation by enthymeme" ("Studies" 1998, 26). In the *Art of Rhetoric*, Aristotle himself describes the *topoi* as "a selection of premises about probabilities and what is most suitable" (1926, II xxii, 10) and as "the elements of enthymemes" (II xxii, 13). Aristotle describes twenty-eight such *topoi,* among them premises based on qualities of opposition, similarity, relation, time, definition, induction, enumeration of parts, and contradiction. Grimaldi divides the twenty-eight *topoi* into three general patterns of inference and logic: antecedent-consequent, or cause-effect; more-less; and some form of relation ("Sources" 1998, 134). He characterizes the *topoi* not as a simple, mechanical mode of rhetorical invention, as some scholars have suggested (126), but as Aristotle's attempt to provide an intelligent, systematic way of arriving at probable knowledge (124). Indeed, Richard Enos and Janice Lauer have portrayed the *topoi* as "heuristics having the potentially dynamic characteristic of energizing thought by shaping meaning" (1998, 206). Instead of being static, obsolete devices, then, the *topoi*—via the enthymeme—could "energize ideas through the socially shared understanding of such modes of relational thought," making them a tool for "invention through shared discourse" (206). In order to remain a dynamic instrument of shared invention, the *topoi* must be adaptable to different circumstances, purposes, and cultures—in short, they must be sensitive to the changing *kairos*. That they are indeed adaptable becomes clear from the way Hermagoras altered them to fit stasis theory—applying topics to each of the four categories of stasis—fact, definition, quality, and place (Carter 1988, 99). As Carter explains, "Under issues of fact, for instance, are *topoi* such as motive, ability, desire, and the defendant's character. Under definition is the typical definitional *topos* of setting forth the features of a crime, such as treason, and then showing how the defendant's actions either meet or do not meet those features" (1988, 99).

That the *topoi* are useful not simply in generating ideas for serious oratory, but also for generating audience-appropriate humor becomes evident from statements made by

Cicero and Quintilian. In *De Oratore*, for example, while discussing the sources of laughter, Cicero suggests that the same topics are useful for generating both humorous and serious oratory. As he says, rhetors should remember that "whatever subjects I may touch on as being sources of laughing-matters, may equally well, as a rule, be sources of serious thoughts" (1942, II lxi, 248). In the *Institutio Oratoria*, Quintilian, too, says that serious and humorous speeches share *loci*. He cautions,

> It is, however, a difficult task to indicate the sources from which laughter may be legitimately derived or the topics where it may be naturally employed. To attempt to deal exhaustively with the subject would be an interminable task and a waste of labour. For the topics suitable to jests are no less numerous than those from which we may derive *reflexions*, as they are called, and are, moreover, identical with the latter. (1921, VI iii, 35-36)

The futility of this task does not, of course, stop Quintilian, or Cicero before him, from attempting to examine various *loci*. In fact, a large portion of *De Oratore*'s section on humor involves examining the types of humor—based on facts and language—and their various subcategories, including humor based on the unexpected, the ambiguous, plays on words, words taken literally, and antithesis. Many of these *loci* resemble those put forth by the *Tractatus Coislinianus*, a manuscript originally discovered "appended to one of the manuscripts of Aristophanes" (Grant 1924, 32), and which presents a theory of comedy based on a listing of *loci ridiculi*. The manuscript, which Lane Cooper argues has roots in the lost second book of Aristotle's *Poetics*, cites sixteen *loci* or places from which humor arises, divided into two categories: diction and things. Among sources of humor based on diction, the tract lists homonyms, synonyms, garrulity, paronyms (words derived from the same root), diminutives, perversion of words by voice and by other means, and grammar and syntax. Among the sources of humor based on things, the tract says laughter derives from assimilation (toward the better or the worse), deception, the impossible, the possible and inconsequent, the unexpected, the debasing of personages, the use of clownish dancing, and a lack of sequence or logic (Cooper 1922, 225).

Chris Holcomb, who examines the *topoi* of jesting used by rhetors during the English Renaissance, agrees with Quintilian about the futility of attempting to make a definitive list of sources for humor. As Holcomb says, "Jests are far too idiosyncratic and far too open to a diversity of interpretations for anyone to determine, once and for all, their subject matter and function" (2001, 98). If one keeps in mind the practical limits of such a set of *topoi*, however, "this notion offers a theoretical apparatus for mapping out what a particular culture or community generally finds funny. That is, a set of jesting *topoi* might constitute common ground (*communis locus*) that allows the content and point of jests to be shared" (2001, 98). An awareness of a community's *topoi* for humor would permit a rhetor to tailor speech or writing to appeal to its members' particular tastes. The fact that some things the Greeks and Romans found amusing—such as physical deformity—would no longer amuse contemporary audiences, at least those with good taste, illustrates such *topoi* vary from culture to culture. As Holcomb argues, "[O]ne would expect the *topoi* of jesting to shift not only across groups or cultures, but also across time. Patterns in the ways these *topoi* are reproduced, revised, forgotten, or replaced could serve as indices of social change" (98). The open-ended nature of the *topoi*, in fact, prevent them from becoming obsolete or formulaic, preserving their usefulness as sites of invention. After all, as Cicero and Quintilian suggest, the *topoi* serve as a tool of invention for both serious and humorous speeches since serious thoughts can derive from humorous matters and vice versa. Thus, one can use the *topoi* to approach serious ideas with a lighter touch. At the same time, one's knowledge of the culture's *topoi* can also help one tailor one's words to suit the sense of humor of one's audience.

Plain Style, Sermo, Urbanitas

The terms *plain style*, *sermo*, and *urbanitas* come out of Stoic rhetorical theory and describe concepts related to an urbane, informal, witty style of speech rooted in Socratic irony and preferred by Cicero and the Scipionic Circle—a group of writers and orators who influenced Cicero's thinking. The goals of a rhetor speaking or writing in the plain style were, first, "to speak the truth" and, second, "to teach" (Fiske 1971, 78). In the service of these goals, but without "any self-conscious straining at emotional effects" (79), the rhetor could use wit appropriate to the circumstances. The five virtues of the plain style, George Converse Fiske says, are correctness, brevity, clarity, appropriateness, and embellishment that avoids vulgarity (1971, 127-30). As it developed in Rome—fostered by Scipio and Panaetius, Cicero's friends and colleagues—the plain style took form in the *sermo*, which in Latin means "conversation" (84). The *sermo*, in contrast to oratory, was the form of speech most appropriate to settings other than the formal venues of the courts, assemblies, and senate. As Cicero says, "Conversation should find its natural place in social gatherings, in informal discussions, and in intercourse with friends; it should also seek admission at dinners" (*De Officiis* 1913, I xxxvi, 132). Cicero enumerates the essential qualities of the *sermo* as follows:

> It should be easy and not in the least dogmatic; it should have the spice of wit. And the one who engages in conversation should not debar others from participating in it, as if he were entering upon a private monopoly; but, as in other things, so in a general conversation he should think it not unfair for each to have his turn. He should observe, first and foremost, what the subject of conversation is. If it is grave, he should treat it with seriousness; if humorous, with wit. And above all, he should be on the watch that his conversation shall not betray some defect in his character. (I xxxvii, 134)

As Fiske observes, Cicero came to see the *sermo* as "the ideal literary form for the plain style whether written or spoken" (1971, 85) and Panaetius saw "the restrained type of ironic or Socratic humor as the appropriate tone" (84) for the *sermo*.

