

CARNIVALESQUE ENCULTURATION:  
RHETORIC, PLAY, AND “WABBIT LITERACY”

by

Marion Louis Kelley

---

Copyright © Marion Louis Kelley 2000

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
WITH A MAJOR IN RHETORIC, COMPOSITION, AND THE TEACHING OF  
ENGLISH

In the Graduate College

UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

2000

## **INFORMATION TO USERS**

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

Bell & Howell Information and Learning  
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA  
800-521-0600

**UMI<sup>®</sup>**



CARNIVALESQUE ENCULTURATION:  
RHETORIC, PLAY, AND “WABBIT LITERACY”

by

Marion Louis Kelley

---

Copyright © Marion Louis Kelley 2000

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
WITH A MAJOR IN RHETORIC, COMPOSITION, AND THE TEACHING OF  
ENGLISH

In the Graduate College

UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

2000

UMI Number: 9965890

Copyright 2000 by  
Kelley, Marion Louis

All rights reserved.

UMI<sup>®</sup>

---

UMI Microform 9965890

Copyright 2000 by Bell & Howell Information and Learning Company.

All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against  
unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

---

Bell & Howell Information and Learning Company  
300 North Zeeb Road  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA ®  
GRADUATE COLLEGE

As members of the Final Examination Committee, we certify that we have  
read the dissertation prepared by Marion L. Kelley  
entitled Carnavalesque Enculturation: Rhetoric, Play, and "Wabbit Literacy"

and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation  
requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

<u>Tilly Warnock</u> Sue (Tilly) Warnock	<u>3-31-2000</u> Date
<u>[Signature]</u>	<u>31.iii.2000</u> Date
Barbara Babcock	
<u>Thomas P. Miller (cf. T. Warnock)</u> Thomas P. Miller	<u>3-31-2000</u> Date
	<u>                    </u> Date
	<u>                    </u> Date

Final approval and acceptance of this dissertation is contingent upon  
the candidate's submission of the final copy of the dissertation to the  
Graduate College.

I hereby certify that I have read this dissertation prepared under my  
direction and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation  
requirement.

<u>Tilly Warnock</u> Dissertation Director	<u>3-31-2000</u> Date
Sue (Tilly) Warnock	

## STATEMENT BY AUTHOR

This dissertation has been submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for an advanced degree at The University of Arizona and is deposited in the University Library to be made available to borrowers under rules of the Library.

Brief quotations from this dissertation are allowable without special permission, provided that accurate acknowledgement of source is made. Requests for permission for extended quotation from or reproduction of this manuscript in whole or in part may be granted by the copyright holder.

SIGNED: 

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the many people who made this dissertation possible, particularly my committee: Tilly Warnock (director), Thomas P. Miller, and Barbara Babcock, whose guidance, thoughtful feedback, and infinite patience were invaluable in the drafting and revision of the manuscript. Erich Hansen, Ph.D., counselor, mentor, and friend, gave wise advice and motivational support throughout the writing process, helping me past many obstacles. I want to be like him when I grow up. Special thanks to three exceptionally gifted readers whose insights were instrumental to the development of my argument: Carole Edelsky, Carol Ekstrom, and my partner in everything, Gail Shuck. Paul Niemeyer, the best guy I've ever bantered with over a cup of coffee, called my attention to the Seinfeld quote that serves as the dissertation's epigraph, and also served as trans-Pacific liaison during the preparation and submission of the final version of the manuscript. The Editorial Board of The Drawn and Quarterly, Jim Champagne, Lisa-Anne Culp, Paul again, and Carol Nowotny-Young, provided much-needed comic relief from an otherwise terribly serious graduate school career. Al and Eva, therapy dogs extraordinaire, are sorely missed.

## DEDICATION

To Noah, who really knows how to play.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS .....	8
ABSTRACT .....	9
CHAPTER 1	
READING OUT OF TURN: IRONY, PARODY, AND CONTEXT .....	11
<b>Too Many Eirons in the Fire: What Happens when Parody “Fails”</b> .....	13
<b>Reading Over Time: Wabbit Literacy and Interpretive Contexts</b> .....	14
<b>Some Definitions</b> .....	17
<b>I Stand Here Irony-ing: Modernist and Postmodernist Views</b> .....	23
<b>It Takes a Village to Make an Irony</b> .....	25
<b>Carnavalesque Cruises: Dialogism and Parody</b> .....	30
<b>Play, Pleasure, and Pedagogy</b> .....	34
<b>Taking the Dialogic Plunge</b> .....	35
<b>Where Do We Go From Hare: Dissertation Outline and Major Arguments</b> ..	38
CHAPTER 2	
PARODIES LOST, PARODIES REGAINED: THE ENTHYMEMATIC NATURE OF WABBIT LITERACY .....	41
<b>The Enthymeme and Dialogue</b> .....	42
<b>“What’s Up, Doxa?” Humor as an Enthymematic Operation</b> .....	48
<b>My Discursive Community Can Beat Up Your Discursive Community:</b> <b>Hostility and Enthymemes</b> .....	54
<b>Normal Abnormalities</b> .....	60
<b>Seeing Double Voices: Enthymematic Knowledge in Parody</b> .....	67
<b>What Happens After You Don’t Get the Joke</b> .....	75
<b>Conclusion: “Th-Th-That’s All, Folks! Or is It?”</b> .....	80
CHAPTER 3	
CARNIVAL KNOWLEDGE: COMMUNITIES AND CULTURAL LITERACIES .....	82
<b>Cultural Literacy: What You Don’t Know Won’t Hirsch You</b> .....	84
<b>Cultural Literacy and Parodic Context</b> .....	87
<b>Loose Canons: Fragmentary Knowledge and Ideological Broad­sides</b> .....	89
<b><i>Liberté, Egalité, and The Brady Bunch</i></b> .....	97
<b>To Read the Impossible Dream</b> .....	107
<b>Conclusion: Hard Facts, Fuzzy Knowledge, and Slippery Texts</b> .....	111
CHAPTER 4	
THE AMBIVALENT WABBIT: FROM CARNIVAL TO THEME PARK .....	114
<b>Fantasia, Loony Tunes, and Middle Class Anxieties</b> .....	117
<b>Talking Back to Walt</b> .....	121
<b>Corporate Carnivals and the Commodification of Irony</b> .....	129
<b>Imagined Amusements: Playing Against the Script</b> .....	135

TABLE OF CONTENTS—*Continued*

<b>You're Livin' in Your Own Private Carnival</b> .....	142
<b>Play MiSTy For Me</b> .....	145
<b>And the Fans Play On: MiSTing as Vernacular Theory</b> .....	152
<b>Conclusion: The Ambivalent Playground</b> .....	157
EPILOGUE	
FUDD FOR THOUGHT: IMPLICATIONS AND EXTENSIONS .....	159
<b>Implications for Further Research</b> .....	167
APPENDIX: PERMISSIONS .....	172
WORKS CITED .....	173

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

<b>Figure 1: Wabbit or Duck?</b> .....	19
<b>Figure 2: Baby Blues</b> .....	63
<b>Figure 3: Penn and Teller as Lee Harvey Oswald</b> .....	74
<b>Figure 4: Mystery Science Theater 3000</b> .....	145

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the processes that enable understanding of irony and parody, arguing that understanding of ironic and parodic discourse is grounded in socially-constructed knowledge, frequently through knowledge derived from mass media. Although parody and irony are often commodified products of mass culture, they can also help interpret and critique mass media. I also conceptualize a type of cultural knowledge for which I have coined the term “Wabbit Literacy” in recognition of the many parodies found in Bugs Bunny cartoons. Wabbit Literacy is a dialogic means of learning resulting when a reader encounters parodic references to a text *before* encountering the text being parodied. What is for the writer a parodic *allusion* to a given cultural artifact (text 1) becomes for the reader of the parodic text (text 2), the *primary reference point* for awareness of text 1.

Wabbit Literacy offers a new perspective from which to consider the situatedness of dialogic interactions among readers, writers, and text(s). Wabbit Literacy examines the “temporal contexts” of discourse, the relations among a particular reader’s earliest encounters with a text, later encounters with the text(s), and changes in the reader’s interpretations over time. Wabbit Literacy begins with a moment that most conventional discussions of parody and irony might describe as a reader’s “failure” to “get” an irony or parody. Such “failure” to interpret irony or parody is not always the terminus of the discursive event, and may often be the beginning of learning, a first step toward competence in particular socially constructed discourses.

In addition, the dissertation examines similarities between the classical enthymeme and the process of understanding humor and parody. Humor and rhetorical enthymemes work because members of discursive communities make use of socially-constructed common knowledge; parody deploys enthymematic social and textual norms for humorous purposes. Because parodic frames involve deliberately playful perspectives, Wabbit Literacy can interrogate ideological underpinnings of knowledge systems. Parody can enable tactical, local resistance to corporate entertainment products. Fans' playful transformations of commodified entertainment can give them a measure of individual agency, constituting a form of "vernacular theory" that enables a critical approach to entertainment texts.

