

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 scatter-shot 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 *Im 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, Joaquim 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-planned 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 anticlerical 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 Hieronymus 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 hyper-masculinity 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” (Wilmot 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 Wilmot 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. als* 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 Ferreri), 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 certainty 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 neither 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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