The Roman version of Socratic irony takes form in the concept of *urbanitas*, a term that describes the qualities possessed by an *urbanus*, or a civilized and courteous rhetor, whose wit is "marked by reserve in the use of his powers and by studied understatement" (Fiske 1971, 343). As Fiske says, the term "connoted not only wit and cleverness, but also to a much greater degree elegance and refinement" (124). Aimed in large part at securing the rhetor's *ethos*—and at facilitating a friendly reception of his or her ideas—the wit of the *urbanus* "has the qualities of the liberal jest" (Grant 1924, 121), which include sensitivity to appropriateness in time and subject matter, and lacks "the malice and the obscenity of the illiberal jest" (119). Cicero describes this type of humor as *gravitate salsum*, translated as a type of "humour… blended with austerity" (*De Oratore* 1942, II lxvi, 270) or *severe ludus*, translated as "solemnly jesting" (II lixvi, 269). Both phrases refer to a type of wit whose aims include communicating serious points while amusing an audience, and Cicero points to the Socratic philosophers as the "best models" of this type of wit (*De Officiis* I, xxxvii, 134).

The plain style, *sermo*, and *urbanitas* represent a style of speech suited not only to Socratic dialogue but also to other oratorical situations, including teaching. This suitability is clear from the plain style's primary goals of "to speak the truth" and "to teach." The qualities of the *sermo*—especially its emphasis on easy, inclusive dialogue, spiced with appropriate wit, and aimed at enhancing the rhetor's character—also match up nicely to the type of speech conducted between a teacher and his or her students—particularly the students in a contemporary classroom, where one of the aims is to encourage students to learn by participating in group invention, discussion, and criticism. Finally, the refined, solemn jesting of the *urbanitas* is, as Cicero has said, "an elegant kind of humor… adapted to oratory as well as to polite conversation" and suitable not simply to the law courts, but "any other kind of discourse" (Watson, 162-63), including that of the home, the classroom, the office, or other social situations.

As this essay has attempted to demonstrate, although scholars have tended to frown on humor because of its association with frivolity and fun—not to mention the unfair edge it offers the witty rhetor engaged a serious argument—humor is a rhetorical enterprise governed and informed by many of the classical rhetorical principles that govern and inform other persuasive discourse. Such rhetorical concepts as *kairos*, *enthymeme*, *stasis*, *topoi*, *plain style*, *sermo*, and *urbanitas* not only offer insights into rhetorical theory that are of use to orators, but can also give insights into the effective use of wit as a rhetorical device. These concepts offer a theoretical framework with which to analyze and understand otherwise elusive phenomena—wit and humor—with an eye toward applying them to the rhetorical situations that arise in one's everyday life. In plainer words, students of rhetoric ought to take humor seriously.

END NOTES

1. The humor of the cultured orator tends to be self-deprecating, tasteful, well-timed, and appropriate to the situation, the audience, and the orator's character. Such wit enhances rather than detracts from an orator's argument.

2. Aristotle alludes to his own discussion of the different forms of humor in the *Poetics* and touches on the rules of propriety as they relate to humor, saying that some types of humor are "becoming a gentlemen, others not. You should therefore choose the kind that suits you" (1926, III xviii, 7). Aristotle goes on to reveal his preference for irony over buffoonery—or clownish humor—because irony "is employed on one's own account" and buffoonery "on that of another" (III xviii, 7).

3. Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "wit."

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THIS IS **NOT** FUNNY: HOW MICHAEL HANEKE'S *FUNNY GAMES* CORRECTS ITS AUDIENCE

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Breaking Eggs, Breaking Kneecaps

"Eve sent me. She's cooking and she ran out of eggs, and she asked if you could help her out." It is this seemingly innocent request for a couple of eggs that makes Ann Farber believe that she can trust Peter, a decent looking young man she has only met once before. Smartly dressed in an impeccable white outfit, and afflicted with polite manners, he appears at the doorstep of Ann's well-equipped holiday home. His shy and clumsy behaviour and soft tone of voice contribute to his reliable, gentle appearance. So Anne decides that she can invite Peter into her home. When he almost instantly drops the eggs Ann has handed over to him, she initially laughs and tells him not to worry about it. Peter politely asks her for some new eggs, after which he 'accidentally' knocks her phone into the kitchen sink, and finally drops the eggs again.

This scene from Michael Haneke's film *Funny Games* (2007) may seem funny at first. However, the slapstick humour which the rapid succession of accidents of the clumsy protagonist hints at is nipped in the bud. When Peter's companion Paul enters the Farber premises as well, the situation quickly turns grim. Ann loses her patience with the two young men. Offended by the fact that they still dare to ask for new eggs after having dropped them twice, she firmly asks Peter and Paul to leave. They don't. Paul suddenly smashes the kneecaps of Ann's husband George with a golf club. After that, the two men stay for another twelve hours in which they torture and kill Ann's entire family: her dog, her ten-year old son, her husband, and finally Ann herself.

Funny Games is not a funny movie at all. It meticulously represents the pain, distress and suffering of the Farber family for the duration of the film. Yet, the film cannot be seen apart from humour. As both the title and the above mentioned opening scene already indicate, the film constantly suggests that it *is* funny. Violence is alternated with jokes, games and funny little accidents.

Whereas such a mixture of horror and humour often succeeds in entertaining the audience of many contemporary narrative films, Haneke's film makes its viewers shiver instead of laugh. Both the German version—which first appeared in 1997—and the more recent English version of *Funny Games* have led to very emotional responses and controversies: the film has truly compelled and horrified its spectators.[1,2]

The strong feelings of disgust and discomfort which *Funny Games* gives rise to are not so much—not solely—a result of its meticulous representation of violence. Rather, the film is so highly unsettling because of its constant mismatches between violence *and* fun, horror, *and* humor, as well as suffering *and* entertainment. In this article I explain how many of the characteristics which can make representations of violence uplifting and entertaining to an audience are hinted at but then undermined in Haneke's film. As for the protagonists, every possible escape from violence in *Funny Games* turns out to be a cul-de-sac for its viewers too, who are deprived of any secure, satisfactory stance towards the violence that is depicted. I argue that the above mentioned 'çul-de-sacs' and 'mismatches' in Haneke's film function as a correction of the customary *cinematic match* between violence and fun. Before turning to this common combination of humor and suffering in film, it is first necessary to look into the more general link between entertainment and the pain of others.