## CHAPTER 1

## READING OUT OF TURN: IRONY, PARODY, AND CONTEXT

*It is SO sad: all your knowledge of high culture comes from Bugs Bunny cartoons.*  
*–Elaine to Jerry, Seinfeld ("The Opera")*

The film begins: lightning flashes and the clouds part, revealing the enormous, menacing silhouette of a man in a horned helmet perched on a lofty peak. The camera zooms into the tempest, focuses on the figure, and the lightning flashes once more, unveiling Elmer Fudd, in Viking regalia, singing in hushed tones, "Be vewwy quiet / I'm hunting wabbits!" Elmer is, as always, tracking Bugs Bunny, with his characteristic exclamations, "Wabbit twacks...a wabbit hole!" set to an operatic score. With the zeal of a dragon-fighting Siegfried, Elmer plunges his spear into the hole, singing, "Kill da Waaabit, Kill da Waaabit, Kill da Waaaaaabit!" to the melody of Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries." So begins Chuck Jones's 1957 cartoon *magnum opus*, "What's Opera, Doc?" Jones's cartoon is, all at once, a masterful lampoon of Wagnerian opera, a sly parody of Walt Disney's artistic pretensions in Fantasia, a quirkily effective introduction to the conventions of opera, and a practical primer on the art of parody. It is also something of a touchstone for this dissertation, exemplifying elements of textual play and of learning from parody that I will examine throughout.

In this dissertation I explore the processes that make possible our understanding of irony and parody. I argue that understanding of ironic and parodic discourse is

grounded in socially-constructed knowledge, and that mass media are highly influential channels for the construction of cultural information. Although parody and irony are often commodified products of mass culture, they can also be useful tools for interpreting and critiquing mass media. I also conceptualize a particular type of cultural knowledge, for which I have coined the term “Wabbit Literacy,” and explore how it is acquired. Wabbit Literacy is a dialogic means of learning that results when a reader (or, just as likely, a viewer),<sup>1</sup> encounters parodic references to a text *before* encountering the text being parodied. In other words, what is for the writer a parodic *allusion* to a given cultural artifact (text<sub>1</sub>) becomes for the reader of the parodic text (text<sub>2</sub>), the *primary reference point* for awareness of text<sub>1</sub>. Wabbit Literacy, in effect, describes a way of encountering texts and information about the world that runs counter to conventional assumptions about how we make sense of texts, particularly parodic or ironic texts. Most studies of irony and parody assume that the reader simply either knows or doesn’t know what’s going on. Wabbit Literacy is an in-between kind of knowledge, in which the learner knows things backwards, interprets parodies partially, and learns about the world by falling through textual wabbit holes. The concept of Wabbit Literacy helps us understand parody and irony in general as well as the ways in which we become members of “discursive communities”—that is, the way we learn to become competent in particular socially constructed discourses. Wabbit Literacy plays a role in constructing,

---

<sup>1</sup> Since this dissertation draws its examples from a wide range of textual, visual, and electronic media, I will use the terms “reader,” “viewer,” “listener,” “audience,” and “interpreter” somewhat interchangeably throughout. When discussing particular genres or works, I will use the appropriate term—“viewer” for TV, for instance—but when discussing the act of interpretation generally, I will tend to use “reader” (regardless of medium), “interpreter,” or “audience.”

reflecting, and maintaining the social order, but also has the potential to encourage learners to approach cultural artifacts in a spirit of play and *jouissance*.

### **Too Many *Eirons* in the Fire: What Happens when Parody “Fails”**

The concept of Wabbit Literacy offers a valuable contribution to the study of rhetoric because it offers a new perspective from which to consider the situatedness of interactions between readers, writers, and text(s). In particular, Wabbit Literacy examines what we might call the “temporal contexts” of discourse—that is, the relation between a particular reader’s earliest encounters with a text, or a set of texts, the reader’s later encounters with the text(s), and the changes in the reader’s interpretations of the text(s) over time. Wabbit Literacy begins with a moment that most conventional discussions of parody and irony might describe as a reader’s “failure” to “get” an irony or parody. A reader who doesn’t recognize that text<sub>2</sub> is a parody of text<sub>1</sub> would usually be labeled “naïve,” “ignorant,” “uninformed,” or “unaware” by traditional discussions of parody. While it is true that, in the conventional sense, the reader has indeed “missed” a parodic/ironic meaning, the reader’s failure to correctly interpret irony or parody is not necessarily final, not always the terminus of the discursive event. In many cases the reader comes away with a kernel of knowledge, an impression, or an attitude that, while falling short of full apprehension of the parody, nevertheless results in learning. For example, many children’s first exposure to classical music comes from its use,

sometimes directly parodic, sometimes simply as “mood music,” in animated cartoons.<sup>2</sup>

Children may not recognize what Bakhtin has termed the “cheerfully irreverent quotation marks” in which the animators have often placed the music (*Dialogic Imagination* 55), but they are quite likely to absorb and remember the music. Even though the children have not yet become familiar, in that first encounter, with the cultural knowledge that would enable them to recognize a parodic use of the music, their initial “failure” at interpretation may only be temporary. This phenomenon is not, of course, limited to childhood; we constantly encounter parodic knowledge in the “wrong” dialogic order, as this dissertation will demonstrate.

### **Reading Over Time: Wabbit Literacy and Interpretive Contexts**

Like most intertextual theory, Wabbit Literacy encourages us to recognize that basic concepts in rhetoric and composition are far more complex and dynamic than we often realize. Consider the idea of authorial “purpose.” A parodist’s purpose may simply be to poke fun at an established text or genre, but the parody may actually have the effect of *educating* a segment of the audience about the “target” text or genre, regardless of whether the parodist had any didactic purpose in mind. The concept of “audience” becomes similarly complicated in this example. We would assume that a parodist “normally” writes largely for an audience that recognizes the work’s parodic allusions,

---

<sup>2</sup> This dissertation will focus on instances of learning from specifically *parodic* uses of texts, although one can certainly learn from non-parodic, allusive uses of texts as well. For instance, with the exception of one or two segments, Disney’s *Fantasia* does not parody classical music so much as it illustrates or prettifies the music, while a cartoon like Chuck Jones’s “Rabbit of Seville” (1950) is a distinctly parodic take on the operatic form.

but we must also recognize that a portion of the audience will not “get” the parody *as* a parody, although, again, they may well make a different kind of sense of the parody. To be sure, the parodist may be aware that the “uninitiated” might also encounter the parody. Parodists have widely differing assumptions about their audiences’ familiarity with parodic “targets.” Some barge right into the parody with little or no overt warning that a parody is happening, assuming that the reader will share enough familiarity with the parodied text(s) to be able to get the references. Others carefully lay their parodic groundwork, particularly when working with texts or genres that might be outside the reader’s textual experience. Many modern authors of metafiction *do not* simply take for granted that the “reader and narrator share a set of values and an educational background” and therefore take a didactic stance toward the texts they parody, instructing the reader about the object of parody even while parodying it (Hutcheon, Theory of Parody 90-91). Consider, for example, Umberto Eco’s The Name of the Rose, a multi-layered pastiche of detective novel, medieval theological dispute, and general bibliophilia. While he does not provide translations of the copious Latin in the novel, Eco is merciful to the modern reader, having the novel’s central characters (a novice monk and a Dominican friar/detective/sage) explain through dialogue some of the more abstruse matters of Church history. So while Eco parodies ecclesiastical debates as part of his long, often-ironic meditation on reading, he also provides a few intertextual guideposts to the reader. In this case, the parodist hedges his bets, building into the text at least some of the contextual information that the reader will need to make sense of the parody.

Since parodies almost inevitably make some form of ironic, evaluative comment on the object of parody, Wabbit Literacy is inextricably implicated in social hierarchy and ideological constructs as well. The Wabbit-Literate learner is introduced not only to the “target” text itself, but is also exposed to a set of attitudes and assumptions about the value of the parodied text and the social contexts in which that text is read and discussed. The paradox of parody is that it simultaneously makes fun of and reinforces cultural codes. Even as parody pokes fun, it also valorizes its targets as being important enough to bother making fun of, communicating, as Linda Hutcheon puts it, a “combination of respectful homage and ironically thumbed nose” (Theory of Parody 33). Learning from parody, like any other learning, is inevitably value-laden; Wabbit literacy could be said to be a “double-voiced” way of learning.

The very contents of Wabbit-Literate learning are shaped by social forces. In the case of parodies of traditional “high culture” texts, learners with greater access to education (that is, of privileged social class) are far more likely eventually to encounter the “original” text, or non-parodic references to it, than learners with less educational opportunity or leisure time. Other factors that may decide whether a learner will encounter the “original” or non-parodic versions may include gender, ethnicity, and, of course, mere happenstance. For instance, by sheer coincidence, I fairly often come across a serious reference to a song or film that I have recently seen parodied.<sup>3</sup> Under the right

---

<sup>3</sup> The reader’s rhetorical stance also contributes to the recognition of parodies and their referents. In the course of writing this dissertation, the fact that I’ve been *looking* at (and for) parodies makes me more aware of parodies, and hence more likely to notice them. It’s a bit like buying a Chevy Impala and noticing how many Chevy Impalas are on the road, or being pregnant and wondering why there suddenly seems to be a baby boom (thanks to Gail Shuck for that analogy).

set of circumstances, then, early encounters with parodic texts can predispose an interpreter, when (or if) he encounters the “original,” to read it through the memory of a long-ago parody.

### **Some Definitions**

In keeping with the dialogic spirit of irony and parody, I have concocted the term “Wabbit Literacy” as a portmanteau phrase combining E.D. Hirsch’s “Cultural Literacy” with the ever-present Wabbit, Bugs Bunny. If cultural literacy is, in Hirsch’s plan for educational reform, the body of formalized knowledge we must be taught to make sense of culture, then Wabbit Literacy is the messy mishmash of incidental knowledge that we acquire through alternative arenas of learning, learning through parodic venues that weren’t supposed to be “educational.”

“Parody” and “irony” can be somewhat difficult terms to pin down. Whole treatises have been devoted to the various shadings and nuances in different theorists’ treatments of them (Muecke 1970/1982, Rose 1979, Booth 1974). For this dissertation, I am drawn to Linda Hutcheon’s elegantly simple definition of parody because it acknowledges the multiple perspectives and ambivalent attitudes at work in the genre:

Parody, [. . .] in its ironic “trans-contextualization” and inversion, is repetition with difference. A critical difference is implied between the backgrounded text being parodied and the new incorporating work, a distance usually signaled by irony. But this irony can be playful as well as belittling; it can be critically constructive as well

as destructive. (Theory of Parody 32)

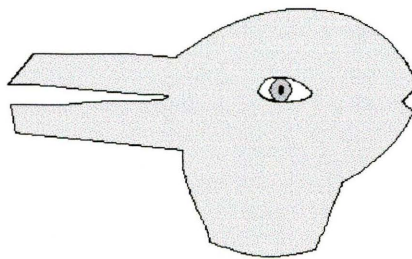
Hutcheon notes that the Greek prefix *para-* can mean both “against” and “with.” A parodic text both echoes and sets itself apart from its “target,” encouraging the reader to constantly shift viewpoint from figure to ground and back, to see multiple textual worlds at once. In rhetorical terms, this view of parody emphasizes the complex and problematic relations between interpreter and text, particularly as the reader bounces dialogically between the parodic text and the “target” text. This double-consciousness is particularly noticeable in Wabbit Literacy, where the parodied features of the target text are likely to be uppermost in the interpreter’s mind.

“Irony” is a multivalent term, its definitions ranging from the relatively “stable” substitution of one meaning for another posited by Wayne Booth in his Rhetoric of Irony to an all-encompassing nihilism decried by one critic as “the warped, bottomlessly skeptical sensibility that many younger Americans have adopted in order simply to survive their culture” (Katz 35). It is both and more, of course. Irony can range from a “simple” substitution of meanings to an ironic worldview. Linda Hutcheon, again, offers what strikes me as the most inclusive definition of irony, describing it above all as a communicative *process* and proposing that irony has “three major semantic characteristics: it is **relational**, **inclusive** and **differential** (Irony’s Edge 58, emphases in original). Irony is *relational* in that “it operates not only between meanings (said, unsaid) but between people (ironists, interpreters, targets). [. . . Irony meaning is] the result of the bringing—even the rubbing—together of the said and the unsaid, each of which takes on meaning only in relation to the other” (Irony’s Edge 58-59). Key to this relational

aspect of irony is the active connection-making of the interpreter; texts and meanings are relational to each other only insofar as there is someone to *make* those relations.

Hutcheon illustrates the *inclusive* nature of ironic meaning by an ingenious reworking of an analogy that has previously been used to argue for more restrictive notions of irony:

the famous optical illusion of the duck and rabbit (see figure 1).



**Figure 1: Wabbit Or Duck?**

Depending on your perspective, the figure can be interpreted as a duck *or* a rabbit; we cannot perceive both the duck *and* the rabbit at the same time. Hutcheon says, however, that

When it comes to the ducks and rabbits of ironic meaning, our minds almost can [perceive both readings at once]. In interpreting irony, we can and do oscillate very rapidly between the said and unsaid. [...] It is not the two “poles” themselves that are important; it is the idea of a kind of rapid perceptual or hermeneutic *movement between* them that makes this image a possibly suggestive and productive one for thinking about irony.

(Irony's Edge 60)

Irony is less a matter of choosing one single, fixed meaning or another (*either or*), but rather of recognizing that multiple meanings play off one another (*both and*). Finally, ironic meanings are *differential*; even as their inclusive function combines, such inclusion is nonetheless dependent upon differentiation: “Ironic meaning forms when two or more different concepts are brought together: ducks and rabbits. The unsaid is other than, different from, the said” (*Irony’s Edge* 64).

This notion of “ironic meaning as something in flux, and not fixed” (*Irony’s Edge* 60) is very important in considering Wabbit Literacy as well. The Wabbit-Literate reader experiences the “original” through the lens of a remembered parody, her perceptions constantly oscillating between the two, not necessarily fixed on either. Both parody and irony involve the creation of multiple meanings from a single text. In the case of irony, a single phrase can be taken more than one way. For instance, we can take *Apocalypse Now*’s Colonel Kilgore at his word when he exults, “I love the smell of napalm in the morning. It smells like...like victory.” The character truly believes his infamous line. When considering the line from the point of view of the film’s protagonist, Major Willard, we recognize unsubtle ironic shading: “Anyone desensitized enough to war that he would love the smell of napalm is clearly deranged.” Irony’s double-voicedness allows both meanings to co-exist as we experience the film. Parody likewise deals with double signification, repeating and commenting upon various elements of its “target” text. To continue using *Apocalypse Now* as an example, I would argue that director Francis Ford Coppola is not merely adapting or quoting from Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* by transporting the plot to Vietnam. *Apocalypse Now* parodies both Conrad and the U.S.

involvement in Vietnam through this transformation, encouraging us to look at Vietnam as a colonialist nightmare *and* to revisit Conrad's novel in the light of the later history of colonial adventurism. I recognize a certain taxonomic laxity in discussing "irony" and "parody" as if they were almost interchangeable. My rationale for this partial conflation of parody and irony is grounded in their both being, in Bakhtin's term, "double-voiced." This similarity between the trope (irony) and the genre (parody) is important to my discussion of Wabbit Literacy, which is concerned with how readers make sense of rediscovered or "missed" ironies and parodies, in which interpreters achieve communicative "completion" only in a roundabout manner, becoming able to read particular parodies and ironies only at some point after their initial encounters with them. The cognitive and rhetorical workings of both parody and irony thus have enough in common that I am comfortable discussing them with a fair degree of overlap, drawing distinctions between the two when necessary.

Wabbit Literacy adds to Hutcheon's model in that it entails a process of *learning* to differentiate. A Wabbit-Literate learner first encounters the parodic text as a largely undifferentiated whole which he may only partly (if at all) recognize as parodic; only later, if the learner encounters enough subsequent discourse related to the parody and its "target," do the differences become more recognizable. In such a first encounter, the reader may well sense that *something* is odd about the text. As I discuss later in this chapter, parodic texts often contains cues that highlight parodic content, even though they may not spell out *what* is being parodied. To adapt Hutcheon's rabbit/duck metaphor, a Wabbit-Literate learner, lacking a perceptual framework even to recognize

the figure as an optical illusion, might first see only one or the other and stick with it, or possibly see some sort of bizarre shape with an eye in the center, a “wabbitduck.” With further experience in making sense of two-dimensional representations, especially pictures of rabbits and ducks, the interpreter would become able to discern and oscillate happily between the two animals in the figure.

The Bakhtinian concept of “dialogism” will also be central to my analysis, since parody is one of the most obvious examples of how authors reply to one text with another, and of how readers interpret texts in response to their readings of other texts. Dialogism necessitates that we reject the assumption that texts have stable meanings; instead, dialogism encourages us to recognize how we read texts *through* one another. To Wabbit-Literate readers the “original” text is already familiar through previous encounter(s) with the parody. Yet encountering the “original” also can serve to fill in information that readers didn’t “get” the first time they saw the parody, thus resolving the puzzles or incongruities from the original: “Aha! So THAT’S where that came from.” In a sense, Wabbit Literacy involves “getting the joke” long after the reader has first encountered the joke in a parodic text—reminding or signaling to the reader that the parodic text *was* joking, and causing the reader to see the parodied text in the light of that remembered / recovered joke. Considering such idiosyncratic relationships between author, audience, and text adds a dimension of locational and temporal specificity to dialogic models of rhetoric and communication. The literature on parody and irony is surprisingly lacking in discussions of the possibility of a reader’s interpretations changing *over time*, and in response to multiple encounters with texts. Even given the growing

importance of reader-response and intertextual criticism, most discussions of the interpretation of irony assume that you either “get” it at the moment you first encounter it, or you fail altogether to get it.