Painful Pies

The relationship between violence and fun is not exclusive to cinema, nor is it a recent phenomenon. In *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Susan Sontag suggests that the 'despised impulse' to watch the violation and suffering of others might be as natural to human beings as sympathy. She traces the acknowledgment of human attraction to gruesome sights as far back as Plato, who "appears to take for granted that we also have an appetite for sights of deg-

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radation and pain and mutilation" (86). It is important that Sontag defines this attraction to atrocity as a *despised* impulse. Although religious thinking has linked pain to sacrifice and exaltation, suffering is generally regarded as "a mistake or an accident or a crime. Something to be fixed. Something to be refused" (Sontag 88).

Because of this dominant moral rejection of violence and suffering in most Western cultures, the desire to look at (pictures of) suffering tends to be suppressed, and the pleasure derived from watching pain is not a culturally accepted one. As a result, the wish to see something gruesome can be a source of inner torment and mental conflict. We want to look while we feel we shouldn't. This struggle can explain why looking at the pain of others is not only a source of (forbidden) pleasure, but also a common source of *laughter*. Over the past couple of centuries, many theorists (Spencer [1860], Gregory [1924], Freud [1928], Shurcliff [1968] and Berlyne [1972])—to name only a few), have noted the *tension-releasing* function of humor, and some have even suggested that tension relief is a defining characteristic of all humor (Martin 2007).

One of the main tenets of relief theory is that making a joke about something we find frightening or threatening can relieve us from feelings of anxiety. More importantly, according to relief theory, humor functions as a way to overcome sociocultural inhibitions and reveal suppressed desires. In jokes we express and address things we are not supposed to feel, do, or talk about according to conventions (or, as Freud would have, the superego). In other words, humor can provide us with an outlet or a feeling of relief as we briefly step out from under moral and sociocultural restraints. When jokes allow us to laugh out loud over the suffering of others, they might be said to temporarily relieve us from the repressed inclination to enjoy the pain of others.[3]

From its onset, cinema has provided its audience with comic relief from the prohibited pleasure of *schadenfreude*. One of the main attractions of this early *cinema of attractions,* as Tom Gunning defined it, the comic action. Many of the first single shots movies which were produced in the first decade of the last century showed brief gags in which characters suffered from little accidents or traps. Clumsy or unwitting figures would trip and stumble, fall into a pie, or get soaked by a watering hose.

The suffering of these comic characters is relatively harmless in comparison to the violence which is inflicted on victims in a large amount of more contemporary 'funny' fiction films. Around 1990, a 'violent turn' can be noticed in cinematic comedies. Similar to the turn from breaking eggs to breaking kneecaps in the opening scenes of Haneke's *Funny Games,* the *schadenfreude* which can be derived from contemporary comedies no longer depends on pies, but rather on brain matter flying in the face of guileless characters. The tendency to represent excessive violence in a funny way can first and foremost be traced back to so called *nouvelle violence* films, of which Quentin Tarantino's works provide the most poignant examples.

Caught Laughing

In Tarantino's films, horribly violent acts or abject situations are often combined with comic aspects. In *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), for instance, a tied up policeman is approached by his guard, gangster Mr. Blonde, in a threatening, yet amusing way. While swinging a knife in his hand, Mr. Blonde is doing a cheerful little dance to "Stuck in the Middle with You" by Stealers Wheel. He then cuts off the policeman's right ear. The laconic style in which the scene is presented suddenly contrasts with the policeman's pain and suffering. The same intertwining of fun and horror can be found in *Pulp Fiction's* "the Bonnie situation" (1992). In this scene, two gangsters have to clean up a car because one of them has accidentally shot a man in the face, leaving skull, brain matter, and blood all over the backseat. This abject situation becomes ludicrous when the cool and cold-blooded gangsters panic for a rather ridiculous reason: they are afraid to get caught red-handed by an innocent nurse, Bonnie.

It can be argued that the comic aspects in Tarantino's films present the violence in his films as entirely 'over the top', and thereby ironize much of the brutal acts that come by.[4] The 'said' in Tarantino's films can be described as: violence is cruel and grave. For this is how the violence is represented for most of the time: painful, abject and horrific. The funny and exaggerated parts, however, point at the 'unsaid': that the represented violence shouldn't be taken very seriously. Hereby, the film seems to give its spectators permission to laugh over horrible acts.

However, as Sharon Willis argues, it isn't that uncomplicated for the films' viewers to consider the violence as merely funny. As I've already noted, enjoying the suffering of others is something we tend to suppress unless humor makes it 'appropriate' to laugh over.. This appropriateness, however, does not only depend on the joke(s), but also on the gravity of the suffering. It is more appropriate to laugh over someone who trips over a dog than over someone who has his ear cut off. In Tarantino's films, the violence is extreme. It is, moreover, merely funny *because* it is extreme. Paradoxically, however, this intense and serious character also prohibits us from laughing out loud. The 'comic relief' is therefore not complete.

In the same vein, Willis defines the combinations of fun with horror in Tarantino's films as 'mismatches' that produce an affective excess in the films' viewers:

> To be caught laughing when something horrific happens, to gasp at the mismatch between our affective state and the next image, may be said to reproduce, or at least to recall the embarrassment, or even shame, to be caught with our pants down in the breach of social discipline. Tweaking our internal social censorship mechanisms as they do by the mismatches between the funny and the horrifying, the abject, or the frightening, [Tarantino's] films leave us to manage that affective excess. (190)

According to Willis, this affective excess—which she describes as 'being caught with ones pants down'—can be managed in two ways by the films' spectators. On the one hand, viewers can take satisfaction in the alibi Tarantino's films provide. As Willis notes, "we can feel we are getting away with laughing when we should not" (190). On the other hand, the spectators' shock of being caught laughing when something horrific happens can be merely a source of embarrassment. These two possible reactions to laughing over the violence in Tarantino's films—satisfaction and embarrassment—can never completely be resolved.

Moreover, Tarantino's films cause doubt about the meaning or intended effect of the ironic stance towards violence that can be attributed to them. As Linda Hutcheon points out, irony doesn't necessarily have a critical edge; it can just as well be "morally irresponsible, empty, even silly" (49). According to Hutcheon, irony can become "a tone of urbane amusement, assuming the right to be amused, but offering no precise positives behind the right" (49). Furthermore, Hutcheon notes how in addition to being an empty decoration, irony can even function as an affirmation—rather than destruction—of its target.