### **I Stand Here Irony-ing: Modernist and Postmodernist Views**

To set up my discussion of Wabbit Literacy, I will briefly review the theories of Wayne Booth and Linda Hutcheon, theorists who best represent, respectively, modernist (particularly New Critical) and postmodern thinking on irony. Modernist approaches to irony make the apparently commonsense assumption that its success depends upon the reader’s ability to recognize both the text’s ironic intent, and to relate what is said to what is unsaid. In A Rhetoric of Irony, Wayne Booth makes a fairly traditional case for locating irony within the text itself (Booth discusses irony alone, not parody). He charts out a hypothetical map of the cognitive processes necessary to make sense of what he calls “stable irony,” that is, an irony that most experienced readers would agree is intended to be seen as a deliberately ironic movement on the author’s part. Booth hypothesizes a four-step operation that begins when a reader is forced to reject the literal surface meaning of a statement due to some “incongruity among words or between words and something else [the reader] knows” (10). The reader then hypothesizes alternative meanings, makes a decision about the author’s likely beliefs, and finally reconstructs the author’s “real” meaning—that is, decides which possible interpretation is most congruent with the reader’s perceived sense of the author’s beliefs (Booth 10-13). If the reader is unable to catch hints of irony within the text, or is unable to project a satisfactory

resolution of the incongruities in the ironic text, the process fails. While Booth locates irony primarily within the text itself, he also acknowledges that the act of understanding irony “completes a more astonishing communal achievement than most accounts have recognized. Its complexities are, after all, shared; the whole thing cannot work at all unless both parties to the exchange have confidence that they are moving together in identical patterns” (13). Even Booth’s largely text-based model of irony grants that a great deal of the operation depends on a mediated interaction between author, text, and reader. The critical difference between Booth’s model and more postmodern views of irony is that Booth locates irony primarily within the text itself. The reader’s “job” is to successfully puzzle out the author’s ironic intent as transmitted through the text, using textual clues that alert us to ironic intent:

- 1) Straightforward warnings in the author’s own voice;
- 2) Known error proclaimed;
- 3) Conflicts of facts within the work;
- 4) Clashes of style; and
- 5) Conflicts of belief. (Booth 53-76)

Booth is careful to qualify these clues as markers of “stable irony,” the relatively easy-to-recognize meaning that hides behind a stated meaning, such as Marc Antony’s “Brutus is an honorable man” speech in Julius Caesar, the total force of which can lead to no other conclusion than that Marc Antony considers Brutus utterly without honor (42).

While we must acknowledge the logic and theoretical value of modernist models of irony, they do not adequately explain the complex ways in which irony works (or

sometimes *doesn't quite work*) in discourse. The complex, dynamic relations among text, context, speaker, and interpreter challenge theories of irony that portray the reader's task as a simple matter of decoding or reconstructing the ironist's intended meaning, which is cleverly "hidden" in the utterance. Postmodern views of irony argue that it is the *interpreter* who finally attributes ironic meaning to an utterance, regardless of "authorial intent." Indeed, Linda Hutcheon wonders "who really should be designated as the 'ironist'" and suggests that "make" might be a more appropriate verb than "get" to characterize what an interpreter does with an irony (Irony's Edge 11). While we should certainly not discount the ironist's intentions, postmodern theory seeks to credit the role of the text's interpreter as well as the author. The attribution of irony to a text is "the act of a conscious agent" and not something that simply exists of itself within the text (Hutcheon, Irony's Edge 12).

### **It Takes a Village to Make an Irony**

These theorists' metaphorical representations of how irony works suggest starkly divergent views of the roles of ironist and interpreter. Booth sees the successful interpreter making a "leap or climb" to join the ironist at a "higher and firmer location" of meaning (36-37). This ironic viewpoint "above" the surface meaning of the ironic utterance, and above "unsound readers," is a sort of Empyrean realm from which the author and knowing readers can look down in jolly condescension upon the attitudes being ironized and the fools who aren't in on the joke. Hutcheon, on the other hand, consciously resisting the elitist implications of Booth's metaphor, places complex

networks of social relations squarely at the center of the ironic transaction: “It is not so much that irony *creates* communities or in-groups; instead, I want to argue that irony happens because what could be called “discursive communities” already exist and provide the context for both the deployment and attribution of irony” (*Irony’s Edge* 18). To be sure, Booth sees shared irony more as a way of building “amiable communities” than of excluding “naive victims” (28). Nonetheless, there is a distinct emphasis in Booth on the interpreter’s *joining with* the author, thereby placing the reader in a subordinate position to the author.

Beyond presenting an appealingly egalitarian model of relations between interpreter and ironist, situating irony within “discursive communities” offers a more comprehensive view of the role of shared knowledge in the making of meaning. A “discursive community” is any specific group of people able to make sense of a particular bit of discourse, from two friends sharing an inside joke to a global television audience (or perhaps more accurately, “market”) watching the Super Bowl. “Discursive community” is different in a significant way from the similar but more generalized concepts of “speech community” or “discourse community.” Where the latter two terms tend to imagine relatively homogeneous groups of language users that are rather stable over time, the concept of “discursive communities”

acknowledges those strangely enabling constraints of discursive contexts and foregrounds the particularities not only of space and time but of class, gender, ethnicity, sexual choice—not to mention nationality, religion, age, profession,

and all the other micropolitical groupings in which we place ourselves or are placed by our society. (Hutcheon, Irony's Edge 92)

A discursive community, then, is a relational, almost evanescent grouping that can be said to exist in relation to a single chunk of discourse—an utterance or a more extended dialogue. A discursive community is the group of people that is, through whatever combination of experiences with language, able to make sense of a particular bit of discourse (in this case, ironic discourse). A “discursive community” shares with the more widely-used term “discourse community” a recognition that “we all belong to many overlapping (and sometimes even conflicting) communities and collectives. [. . .] This overlapping is the condition that makes irony possible, even though the sharing will inevitably always be partial, incomplete, fragmentary; nevertheless, something does manage to get shared—enough, that is, to make irony happen” (Irony's Edge 92). Instead of simply depending upon an individual reader's mastery of a particular topic, then, irony is connected with complex networks of power, meaning, and understanding. When I speak of a Wabbit Literate interpreter “getting” a parody long after originally encountering a parodic text, it is not so much that the interpreter has simply “filled in the blanks” of her individual knowledge-base as that she has negotiated a series of socially mediated maneuvers that change her relationship to the parodic text that she had earlier encountered.

This emphasis on the discursive community as a center of irony-making should not suggest, as all too many invocations of “community” do, that irony is all warm and fuzzy. Indeed, as Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the “Contact Zone” suggests,

communities are places where ideologies, identities, and social relations are contested, often quite heatedly. The social grounding of irony—and by extension, parody—renders it just as likely as any other form of discourse to be caught up in issues of power and hierarchy. Irony can either reinforce or subvert dominant discourses. The powerful can use the trope of irony to belittle opponents of a colossal injustice just as easily as those opponents can deploy irony to call attention to the colossal injustice. Indeed, considering that the perpetrators of colossal injustices tend also to have more immediate access to or direct control over mass communications media, they may be *more* able than their opponents to use derisive irony. The optimist in me would like to believe that “good-guy” satirists more effectively deploy irony in the service of justice, but blunt sarcasm used by the “bad guys” can be equally persuasive. There’s Joseph Heller, and then there’s Rush Limbaugh. Like any trope, irony is neither inherently a tool of liberation or of oppression; its effects depend upon who is using it, how it is used, and in what discursive context.

A speaker’s range of discursive experiences shapes the spectrum of discourses in which he can meaningfully participate. Having participated in or been exposed to discursive situations involving irony prepares a speaker to recognize similar ironies or parodies, though such experience doesn’t guarantee any sort of general “ironic competence.” The MTV fan who revels in the ironies of Beavis and Butt-Head may not read any irony in, say, Swift’s “A Modest Proposal,” just as a fan of Swift might find nothing particularly funny about Beavis and Butt-Head. Even so, the more habitually one slips in and out of particular discursive environments, the more likely one is to be accustomed with multiple ways of reading texts (a point I will develop further in Chapter

4). Interpreting irony is much more than a simple matter of general “communicative competence.” Various theorists have named an array of “interpreter competences,” such as literary, paralinguistic, metalinguistic, rhetorical, ideological, and social competence necessary to make sense of irony, as well as “a sort of general cultural competence to cover the presuppositions, background information, assumptions, beliefs, knowledge and values that are shared by ironist and interpreter” (Hutcheon, Irony’s Edge 95). The problem with such analyses is that they assume fairly stable bodies of knowledge that an individual knower either has or does not have access to. If all these elements actually co-exist for the ironist and the interpreter, however, it might be more accurate to say that irony “come[s] into being because the communal values and beliefs already exist. It might, therefore, be less a matter of interpreter ‘competence’ than of shared assumptions on many different levels” (Irony’s Edge 95). If irony depends less upon individual competence than upon a broad palette of social knowledges, then the discursive power that accrues to particular ironies is potentially available to anyone who is able to move across the borders of the relevant discursive communities. Such border-crossing, as Pratt’s concept of the “contact zone” suggests, is not necessarily easy or pleasant, but it provides a more fluid model of discourse (including ironic discourse) than the rather simplistic “either-you-know-it-or-you-don’t” model often proposed to explain irony. This emphasis on socially-constructed knowledge and assumptions as the enabling force of irony will be critical to my discussions of humor and the enthymeme in Chapter 2, and of parody and “cultural literacy” in Chapter 3.

Of particular interest for this dissertation is the process by which one becomes a member of the various discursive communities that make irony possible. I argue that Wabbit Literacy allows for cases of missed, faultily-interpreted, or partially-interpreted ironies and parodies to become the foundation for entry into discursive communities that can interpret or reinterpret irony. Wabbit Literacy, taking into account the changing relation over time of the interpreter to the parodic text and its target, provides the interpreter with an interpretive framework for such “failed” ironies/parodies, a starting-point for making (that is, constructing) sense of the partly-understood text. As the interpreter’s relationship to the text changes, so too does the interpreter’s relationship to the discursive communities that interact with that text. The interpreter who encounters a joke that she doesn’t “get” might nonetheless come away from the dialogue with a fragment of information that she may later touch upon when making meaning of another bit of discourse. Where conventional concepts of parody might see a “missed” parody as a failure to understand, I see the potential for unguided learning about a wide array of information concerning genres, specific texts, rhetorical tropes, and the various other fragments of culture that enable the learner to communicate—or to begin to communicate—in various discursive communities.

### **Carnavalesque Cruises: Dialogism and Parody**

Most conventional models of parody assume a stable original text, or body of knowledge, that successful readers of parody “access” in essentially similar ways. These models suggest a fairly uncomplicated process in which the interpreter recognizes certain

stylistic or textual features of the “original,” then superimposes that awareness on the parodic text. The pieces of the puzzle click into place, the parody works, and the reader chuckles, or at least recognizes that a parody has “happened.” Such discussions of parody rely upon one variant or another on the “banking” model of learning critiqued by Paolo Friere, in which it is supposed that the learner is filled up with bits of knowledge which s/he then draws on in an assortment of new situations. In contrast, Mikhail Bakhtin and his postmodern successors have served up a dialogic model of parody, in which the reader’s act of reading brings the target text and the parodic text (indeed, *all* discourse) into perpetual dialogue with each other. No text can stand alone or stable; all are read through the reader’s multiple discursive frames. Even the act of recognizing a work *as a parody* involves a kind of intertextual dialogue: “When we call something a parody, we posit some encoding intent to cast a critical and differentiating eye on the artistic past, an intent that we, as readers, then *infer* from the text’s (covert or overt) inscription of it” (Hutcheon, Theory of Parody 84).

Where this moment of *kairos*, this “Aha!,” is usually thought of as a moment of discovery, in the case of Wabbit Literacy it is also a moment of recovery as well. The reader simultaneously apprehends a new text, comprehends a joke which he may have not gotten (or have only partially gotten) years ago, and appraises both the “original” and the parody in a contrastive, dialogic light, reading the “original” through the parody’s remembered, carnivalizing echoes. Wabbit Literacy’s “Aha!” may be accompanied by ambivalent affective responses. On the one hand, there may be delight at figuring out “where that came from,” but there may also be a moment of disorientation akin to

leaving a dark theater after a matinee: “I can’t believe I thought that Raphael, Donatello, Leonardo, and Michaelangelo were only Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.”<sup>4</sup>

Even the “normal” process of understanding and enjoying parody is a dialogic process. When we read a parody of an already-familiar “target” text, we recognize similarities between the parodic text and its “target”. Our consciousness constantly oscillates between the two. We check the features of the parody against our memory of the “target” to see how well the pieces fit. Do the structural features (plot, character names and features, style, and so on) match up at least roughly? Does the parody jibe with our perception of the “spirit” of the original? Do the novel elements in the parody make sense, and what kinds of sense do they make? We see, then, that even conventional notions of parody allow for significant variations of degree in the audience’s recognition and pleasure in reading a parody. Presumably, the better we know a “target” text, the more pleasure we will derive from a well-executed parody—or at the very least, the more jokes we will get. Parody’s inherent self-referentiality has made parodic texts very attractive as a subject of study by postmodern theorists, since parody calls attention to its own constructedness, and to the generic features that it plays upon. Further, such self-referentiality is quite often just plain fun—for the reader, there is pleasure to be had in being in on the dialogic game.

---

<sup>4</sup> This really happened: In about fifth grade, when I had learned to be a bit skeptical of kiddie shows, a teacher mentioned something about a Tasmanian devil, and I confidently put my hand up and declared that there was no such thing, that it was merely a cartoon character. I also recall being surprised, when I first saw a photo of a real roadrunner, how wrong it looked compared to Chuck Jones’s version.

Wabbit Literacy involves a very particular, and generally overlooked, form of intertextual interaction between reader, text, and cultural context. Theories of intertextuality posit that there can be no “pure” reading of any text: all texts are read dialogically through the reader’s experience of the world of discourse. Beyond this “normal” dialogism, the Wabbit-Literate reader inevitably encounters the “original” in a different light because her earlier experience of the text was articulated in specifically *parodic* terms. The Wabbit-Literate reader thus already “knows” (or at least “knows about”) the target text, and the experience of reading the “original” may be a sort of carnivalesque, through-the-looking-glass version of how parody itself is generally assumed to operate. In the “original” text, read after the parodic one, the Wabbit-Literate reader encounters familiar scenes, characters, lines, and such, and thinks back to the parodic framework in which s/he first encountered those elements, contrasting the parodic version with the “genuine” version.

Wabbit Literacy therefore offers an approach to intertextuality and reader-response theory that has seldom been explored: While most discussions of intertextuality speak of the ways we read texts “through” each other, they don’t often address the temporal/spatial dimension of parodic intertextual reading—that is, the *order* (in time and rhetorical situation) in which a reader encounters various texts. My notion of Wabbit Literacy puts temporality and contextuality at the dialogic center of the discussion, arguing that encountering a parodic text before encountering the “original” text significantly alters the reader’s experience of that “original” (and thus necessitates those omnipresent scare quotes that I keep putting around “original”!).

### **Play, Pleasure, and Pedagogy**

Looking back to my earliest encounters with parody, in television cartoons like Rocky & Bullwinkle, or later in childhood, reading MAD magazine, I think that I have always been attracted to parody's wild sense of play. In MAD's TV parodies, Snoopy and his doghouse fly into the background of "Star Bleccch," and "Captain Jerk" comes through the transporter with his foot sticking out of his ear, his head literally growing out of his butt. There's a sense that the normal rules of story-telling are subject to being broken just for the sheer fun of it. Our pleasure in parody derives "from the degree of engagement of the reader in the intertextual 'bouncing' (to use E. M. Forster's famous term) between complicity and distance" (Hutcheon, Theory of Parody 32). I would propose that such "intertextual bouncing" is a large part of what makes Wabbit Literacy a potentially powerful form of incidental learning. Under certain circumstances, such parodic, playful learning might even be more memorable than learning in a more formally "instructional" context.

Because parody is usually steeped in irony, and because irony has an evaluative edge to it, Wabbit Literacy involves more than accruing knowledge about discrete items in a cultural lexicon, but can also serve as an introduction to often competing visions of cultural ideologies. While "straight" learning is also accompanied by unspoken (and usually culturally conservative) evaluative agendas, parody places a more direct emphasis on its ironic evaluations, making it difficult to ignore the evaluative edge that accompanies learning through parody. Where the "banking" model of learning stresses

filling the learner up with supposedly neutral facts, Wabbit Literacy involves the interpreter's becoming familiar with reading *across* and *through* both parodic and non-parodic texts.

### **Taking the Dialogic Plunge**

Bakhtin sees all discourse as heteroglossic: "Every concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a point where centrifugal and centripetal forces are brought to bear. The processes of centralization and decentralization, of unification and disunification, intersect in the utterance" (272). Wabbit Literacy starts the learner out at the centrifugal end of the dialogic pendulum, plopping her down in the middle of a discursive territory that may only be partially familiar. The Wabbit-Literate learner, though perhaps a bit disoriented, has a unique perspective, seeing the text in its parodic guise first. Bakhtin, taking a historically literate reader's long view, argues that "there never was a single strictly straightforward genre, no single type of direct discourse . . . that did not have its own parodying and travesty double, its own comic-ironic *contre-partie*" (Dialogic Imagination 53). Further, such parody

rips the word away from its object, disunifies the two, shows that a given generic word—epic or tragic—is one-sided, bounded, incapable of exhausting the object; the process of parodying forces us to experience those sides of the object that are not otherwise included in a given genre or a given style. (Dialogic Imagination 55)

The reader who *starts* with parody, then, gets her first glimpse of "the object" from a

playful, dialogized perspective that is deliberately, artfully “abnormal.”