The critical intention of the irony in Tarantino's films is hard to decipher. Are viewers allowed to laugh over the depicted violence or are they supposed to feel ashamed for doing so? Is violence ironized by the films in order show to how ridiculous and stupid violence really is? In other words, is the ironizing of violence meant to criticize violence itself? Or is the ironic stance towards violence rather celebratory? Is it meant to show us how cool and funny a nonchalant and indifferent attitude towards violence really is?

I would opt for the last option when it comes to Tarantino's films. The ironic stance towards violence in his films doesn't criticize its target; rather, violence is celebrated.[5] Although the ironizing of violence can produce unease in the films' viewers, the films nevertheless *allow* them to be amused by violence. In an interview with Lisa Kennedy, Tarantino recounts how the motto of his films was once appreciatively described to him as: "Looking cool being bad, with a fuck-you attitude" (qtd. in Kennedy 1994, 31). This doesn't just apply to the bad guys in his films though. It is also the attitude the spectator is encouraged to take up. Looking at violence ironically may be slightly bad, but is cool precisely because of that. In the end, the irony in Tarantino's films functions therefore more as an affirmation of violent behaviour than an objection to it.

Tarantino's films can be said to have paved the way for extremely violent films in which the possibly discomforting oscillation between fun and seriousness has vanished altogether. Horror parodies such as *Scary Movie* (2000) or so-called 'splatsticks' (splattery slapsticks) such as *Club Dread* (2004) hardly leave any room for the seriousness of pain, for they are riddled with slapstick-like jokes. Stabbings and murders are alternated with 'funny' little accidents, such as the loss of a breast-implant or a character slipping over a pool of blood. As opposed to Tarantino's films, these movies leave no doubt as to the intended effect

of flying brain matter and the like; these 'splatsticks' are meant to entertain, not to critique. In these films, splashing blood has indeed fully replaced the splashing gardening hose. For the slapstick humor in these overtly comic yet excessively violent films grants its audience unequivocal permission to laugh over pain and suffering without risking social embarrassment.

In addition to firmly establishing the genre of the horror comedy, *nouvelle violence* films have also installed an ironic *mode of looking* in many contemporary viewers. Today, film spectators are inclined to understand excessive cinematic violence in films as funny and amusing rather than serious and shocking. The emergence of such an ironic understanding of violence and suffering can be well illustrated by the reception of *American Psycho*. When Bret Easton Ellis' novel *American Psycho* was first published in 1991, it caused a wave of shock and outrage. When the novel's adaptation to film was released in 2000, however, the represented atrocities where largely understood as ironic. This can partially be ascribed to the film itself, which was more overtly ironic than the novel. However, it can also be explained by a change in the attitude of the audience, because in the years between the novel and the film, many people had grown accustomed to taking an ironic stance towards represented violence. Films such as *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction* had 'taught' them to understand depicted pain and suffering as a non-serious, funny matter. As I will argue in the course of this paper, Haneke's *Funny Games* can be understood as an attempt to *un*learn this lesson.

Funny Games?

At first sight, *Funny Games* (2007) may seem similar rather than averse to Tarantino's nouvelle violence films. Like *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction,* Haneke's film contains the suggestion that violence is funny, and might therefore induce the same embarrassment in spectators as is evoked in Tarantino's films; that is, it has the potential to stir up the feeling which Willis compares to the sensation of 'being caught with your pants down.' Yet, Haneke's combination of the horrible with the funny produces an even bigger mismatch between fun and suffering than Tarantino's films. In addition, this mismatch has a slightly different effect on the audience. Instead of feeling ashamed for being caught laughing when perhaps they should not, the viewers of *Funny Games* are being caught watching when perhaps they shouldn't. In order to explain this effect, it is first necessary to explore where and why irony can be attributed to *Funny Games.*

While the Farber family is sitting on the couch of their living room, frightened and shocked because of the physical violence that has just been inflicted on them by the two perpetrators, Paul addresses them with a proposal: "We're gonna make a bet now, ok? We bet that in, let's say, twelve hours, all three of you are going to be 'kaput'.… *You* bet that you will still be alive tomorrow at nine o'clock, and *we* bet that you will be dead, ok?" Understandably so, the three family members—Ann, George senior and

George junior—are stunned by this absurd plan. Except for Ann's astonished "What?" they remain silent, which leads to Peter's disappointed reaction that "they don't want to bet." This, however, is not an option according to Paul: "A bet has to be made."

The two perpetrators consider the entire situation a game, a bet which will result in winners and losers. Furthermore, within this large game, a few smaller games are set up by Peter and Paul. One of these games, for instance, is called 'cat in the bag', in which Ann has to undress herself while her son George is being gagged by Paul. Another example is 'the loving wife', in which Ann has to say a prayer in order to be given the choice by which weapon her husband will be killed: a knife or gun.

Peter and Paul take their violent games very seriously. The rules have to be followed strictly, the bet *has* to be made, and the victims must play along. If not, the consequences will be severe. By emphasizing the seriousness of their games, the perpetrators seem to stress the graveness of their violence as well. However, the serious attitude of the perpetrators toward their violent games can be understood as ironic. It is ironic because in all cases, the perpetrators encourage their victims to follow the rules, make a bet, and play along in order not to spoil the *fun*. In the end, their violent games are meant to be understood as funny and amusing. The violence the two perpetrators use should therefore not be taken too seriously either.

All the more ironic is the perpetrators' (verbal) dismissal of any form of misbehaviour. Quite apart from their outbursts of physical violence, the two men express nothing but courteousness and politeness when they speak. For instance, shortly after Paul has broken George's kneecaps with a golf club, Peter asks George to "please have a seat" with a soft and kind tone of voice. When the badly injured man is finally seated, Peter continues his gentle approach: "Could you please take off your pants? If you don't let me see your wound I can't help you.… I'm happy to help, really, I just don't want to impose." The two young men keep insisting on polite manners, honesty, and tidiness; for example, they take great pains to keep the carpet clean. Whenever the Farbers use any physical violence in their defense, the two men are offended and disapproving. For instance, Paul tells George that the slap in the face George gave him "really wasn't an appropriate reaction." Moreover, Peter and Paul repeatedly offer the Farbers their sincere apologies for their own violent 'faux-pas.' However, these apologies for and verbal dismissals of violence cannot be taken seriously because the perpetrators *act* violently over and over again.

Funny Games doesn't raise much doubt on the critical intention of the ironic stance the two perpetrators expose. Their ironic mocking of violence doesn't seem to be aimed at criticizing violence at all. Instead, their irony functions as an accomplice to their abject violent behaviour. It is their ironic attitude that provides them with an excuse, or perhaps even a reason, to use the most horrific brutal violence. For it isn't that serious, is it?