Bakhtin says that parody places genre, style, and language “in cheerfully irreverent quotation marks” (*Dialogic Imagination* 55). The reader who has not yet encountered the texts being parodied, however, may be unable to “see” those ironic quotation marks, and even if the reader gets a sense that something is being parodically “quoted,” the source is likely to be unclear. Most parodies, after all, do not include a works-cited list. We might expect a range of reactions to such references, depending upon the interpreter’s familiarity with the referents being parodied, and depending upon the interpreter’s familiarity with the slippery ways of irony: 1) the viewer might identify the ideas being played with, and thereby “get” the gag; 2) the viewer might be so wholly unaware of the referents and the techniques used to frame them as a joke that the gag escapes the viewer altogether; or 3) the viewer might recognize that a gag took place, but because the viewer is not yet privy to the cultural knowledge that the gag depends upon, the viewer is unable to “get” the joke.

To examine how an interpreter might make use of such tentative approaches to reading a parodic text, we might consider Friz Freling’s “Slick Hare” (1947), which parodies several Hollywood films of its time, but would be difficult for a modern viewer reader who is relatively inexperienced with film history (*not* ignorant or unsophisticated) to make immediate sense of. “Slick Hare” is set in a Hollywood restaurant where Humphrey Bogart demands fried rabbit; Elmer Fudd, the waiter, tells Bugs that Mr. Bogart would like to have him for dinner, and Bugs replies, “If he wants me, all he has to do is whistle” (Beck and Friedwald 179). Another throwaway gag in the cartoon has Ray

Milland buying a drink by trading in his typewriter as he had in The Lost Weekend; the bartender gives him back three tiny typewriters in change. It is highly unlikely that these parodic references would resonate at all with the average child watching this cartoon on cable TV a half-century after it was produced. I would also guess, however, that children (and adults who are unfamiliar with films of the 1940s) don't simply ignore such gags, either. They can't—the bits are clearly set up as jokes, the scene lingering on-screen long enough to cue the viewer that this is intended as funny. Many of Jay Ward's "Bullwinkle" cartoons are similarly prone to underlining their awful puns with elaborate set-ups or exaggerated reactions from characters. The child may very well laugh anyway, even without getting the joke. Sometimes the cartoon action is funny in itself. More likely, the child may laugh because *that is what you do at a cartoon*. The child viewer brings a certain level of generic expectations to the cartoon, and that is sufficient, at the moment, for the gag to work. She may well be unable to resolve the incongruity any farther than recognizing that a joke *of some sort* has taken place, but the gag nonetheless fits the pattern of performances that she has come to expect constitutes cartoon humor. Indeed, as most parents with young children probably notice, toddlers often will happily laugh along when Mommy and Daddy are laughing, regardless of whether the toddler has any idea of what is going on. And when the child retains something from viewing the cartoon, especially if, with never-ending reruns on TV, which Ray Bradbury calls "the *déjà vu* machine," she sees it several times over the course of her childhood—she acquires some little chunk of information, some nugget that may come back to her years later in a film survey or a music-appreciation class. Voilà! Wabbit Literacy.

## **Where Do We Go From Hare: Dissertation Outline and Major Arguments**

This first chapter has introduced and defined Wabbit Literacy as a special kind of learning that depends upon the learner's encountering a parody before having encountered the item being parodied. I argue that Wabbit Literacy helps us understand parody and irony in general as well as the ways in which we become members of discursive communities—that is, the way we learn to become competent in particular socially constructed discourses. Wabbit Literacy plays a role in constructing, reflecting, and maintaining the social order, but may also encourage learners to approach cultural artifacts in a spirit of play.

**Chapter 2, “Parodies Lost, Parodies Regained: The Enthymematic Nature of Wabbit Literacy”** argues that getting a parody is like understanding an enthymeme. The social construction of the enthymeme is a key theoretical underpinning to Wabbit Literacy. Rhetorical enthymemes and jokes both work because members of particular discursive communities are able to make use of socially-constructed common knowledge. I will examine how parody deploys social and textual norms for humorous purposes in particular texts. Wabbit Literacy introduces a reader to the target text, and the discursive community in which that text operates, and primes the learner to think parodically about that target text.

**Chapter 3, “Carnival Knowledge: Communities and Cultural Literacies”** argues that because cultural knowledge is embedded in particular contexts, purposes, and practices, it is a rhetorical construct that is best examined as a series of overlapping interpretive frames through which facts are understood. Because parodic and ironic

frames take deliberately playful views of cultural knowledge, “Wabbit Literacy” is a potentially valuable means of interrogating systems of knowledge. The urge to systematize knowledge is in dialogic tension with the quirky ways individuals experience it, resulting in prescriptivist texts like E.D. Hirsch’s Cultural Literacy. The mere sharing of facts does not, however, guarantee ideological agreement or even common ground for discussion among diverse groups. Close examination of the ideological conflicts between formal and informal means of learning about culture can help us recognize the many intertextual interactions involved in any interpretation of a text. Learning is not merely a matter of accumulating facts, but also of encountering and even struggling with values systems related to the objects of learning.

#### **Chapter 4, “The Ambivalent Wabbit: From Carnival to Theme Park”**

examines the dialogic play among parodic and nonparodic texts, as enacted by professional and amateur parodists, by producers and consumers of mass culture, and by fan communities. I examine the implications of the commodification of irony. When an entertainment conglomerate has scripted out the entertainment experience for the consumer, how much free play, resistant or otherwise, is possible? I argue that tactical, local resistance to scripted amusement is indeed possible, as seen in the ironic/playful counter-texts constructed by consumers of corporate entertainment products. Although the pressure to accept the “official reading” of such media narratives is very powerful, playful transformations of the official script can give viewers/readers a measure of individual agency, constituting a form of “vernacular theory,” that is, a nonacademic

critical approach to commodified entertainment texts that may, in certain circumstances, serve as a form of resistance to commodification.

**Epilogue, “Fudd for Thought: Implications and Extensions”** examines potential extensions of concepts developed in this dissertation, focusing on two main areas: implications for education and possible research that could build on this dissertation.

## CHAPTER 2

### PARODIES LOST, PARODIES REGAINED: THE ENTHYMEMATIC NATURE OF WABBIT LITERACY

This chapter explores the enthymematic “action” of humor generally, specifically examining the odd enthymematic workings of parody and Wabbit Literacy. I will argue that getting a joke is very much like getting a rhetorical enthymeme: Rhetorical enthymemes and jokes both work because members of particular discursive communities are able to make use of socially-constructed common knowledge. In much the same way as the interpreter of a rhetorical enthymeme draws upon shared knowledge and schemata to reach a conclusion laid out by the rhetor, the hearer of a joke also uses “common knowledge” or information supplied in the joke itself to resolve an incongruity. For most enthymemes and most humor, this is an almost-instantaneous cognitive operation. In the case of fully realized Wabbit Literacy, however, the missing chunk of information usually isn’t acquired until after—sometimes long after—the first exposure has passed.

This chapter will proceed from the assumption that enthymemes and humor both rely upon socially constructed knowledge shared by members of any given discursive community, as defined in Chapter 1. Parody deploys social and textual norms for humorous purposes; a “successful” interpretation of a parody is dependent upon the interpreter’s being able, through membership in various discursive communities, to recognize, even if only partially, the textual and social norms that are

at play. Conversely, a reader who is outside of the discursive communities that enable successful interpretation will not fully “get” the parody. It would be short-sighted, however, to dismiss altogether such partial or incomplete readings as “failed” interpretation. It is quite possible that the reader may come away from the reading with some new, albeit murkily understood, knowledge that could contribute to some later, more satisfactory interpretation. Even fragmentary familiarity with discursive norms can be enough to lead to an enthymematic “aha!” of understanding. Wabbit Literacy, consisting of partially-worked-out understandings of cultural knowledge gleaned from parodies, can therefore serve as a means of entry into discursive communities.

### **The Enthymeme and Dialogue**

Like any number of notions, the idea that enthymemes and humor are related first occurred to me when my mind drifted off on a tangent during a class lecture. In a graduate survey of classical rhetoric, the term “enthymeme” came up. I was not unfamiliar with the term, but this class’s discussion of it came at an opportune time for me—the “teachable moment” of education jargon. The enthymeme was briefly defined, as I recall, as an argument that is implicitly understood rather than developed through syllogistic logic. The important thing about the enthymeme, the professor stressed, was its immediacy: the audience “gets” the enthymematic claim by making instantaneous connections between the rhetor’s claims and the audience’s knowledge, organizing often tacit and ill-defined views into an argument. I had been reading quite a bit of humor theory at the time, and I made my own intertextual leap: this description of the enthymeme sounded very much

like the “incongruity-resolution” theory of humor discussed by Jerry Suls (detailed below in the section “What’s Up, Doxa?”). That initial intuitive link metamorphosed into a paper for another class, and eventually became the focus of this chapter. Since it so directly engages with socially constructed concepts about the world and about language, the enthymeme is a useful vehicle for theoretical explorations of how people become members of discursive communities, through both formal education and the informal learning that is the basis of Wabbit literacy.