However, because the ironic attitude of the perpetrators stands in stark contrast to the suffering of their victims, it seems impossible for the spectator *not* to take the brutal acts in *Funny Games* seriously. For how can the excruciating pains the Farbers have to go through possibly be considered as futile or funny? Unlike Tarantino's films, which seduce the spectator to take up an (embarrassingly) indifferent and amused attitude towards violence, *Funny Games* doesn't make its audience laugh.

An important reason for why the urge to laugh at the represented violence in *Funny Games* never occurs is that, unlike in Tarantino's films, the atrocities in Haneke's film aren't presented in a laconic style. It is merely the perpetrators who are ironic, but this irony isn't sustained by the rest of the film's characteristics. There are no cheerful melodies or over-the-top tableaux like cars filled with blood to accompany the ironic attitude of the criminals. In *Funny Games*, the violent scenes are represented in a sober manner. It isn't splashing blood or cut off ears we get to see, but the tormented faces of the suffering victims, crying and sweating from pain and fear. The ironic attitude of the perpetrators doesn't make the suffering of the Farber family funny. Instead, it makes the violent behaviour of the two young men all the more grim and abject.

The contrast between the soberly represented suffering of the victims and the ironic attitude of the perpetrators towards this pain and suffering produces a desire in the viewer to radically disidentify with the violent behaviour of Peter and Paul as well as their ironic attitude towards this violence.[6] So, although the irony used by the perpetrators is far from critical towards its target, the effect of Peter and Paul's ironic stance towards violence does have a possibly desirable critical effect on its viewers.

The viewer's wish to disidentify with Peter and Paul's ironically acted out violence, however, is disrupted by the film. This is because the viewer of *Funny Games* is involuntarily made an accomplice to the ironic stance of Peter and Paul, and consequently to the violence they use. As I will explain in the next section, the spectator of *Funny Games* is placed in this uncomfortable position of accomplice through a combination of the perpetrators' ironic stance towards violence and the fact that the two criminals repeatedly address the viewer.

Caught Watching

The first interpellation of the viewer is merely visual and comes somewhat as a surprise. When Paul is playing one of his first little games—a game in which Ann has to look for the corpse of her killed dog while Paul provides her with clues about where to search—he suddenly looks over his shoulder, straight into the camera, and smirks. Since there is no one else standing behind him, this brief smile, accompanied with a knowing glance, is likely to be meant for the spectator. Yet, because the smirk is such a brief, non-verbal gesture, it leaves the spectator in doubt. Was this gesture directed at me?

This question can quickly be answered in the affirmative. Shortly after Paul's smirk, he addresses the viewer verbally, again looking directly into the camera: "What do you think? You think they stand a chance? Who are you betting on, mm?" By these questions the spectator is dragged into the 'games' of Peter and Paul as one of the players. Although the viewer cannot physically partake in the whole, his/her role as a passive participant or witness is accounted for in the set-up of the games, and therefore inescapable for anyone who watches the film. In short, watching *Funny Games* turns into an act of playing along with the perpetrators' funny games, whether the viewer likes it or not.

Being addressed directly and being forced to participate in the game causes more than just a feeling of unease in the viewer. This experience also likely induces a feeling of shame. In order to understand this response, it is important to realize that the film viewer is usually a distant witness who is allowed to sit secretly and anonymously in the dark. According to Christian Metz (1982), viewing a film in the cinema somehow resembles an offence because of the viewer's hidden position in the dark. No one really knows or sees that you are watching. Even apart from the dark cinema, Metz argues, watching a film is in general more 'scandalous' than, for instance, watching a play or even a peepshow. In all three cases the spectator can be said to be a voyeur. The difference, however, is that as long as performers of plays or peepshows aren't forced to act on stage, the permission to watch them is sufficiently guaranteed by their physical presence: they want to be watched, otherwise they wouldn't be there. This doesn't count for film. The viewed actors (or as Metz puts it: objects) are physically absent and therefore they cannot give the spectator permission to watch. This is why the film viewer is a sort of peeping Tom. He or she is an unauthorized voyeur who secretly watches actors without their consent.

When the presence of the viewer is acknowledged in *Funny Games* by two of its protagonists, this doesn't immediately make the act of watching more appropriate. Instead of feeling authorized to watch, viewers are more likely to feel taken unaware when Paul first turns to them with a blink. This is because the spectator, who is used to a detached, anonymous place in the dark, is now suddenly 'caught' watching. This probably wouldn't be so very embarrassing if the film would show things we are—according to social conventions—allowed to watch with pleasure. The main subject of *Funny Games*, however, is not something we are supposed to enjoy. The question that is raised by being addressed and acknowledged as a viewer of *Funny Games* is: why do you watch this? Doesn't the fact that you are watching imply that you secretly enjoy seeing these atrocities, this violence, this suffering?

These questions are made even more poignant by the fact that Peter and Paul clearly presuppose the viewer is amused by the violence they inflict on their victims. This is for instance indicated by Paul's blink. His gesture doesn't just acknowledge the presence of the spectator, it also implies that he or she should 'get' the joke; this

violent act shouldn't be taken seriously, it is funny.[7] Such tête-à-têtes suggest a mutual understanding between the perpetrators and the viewer, yet without the consent of the viewer. This way, the spectator is somewhat forced into sharing the ironic stance of Peter and Paul towards violence. Whereas Hutcheon has argued that interpreters of irony are free and conscious agents who can refuse to attribute irony where it might be intended in the same way they can attribute it where it might not be meant (1994:12), such a refusal of irony is hardly possible for *Funny Games'* viewers. By merely watching, they are presupposed to share the ironic stance of Peter and Paul towards violence, and consequently to enjoy watching the violence the two young men use.

What is more, Peter and Paul do not only presuppose the viewer is amused by their violent game, they also indicate that they are playing their game *in order to* amuse the viewer. "Do you think it's enough?" Paul asks the spectator after a long violent scene. His next question already suggests an answer to the previous one: "I mean, you want a real ending, right? With plausible plot development, don't you?" Following this question, Paul continues his torture of the Farber family. Thus, the viewer of *Funny Games* is not only inflicted with a feeling of guilt for merely *watching* violence, but is also indicated by the protagonists as the *reason* that the violence is carried out in the first place. The two protagonists are putting up a spectacle in order to entertain their audience. "It's boring when mutes suffer" Paul says, upon which he removes a lump of cloth by which Ann is being smothered. "We want to entertain our audience, right, show them what we can do."

By having the protagonists put up a spectacle in order to entertain the audience, *Funny Games* resembles the previously mentioned 'cinema of attractions'. As in Haneke's film, the actors in these early movies clearly show an awareness of the camera. By addressing the viewers and putting up spectacles in order to entertain them, they explicitly perform for a (future) audience. Pascal Bonitzer has described these scenes as a world of 'pure' spectacle, in which guilt does not (yet) seem to exist (1981, 23). The difference between *Funny Games* and the cinema of attractions could be said to lie precisely in this absence or presence of guilt. Whereas the spectacles shown in the cinema of attractions consist of relatively innocent acts, such as pulling funny faces or physical slapstick, the spectacles put up in *Funny Games* comprise torture and murder. It is the contemporary spectator who is to blame for this horror show, since it is the viewer who wishes to be entertained by these kinds of abject 'funny games' instead of by harmless funny faces. At least, this is what *Funny Games* implicitly suggests.

The Right Side

Of course, the viewer of *Funny Games* is not likely to feel entertained by the horrible acts that Peter and Paul perform because these violent acts aren't funny in any way. The problem, however, is that the film offers no excuse for

the viewer to watch the film. The only possible reason for watching the film seems to be that the viewer enjoys it, which, presumably, they don't. Still, there is no comfortable moral stance that spectators can take up or identify with in order to justify their watching. The film does present spectators with some possible escapes from their uncomfortable position as pleasure-taking voyeurs of violence. These escapes, however, are consistently undermined in the film, which is why I called them cul-de-sacs. One of these cul-de-sacs is the possibility for the viewer to choose the right side: the side of the victims.

This choice is easily made when watching *Funny Games*. It is hard to sympathize with the perpetrators, since they are vile and cruel. More importantly, it is difficult to identify with them because at first sight there seems to be no understandable reason for their violent behaviour. In fact, they even mock the fact that they don't have any motives for their cruelty, making up all kinds of fake excuses, such as blaming a deprived background, alcoholic and abusive parents, drug-addiction, or the emptiness of existence in general. Because the violent behaviour of Peter and Paul is reprehensible and incomprehensible, the viewer will more likely identify with their victims instead. Moreover, the suffering of the Farber family produces empathy for them in the viewer since it is easy to imagine oneself in the position of the suffering family members. Viewers can see their fear and pain, and it is easy to understand these feelings after having first seen what atrocities were inflicted on them. In short, the viewer is encouraged to identify with the suffering Farbers.

Identification with suffering persons can be considered utterly comforting and even uplifting. According to Ernst van Alphen, this can be explained by the fact that the suffering person is a victim, and therefore without guilt. As van Alphen puts it: "The identification with the represented victims posits the viewers also without guilt and reconfirms their conventional morality" (2). In the case of *Funny Games*, the viewers' identification with the victims, which is encouraged by the film from the beginning, could provide them with a comfortable position, one that confirms their 'conventional morality' and acquits them of the guilt the film installs in them for watching violent scenes.

However, there are two ways in which the film undermines this possible comfort for the viewer. First, the distinction between innocent victims and guilty violators is constantly blurred in the film. Consequently, identification with the victims doesn't necessarily posit the viewer without guilt, because the victims themselves aren't completely innocent either. Although Peter and Paul are the ones who use the gravest forms of violence and finally even murder their victims, it is the Farbers who use physical violence first. Ann, George and little Georgy each attack the two young men with blows and punches before they have even been hit and kicked by Peter and Paul themselves. Apart from physical violence, the Farbers are the first and only ones to become *verbally* abusive. Whereas they rail at their perpetrators and call them names, Peter and Paul keep addressing their victims with polite phrases

in a kind tone of voice. Altogether, the victimized Farbers aren't completely innocent. They *start* acting violent—both verbally and physically—and therefore the violence that is subsequently inflicted on them by Peter and Paul can be considered as punishment for this, albeit a disproportionately severe one.[8]

Second, identification with the victims cannot acquit the viewer of guilt because in *Funny Games* this identification is part of the 'funny' game. As I have explained earlier, the role of the viewer is accounted for in the set-up of the perpetrators' game. While sitting and watching motionless, the spectator is supposed to do something; that is, they are supposed to identify with the Farbers because that's what makes the game of Peter and Paul more exciting and all the more amusing (especially for the spectators, according to the two perpetrators). Paul's question to the viewer "Who are you betting on?" is followed by the remark "You're on their side, aren't you? Ok, so, the bet is on." Thus, by identifying with the victims, the viewer meets the expectations of the perpetrators. This isn't a very comfortable position for the viewer. In spite of being on the 'right side,' the viewer is left uneasy because the distinction between the right and the wrong side isn't clear cut in *Funny Games*.

All is Well That Ends Well

Next to the opportunity to identify with the suffering victims, there is another way by which the viewer of violent films can usually be put at ease: a righteous ending, one in which violence is condemned after all. As van Alphen writes:

> Action films that take delight in excessive violence as an end in itself are usually rounded off with a closure in which the bad guy is killed or caught and the good guy is rewarded. Unconvincing as such closures may be, they fulfil society's official precept to condemn violence and to show that violence does not pay. (6)

When violent films are rounded off with bad luck for the bad guys, the viewer is provided with an excuse to watch; it is more justified to watch violence if this violence is judged by the film in the end. Moreover, by condemning the violence that was shown, a film offers its viewer the opportunity to follow or identify with the moral position implicated by the film. No matter how pleasurable it might have been to see the spectacles of violence, in the end we can agree with the film's assertion: violence is wrong and doesn't pay. Like identification with the victims, a right ending can confirm the viewer in his or her conventional morality. All is well that ends well.

Even Tarantino's films, which I have discussed before, can be said to submit to "society's official precept to condemn violence" in this respect, no matter how cool and funny the violent acts seem. For although the good guys in Tarantino's films usually do not get off too well, the bad guys aren't exactly rewarded either. They get killed (most of the time by each other), and when they aren't killed it is because they have earned their survival by doing

something good first. For instance, in *Pulp Fiction*, bad guy Butch rescues his enemy Marcellus Wallace from anal rape and therefore escapes death. Likewise, gangster Jules judges the violent milieu he belongs to and in the end decides to retreat from it, thereby putting an end to a potentially ongoing series of violent episodes. Both guys get to live after a 'change of hearts.' For the viewer, who felt like being "caught with his pants down" before, these righteous endings can provide some comfort. After having inappropriately laughed over violence, the viewer can now "put his pants back on," and retreat into the more or less safe moral position offered by Tarantino's films in the end: violence might be cool, but it doesn't really pay in the long run.