To lay the groundwork for discussing humor’s enthymematic dynamics, I will first review some major discussions of the enthymeme, focusing in particular on the social aspects of enthymematic reasoning. Many familiar discussions of the enthymeme have treated it as a truncated version of the logical syllogism; i.e., an argument with one or more of its major premises implied rather than stated (Raymond 141, Gage 223). This approach suggests that syllogistic knowledge and enthymematic knowledge are simply two versions of the same logical process, the enthymeme being perhaps more efficient in some circumstances. However, as Aristotle points out, the enthymeme is a means of examining “what is in the main contingent” (Rhetoric I, 1357a); it involves approximations and probabilities, not absolute certainties. The enthymeme works on the assumption that speaker and hearer share a base of knowledge: if any of the propositions that go into an enthymeme “is a familiar fact, there is no need even to mention it; the hearer adds it himself” (I, 1357a). The syllogism deals with “knowledge of the necessary or universal, *episteme*,” and therefore belongs to “the realm of the theoretical and the scientific” (Lunsford and Ede 47). The enthymeme, on the other hand, deals with *doxa*—

the way of knowing contingent reality (that is, the world around us that is both characterized and limited by change)” (Lunsford and Ede 47). The syllogism is suited to the needs of formal, logical reasoning; the enthymeme is suited to rhetorical reasoning.

Aristotle’s enthymeme, according to James Raymond, solves “two ancient problems: how to reason logically with an audience that is indisposed to meticulous analysis, and how to reason logically when indisputable major premises are likely to be unavailable” (144). In essence, enthymemes can be considered “assumptions used in public discourse,” and these assumptions “may be left unstated” and “may be accepted by both speaker and audience without being proven” (Raymond 144). This unstated, communally-shared character of the enthymeme has led many modern rhetoricians to investigate the enthymeme’s dialogic and intertextual implications. If the enthymeme depends upon the audience’s shared ways of thinking about the world, it stands to reason that, even within Aristotle’s largely monologic rhetoric, the audience’s role is at least partially dialogic, relying on “common cultural beliefs (*endoxa*) that the rhetor has reason to believe the audience believes to be true” (Walzer 4).<sup>1</sup>

The rise of postmodern rhetorical theory and reader-response criticism, which place great emphasis on the role of the audience in the construction of meaning, has driven renewed interest in the enthymeme. Where the enthymeme had primarily been discussed as a tool of logical argumentation (and perhaps a flawed tool, at that), it is now

---

<sup>1</sup> Walzer, however, is unconvinced by Ede and Lunsford’s argument that Aristotle’s rhetoric *as a whole* is significantly dialogic. However dialogic the enthymeme may be, Aristotle is not the egalitarian that dialogic rhetoricians want to embrace (Walzer 8-9). If enthymemes work dialogically in Aristotle’s conception, it is only to the end of manipulating an essentially passive audience. Happily, it is not within the purview of this investigation to settle that argument.

examined as a primary locus for the *audience*'s making meaning out of discourse. Lloyd Bitzer argues that rhetorical enthymemes are distinctly social in nature: "The speaker draws the premises for his proofs from propositions which members of his audience would supply if he were to proceed by question and answer" (408). Further, Bitzer notes that while this process leads Aristotle's speaker and audience to "jointly produce" enthymemes, their dialogic potential is largely limited to serving the speaker's, not the audience's ends: "Owing to the skill of the speaker, *the audience itself helps construct the proofs by which it is persuaded*" (408, emphasis in original). The audience's intertextual participation is limited, in this view, to its own complicity in the speaker's argument. Gregory Clark sees the enthymeme as more truly dialogic, and the audience as more active in the exchange, since "the audience retains the power to accept or reject its assertion" (28). Clark continues: "Enthymemes embody the collaborative interaction of rhetor and audience itself, an interaction that is provisionally simulated when the enthymeme is initially composed but is then made actual when that enthymeme is presented to the audience for their judgment" (28). Bitzer sees audience and rhetor in an essentially unequal power relationship—the audience actively constructs meaningful connections, but is nudged toward those conclusions by the rhetor's skill. Clark's conception of the audience grants it the power to more actively accept or reject the assumptions that the rhetor presents to them. One of the most fully dialogic concepts of the enthymeme is envisioned by William Grimaldi's argument that the enthymeme "integrates and organizes the *pisteis* of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*," allowing Aristotle to develop "a system of language use whereby individuals unite all their resources—

intellect, will and emotion—in communicating with one another” (Ede and Lunsford 43).

In this dialogic model, the enthymeme is the integrative mechanism that brings speaker and audience together through their shared assumptions and values—the *doxa* constituting our knowledge of contingent reality (Ede and Lunsford 47). The enthymeme relies upon the discursive common ground between speaker and audience, making communication possible.

The enthymeme has most traditionally been thought of as a fixture of oral discourse; its use in writing is generally treated as a problem for the writer, who must carefully gauge the reader’s likely familiarity with the subject matter. From the reader’s perspective, however, enthymematic understanding is complicated by the multiplicity of discourses that can be encountered through written texts. John Scenters-Zapico argues that oral enthymemes are fundamentally similar to text-based enthymematic knowledge, but that “the give and take of discourse becomes more complicated in the world of written texts because they often depend on other texts that a reader must locate to fill in meaning” (71). Oral and literate enthymemes both depend upon “intertextual” knowledge, and “the ‘results’ of oral and literate enthymemes (the filling in of the missing premises) are the same in that meaning comes about” (75). However, the mechanisms by which such “enthymematic closure” results are different. In primarily oral societies, such as the speech contexts discussed by Aristotle’s Rhetoric, enthymematic understanding is immediate and dependent upon a shared body of orally-transmitted knowledge and moral precepts. Since literate societies are likely to include far greater social / ideological heterogeneity, divergence, and conflict among discourse communities, enthymematic

understanding of printed texts cannot depend upon the “tacit set of shared associations and assumptions [that] must exist for an enthymeme to work” in an oral culture (72). Instead, the reader’s (or viewer’s or auditor’s) understanding may require travelling a complex, twisting intertextual and experiential route.

Scenters-Zapico illustrates the development of literate enthymematic understanding through the example of an unnamed graduate student colleague and her evolving understanding(s) of Bartholomae’s “Inventing the University” (79-83). In her initial year of teaching first-year composition, the student read Bartholomae and found herself thinking, “What the hell is this guy talking about? I had no framework to know what he was saying; he made no sense to me” (80). As she continued teaching writing and taking rhetoric and composition courses, she encountered and internalized concepts and facts relevant to her understanding of Bartholomae. Further, she had frequent occasion to discuss, orally and in writing, those ideas with peers, professors, and her students. Some three years later, when she had occasion to re-read “Inventing the University,” the student “said the article [now] appeared ‘brilliant [. . .] and I wondered how I and others don’t understand, even misreading ideas, but later come to understand, not just understand once, but several different times and ways’” (82). Scenters-Zapico notes that it would be simple to label the student’s initial reading as a “failure,” either because “she’s too dense” or because Bartholomae has “failed” to make his writing accessible to readers in an introductory class on teaching composition (80). However, the view that her reading is due to a “flaw” in the writer or reader rests upon an assumption that “the only good knowledge is immediate. To understand the enthymematic nature of discourse, we must take a long-

term perspective on the social construction of discourse practices” (80). The reader’s inability to grasp a concept immediately does not mean that the idea has “died.” Rather, Scenters-Zapico suggests, “the seed just might have been planted, and will begin to grow furiously. Or the seed will lie dormant for months or years, [waiting] until the ‘right’ conditions for its growth to occur” (80-81). Had the student not continued on in the discourse communities of teaching writing and of an academic rhetoric and composition program, Bartholomae might well have remained meaningless to her. Instead, as part of her everyday social participation in these specialized discourse communities, “Bartholomae’s discourse seeped into her realm” (80) and she became able to read “Inventing the University.” Her understanding developed not through any systematic attempt to “learn” Bartholomae, nor through any instructor’s efforts to “teach” Bartholomae to her. Indeed, notes Scenters-Zapico, “Her enthymematic understanding cannot be called ‘methodology’ because it is more idiosyncratic than an *a priori* scheme can describe” (82). Scenters-Zapico’s intertextual model of the enthymeme is particularly valuable not only because it locates enthymematic knowledge in the social realm, but also because it emphasizes nonlinear learning over time, through multiple encounters with texts and with the communities in which oral and textual discourse takes place.

### **“What’s Up, Doxa?” Humor as an Enthymematic Operation**

Humor, like any rhetorical act, involves complex interactions between the speaker/performer/writer and the audience, and depends upon elaborate networks of assumptions and cultural knowledge. I would argue that jokes (and by extension, parodies)

depend upon enthymematic understanding, that they are modes of communication that rely upon contingent information and attitudes that are understood by the audience but not explicitly stated by the joker/parodist. Since Wabbit Literacy involves multiple instances of reversals and inversions, this section will first discuss the enthymematic workings in “straightforward” readings of humor and parody—cases where the audience recognizes that a parody is taking place, and is familiar with the text(s) being parodied—before delving into the even loopier enthymematic operations involved in Wabbit Literacy.