Alternatively, the viewer of *Funny Games* is left "with his pants down" in the end. The film ends badly for the victims, who all get killed. The perpetrators, on the other hand, get away with their crimes. After having thrown Ann overboard of a sailing boat as a tied up bundle of human waste, leaving her to drown in the vast lake, the two perpetrators are already heading towards another holiday home on shore. This is how *Funny Games* ends: Paul knocks on the door of a house. A woman opens it. The decent looking young man says: "Anne sent me because some guests dropped by, and she was wondering if you could help her out with some eggs." The screen turns black and the closing credits begin to roll. Whereas the film has ended, the 'funny games' haven't.

The peculiar thing, however, is that the film *does* provide the viewer with a righteous ending. About twenty minutes before the film ends in the way I have described above, Ann grabs a gun and shoots Peter. Paul starts panicking, there's chaos all over, and for a moment the situation is in favour of the victims. At this point they can free themselves and take revenge on their violators. But then Paul starts screaming and searching; "Where is it?! Where is the fucking remote?" He finds it, pushes a button, and the whole scene rewinds up to a moment before Ann has laid hands on the rifle. Now, the scene is repeated all over again, but this time Paul sees Ann's attempt to seize the weapon, and he prevents her from using it. From this point on, the 'game' takes a bad turn for the Farbers, while Peter and Paul live and get the chance to ask another family for eggs.

The righteous ending that is shown before the actual end of the film invites the viewer to feel soothed because justice seems to have been served. This sense of relief is dashed, however, as Ann's successful defence against her perpetrators is quickly rectified by Paul's rewinding of the scene. Again, the viewer is lured into a cul-de-sac. Peter's death promises a righteous ending that could have provided an excuse to watch the violence. But this righteous ending is then undermined in *Funny Games* even before the conclusion of the film has completely unfolded.

Paul's manoeuvre with the remote control is rather confusing. His turning back time in order to prevent Peter's death, indicates his ability to intervene in the film's fabula. This raises questions about Paul's status as a protagonist. Not only does he determine the rules of the violent games,

he now also seems to have authority over their entire evolution and results. More importantly, his intervention in the course of events also exposes the artificiality of the film, which points to another strategy by which *Funny Games* forces the viewer into an insecure position.

It's Only a Movie

Although the rewinding scene deprives the viewer of a comforting righteous ending, it does provide the viewer with a new excuse to watch Haneke's violent film. As I mentioned above, Paul's manoeuvre exposes the artificial character of the film. Subsequently, the spectator is provided with the excuse that 'it's only a movie'. The represented violence can be considered less grave because it is not 'real'. However, after taking a closer look at *Funny Games,* this comforting idea turns out to be untenable.

Funny Games cannot be considered 'just a movie' because the film both exposes *and* denies its own fictionality. On the one hand, devices are used which counter the idea that the film forms an accurate, transparent representation of reality. One of these devices is the previously noted rewinding of time. Another one is the perpetrators' awareness of the fact that they are acting in a film. For instance, Paul's presupposition that a spectator is watching their performances—a viewer who moreover wants a 'real ending' with plausible plot development—indicates that he takes cinematic terms and conventions into account. The previously discussed interpellation of the viewer also breaks the 'realistic spell' of the film, because it points out that the film doesn't represent a contained, separate reality in its own right. Instead, the represented events are related to the present moment and space in which the viewer resides. This relation would only be probable and realistic if the film would present us with a 'real time' representation of events, which would suggest the torturing of the Farber family was happening right now, but in another place. This is not the case, however, because the film's fabula of about twelve hours is represented in ninety minutes.

On the other hand, the film makes use of devices that *do* suggest it is a realistic representation. It is mainly aspects of the film's style which imply that the film is non-fictional. The mise-en-scène is simple and sober, and the colors and the lightning are inconspicuous. What is more, there is no extra-diegetic music that accompanies the story, and the montage is limited to a minimum. In short, these aspects draw as little attention to themselves (and consequently to the artificiality of the film) as possible, which results in a documentary-like appearance. The often large elapses of time between cuts produce an especially realistic effect. In these long takes, nothing much happens. For example, Ann and Georgy are filmed from the same static angle for ten minutes, while they are sitting motionless on the floor of their living room. Similarly, when George tries to blow-dry their wet and ruined phone, he is filmed in close-up for three minutes. It is through such slow, static scenes that *Funny Games* differs from conventional fictional action films. The film's sober representation of uneventful situations rather resembles a documentary mode of filmmaking.

The combination of artificial interventions and documentary characteristics produces doubt. On the one hand, the spectator is shown that *Funny Games* is 'only' an artificially produced movie. On the other hand, the spectator is presented with realistic characteristics which contradict the idea that the film is a fictional construct. The doubt that is consequently produced on the status of the film as a representation of either fictional or real events undermines the comforting idea that all violence shown in *Funny Games* is fictional.

The distinction between fiction and reality is put under further scrutiny by a conversation between Peter and Paul. In this conversation the two perpetrators discuss a science fiction film Peter has seen. Peter explains how the protagonist of this film is trapped in a fictional world, upon which Peter says: "But isn't fiction real?" When Peter asks why that is the case, Paul answers: "Well, you see it in the movie, right? Then it is as real as reality." The discussion indicates that both perpetrators are preoccupied with the distinction between fiction and reality, but that they have problems with making this distinction as well.

The difficulties Peter and Paul have with telling fiction and reality apart can be considered the cause of their violent behaviour. Considering the fact that violence is often presented as amusing and entertaining in many contemporary action films, together with the fact that the difference between films and reality is unclear to Peter and Paul, it is possible to conclude that the two perpetrators may have taken over the violent behaviour shown in films without even pondering the distinction that *should* be made between these films and reality. The perpetrators no longer notice that violence isn't funny in reality.

On the other hand, it is questionable whether the world shown in Haneke's film should be understood as reality. Are Peter and Paul themselves part of a fictional world or should their acts be understood as real? Their awareness of being in a film, which I mentioned earlier, can perhaps be considered apart from the fact that they actually *are* represented in a film. Peter and Paul are generally convinced of the fact that reality is like a film and vice versa.

This leaves the spectator with the question: what do you think? Where can and should the line be drawn between representation and reality? Can you still make a distinction between them? What is the difference between realistic and fictional representations? And does it matter if the violence that you are watching is real or staged? The film provides no easy answers to these difficult questions, but rather imposes the inconvenient task of answering them upon the spectator.

Don't Laugh, Don't Look

The three most obvious possibilities that could provide the viewer with an excuse to watch the perpetrator's violent games are undermined in Haneke's film. Identification with the victims, a righteous ending, and the fictional nature of the film all turn out to be ambiguous solutions at best. The viewer is involuntarily placed (and kept) in the position of an ironic, amused voyeur of violence. This can only lead to feelings of repulsion and resistance. Since the suffering of the victims isn't presented in a laconic style, but in an utterly sober manner instead, it is impossible to consider the violence amusing in any way. The idea that the violence is shown to satisfy the viewer makes it all the more abject and horrifying to view the film, and is likely to induce strong feelings of shame for watching. Precisely by producing these negative feelings in the spectator, *Funny Games* has a strong pedagogical effect. It corrects the contemporary inclination to watch representations of violence with an ironic, laconic, and amused attitude by making the viewer feel ashamed for and complicit in the suffering of the family on screen.[9]

In fact, the film raises the wider issue of whether watching violence is acceptable *at all*. For in order to escape from the involuntary position of an amused, ironic accomplice to the depicted violence, the viewer of *Funny Games* has to find another reason for watching Peter and Paul's violent games. And that is precisely the poignant question the film imposes on its viewer: why do you watch this violence? Why *would* you watch violence, pain and suffering? The film provides no easy answers to these questions but one: there is no excuse to watch this, so don't. The violation of others is not funny. It is not to be enjoyed. So despise your impulse to watch pain and suffering and look away. Perhaps all those viewers who actually left the cinema during the film's screenings just 'got the point' before the movie ended.

To conclude, *Funny Games* seems to succeed in fulfilling one of the director's aims. As Haneke once expressed, he wished to "give back to violence that which it is: pain, a violation of others" (qtd in Sharret). I would add to this that *Funny Games* also takes something away from violence: the humor and laughter with which it has become so strongly intertwined in cinema over the last couple of decades.

END NOTES

1. The German spoken *Funny Games* (1997) and its English remake (2008) are nearly identical. I will focus on the English version (also titled *Funny Games U.S.*) in this paper.

2. *Funny Games* was described by critics as "perverse," "scandalous," and "a lascivious celebration of violence." Moreover, viewing the film proved to be unbearable to many spectators, with lots of abandoned cinema seats as a result.

3. Although the relation between humor and suffering can best be explained by relief theory, two other major theories of humor can shed some light on funny representations of violence and suffering as well. The so-called incongruity theory holds that people laugh at what surprises them (Berger 1976, McGhee 1979). Differences from the norm or violations of accepted patterns provoke humor in the mind of the perceiver. From this perspective, jokes on suffering and violence are humorous because they deviate from the norm that suffering is a grave matter. Regardless of their content, jokes on violence produce laughter by breaking the moral law that the suffering of others is to be approached with a serious, lamenting attitude. The superiority theory, in addition, notes that people laugh at others because they feel superior to them (Feinberg 1978, Gruner 1997). Adherents of the superiority theory argue that humor results from seeing oneself as right and triumphant in contrast with the target of a joke, who is seen as inferior, wrong, or defeated (Meyer 2000). Following superiority theory, laughing over the suffering of others expresses a negative stance towards the violated victims; it posits them as wrong, inferior beings (and therefore as rightful victims). The perspectives which the incongruity and superiority theories offer on the relation between violence and humor are not incompatible with relief theory, though. Both the above mentioned deviations from the norm of 'seriousness', as well as the ventilation of feelings of superiority over victims can relieve the viewer of violence from the conventional compassionate stance towards suffering others. For more elaborate overviews of the three major theories of humor, see Meyer (2000) and Martin (2010).

4. Following Hutcheon, I understand the trope of irony as a relation between the "said" and the "unsaid" in which the "unsaid" challenges the "said."

5. Following Willis, I would say that Tarantino's films present an indifferent stance towards violence as *cool,* in order to identify with the black American culture. According to the filmmaker himself, black people are the only ones in America that do not take violence in films serious. It is this attitude towards violence that Tarantino admires and imitates in his films. This doesn't mean that (the irony in) his work has a desirable political or critical effect, though. As Willis argues, Tarantino's films acknowledge (and enter into) ongoing conversations between the dominant white culture and the African American culture, but in the end "Tarantino's ahistorical reading of these conversations in deeply fetishistic" (216).

6. This desire to disidentify with the perpetrators' vile behaviour *because* it is acted out with an ironic attitude towards it, forms an interesting deviation from some theoretical ideas on irony by Slavoj Zizek (1997). According to Zizek, disidentification can most effectively be produced by a too literal, exaggerated form of overidentification. For instance, a naïve and exaggerated imitation of certain conventions will cause the desire to safely disidentify with these conventions in its audience, because the critical intention of such over-identification is awkwardly inscrutable. Irony, on the other hand, isn't capable of producing such disidentification in Zizek's eyes, because when it is used to create a critical distance from its target it usually produces indifference. Irony can function as an excuse to *behave* in the verbally criticized manner anyway, thus Zizek. Opposed to Zizek's theory, *Funny Games* proves that irony can produce disidentification. That is, when irony is used without a clear, critical intention of producing distance from its target, but is overtly used as an excuse to do something horrible instead.

7. Meyer argues that two of the main rhetorical functions of humor are unification and division. By making a joke, a rhetor can unify his audience and get them on his side. At the same time, jokes often differentiate the 'laughing ones' from the target(s) of the joke. As Meyer explains, "politicians especially find humor a useful tool for uniting their audience behind them and dividing them from the opposition" (311). Although the vicious protagonists of *Funny Games* explain that their 'funny' games do not have a serious cause nor serve any purposeful goal, Peter and Paul do show awareness of the above mentioned rhetorical functions of humor. They know that their jokes create a division between the ones who do not find their jokes funny (most importantly the suffering targets of their games) on the one hand, and the laughing onlookers on the other hand. This division may not serve the perpetrators' political or ideological convictions (which they do not have), yet it does sustain their notion of violence as a game with competing opponents. Within this game, the viewer is presupposed to side with Peter and Paul in finding their violent acts funny and amusing. As I will explain later on, Peter and Paul suggest that even the viewer's empathy with the victims does not preclude the fact that he or she is feeling entertained by perpetrators' violent jokes and tricks, as these feeling of empathy are considered to be an amusing part of the game.

8. This is also suggested by Peter and Paul themselves. For instance, Peter tells George that he is sorry about having his broken kneecaps, but that it is really George's own fault. George shouldn't have let Peter beg for eggs, but instead he should have just given them without being so rude and uncooperative. "The pointless begging… was really uncomfortable for me. Degrading, actually," says Peter.

9. It is telling in this regard that the original German version of *Funny Games* was remade as an American movie. Whereas the German version mostly reached a European art-house audience, the U.S. copy was marketed as a mainstream fiction film and played in regular theaters all over the world. This way, the film expanded its scope of re-education from a small elite group of filmgoers to the mass audience of mainstream cinema. Besides the quantitative increase of viewers, it can be argued that the U.S version could aim precisely at those viewers who needed its lessons the most: the desensitized spectators of violent blockbusters and lighthearted mainstream horror comedies.

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