The socially-constructed model of the enthymeme discussed in the preceding section merges nicely with one of the most useful current models of humor. In an influential article on the cognitive processes involved in “processing” humor, Jerry Suls proposes an “incongruity-resolution” approach, beginning with the established notion that humor depends upon the audience’s perception of incongruities between two or more things or concepts. To this, Suls adds the stipulation that, in order to find something funny, the interpreter must be able to

resolve the incongruity either by retrieval of information in the joke or cartoon or from his/her own storehouse of information.... [Humor] results when the incongruity is resolved; that is, the punch line is seen to make sense at some level with the earlier information in the joke. Lacking a resolution, the respondent does not “get” the joke, is puzzled, and sometimes even frustrated. (42)

Clearly, Suls’ description of “resolution” involves an enthymematic way of thinking. The gap between the incongruous elements of the joke or cartoon is bridged by the interpreter’s “filling in” the connections that are left unstated. The interpreter’s ability to

make such connections is grounded in communal norms and assumptions about language and the world—that is, by being a member of the “discursive community” that is able to interpret the joke. To extend this process to parody, resolution involves the reader’s making intertextual links between incongruous elements in the parodic text and the reader’s own dialogically-informed knowledge about the “target(s)” of the parody. Indeed, the presence of such incongruities is often a key signal that a parody is “happening”—they appear as intrusions into the otherwise normal discourse of a narrative. Where an argumentative enthymeme serves as a shortcut to persuasion, in humor and parody, enthymematic understandings lead to getting the joke.

The enthymeme in humor works slightly differently from the enthymeme in argument, of course. The argumentative enthymeme entails reasonable, if not logically syllogistic, linkages of ideas, while the joke’s enthymeme scrambles things up further. As with any enthymeme, significant propositions are unstated; unlike the conventional enthymeme, however, key information is often strategically withheld for the sake of the punch line’s surprise. Consider the following simple joke:

A grasshopper goes into a bar and orders a beer. As the bartender sets the beer down, he says to the grasshopper, “You know, we have a drink named after you.”

The grasshopper says, “Really? You have a drink named Melvin?”

The joke plays off the audience’s presumed awareness that there is a drink called a grasshopper; its incongruity involves replacing the insect’s personal name (Melvin) for his

generalized species name.<sup>2</sup> If the “missing” information were provided prior to the punchline, the joke would be judged ineffective: “A grasshopper named Melvin goes into a bar and...” Indeed, giving away such incongruity-resolving information too soon is probably one of the main flaws attributed to people who “just can’t tell a joke.” The reverse problem—omission of key information—is another cardinal sin in joke performance: “A bug goes into a bar...”

Recognizing humor *as* humor—that is, distinguishing humorous discourse from other kinds of discourse—involves enthymematic, socially-constructed knowledge about what “humor” is and how it works. Rosalind Gabin suggests that humor involves “an inversion of audience expectation and an invitation to the audience to set the inversion straight” (35). Getting any joke involves multiple enthymematic operations, some of which operate below the level of conscious thought: we first have to be able to recognize that a joke is being told, then identify the incongruous elements within a joke statement, identifying the schemata being played with, and finally we must somehow draw “valid” connections between those elements, resolving the incongruity. Getting a joke might be defined, in one sense, as a satisfying enthymematic operation; it involves the setting right

---

<sup>2</sup> This joke may be a distant cousin to jokes involving ethnic stereotypes, of the “Funny, you don’t look Jewish” variety. The bartender sees the grasshopper as a type, not as an individual. The connections are tenuous, however, and probably not worth pursuing here, except to note a certain generic resemblance between the grasshopper joke and this explicitly ethnic joke: A Jewish guy sees a Chinese guy in a bar, goes up to him, and punches him in the face. The Chinese guy says, “What the hell was that for?” “That was for Pearl Harbor!” exclaims the Jew. “That was the Japanese, you idiot—I’m Chinese!” “Chinese, Japanese, it’s all the same to me,” says the Jewish guy. The Chinese guy thinks for a moment then hauls off and hits the Jew over the head with a bottle. “What the hell was that for?” asks the Jew. “The Titanic!” “Are you crazy? Jews didn’t sink the Titanic—it ran into an iceberg!” “Iceberg, Goldberg, it’s all the same to me.”

of a topsy-turvy world, the finding of sense in nonsense. In traditional rhetoric, this is the moment of *kairos*, employing the right words in the right way for the right audience in the right situation.

Beyond the simple intellectual pleasure of solving a mental puzzle, joking is fundamentally a social act—making sense of a joke depends upon the teller and listener sharing some kind of connection. Conversely, if no such connection exists, humor “fails.” Linda Hutcheon argues that “parodic codes, after all, have to be *shared* for parody—as parody—to be comprehended. [. . .] Readers are active co-creators of the parodic text in a more explicit and perhaps more complex way than reader-response critics argue that they are in the reading of all texts” (Theory of Parody 93). Jokes might be seen as confirmation that both teller and hearer share certain enthymematic knowledge and assumptions. For this reason, I am skeptical of the truism that laughter “brings people together.” Rather, it seems more likely that laughter results from people already being “together,” perhaps even if they are linked only very tenuously.

The successful telling and appreciation of a joke affirms that both parties are, at least in some small way, if only for the duration of the joke, members of a community of sorts. Neal Norrick observes that such joking can serve as a means of “testing for a common cultural background and a willingness to joke about it” (“Intertextuality” 121). Such testing, Norrick argues, is aimed not at disparaging those with whom we do not share with community, but at affirming common ground: “We would be more likely to quote *cogito ergo consum* to a colleague familiar with Descartes, in a spirit of sharing, than as a put-down to someone we expected to know no Latin (Conversational Joking

105). Indeed, in his discourse analysis of conversational joke-telling, Norrick notes that tellers of jokes often preface the joke text by “fill[ing] the audience in on any background knowledge they may lack in the interest of ensuring their understanding and enjoyment, and hence the success of the performance” (*Conversational Joking* 107). In Norrick’s example, “Brandon” tells his brother “Ned” a joke about the globe-hopping firefighter Red Adair. Before Brandon launches into the joke, however, the two brothers have this brief exchange:

- Brandon: I’ve got a joke for you. You know who Red *Adair* is? Red *Adair*?  
He’s the guy who goes around and puts out *oil* well fires?
- Ned: Yeah.
- Brandon: Okay. He’s coming back from Indonesia. He’s been over there putting out fires. And he stops off in Las Vegas [...]
- (*Conversational Joking* 107)<sup>3</sup>

Norrick observes that Brandon’s primary consideration before launching into the joke itself is that “Ned possesses crucial background information” about the person whose name will be the object of a pun: “Only when Ned responds positively does Brandon

---

<sup>3</sup> Brandon’s joke, edited/paraphrased for space: Red Adair stops off in Las Vegas on his way back to Houston, and sits down at the bar next to a guy who starts talking about what a *terrific* town Vegas is[...]. “The entertainment here is just spectacular. Two days ago I saw the greatest song-and-dance man ever. Lenny Davis Jr. And this guy was terrific, even at his age. Red Adair looks at the guy and says *Lenny* Davis Junior? You mean *Sammy* Davis Jr.” “Sammy, Lenny, I don’t know. But the guy was great. I tell you the entertainment here is terrific. And *last* night, I saw the *best* country-western singer I’ve seen in my life. This gal sings like an angel. Molly Parton.” And Red Adair looks at the guy. “*Molly* Parton? Everybody knows it’s *Dolly* Parton. How can you call *Dolly* Parton *Molly* Parton?” So they talk a little more and the guy says, “Say, *you* look familiar to me. Who are you?” “I’m Red Adair.” “Oh,” says the guy, “Are you still sleeping around with Ginger Rogers?” (Norrick, *Conversational Joking* 107-08).

signal the beginning of the joke proper with *okay*. Far from testing for this background information, Brandon wants to ensure that Ned is prepared to understand the joke and thus appreciate the performance” (108-09). To ensure the success of the joke performance, Brandon first makes sure that Ned is familiar with a crucial bit of information that will allow Ned to achieve enthymematic closure when he hears the punchline. In essence, Brandon takes a brief moment to make sure that Ned belongs to the discursive community that is able to get the joke through its common knowledge, tenuous and fragmentary though such knowledge may be, of the signifier “Red Adair.” Had Brandon not prefaced the joke with that brief check, the performance may have ended—or been interrupted by—Ned’s asking “wait, who’s Red Adair?” With the immediate feedback available in face-to-face joking, Brandon could have supplied the information, but even the delay that would result from the question could be enough to throw off the joke’s timing—that is, to slow down its socially constructed, enthymematic “aha!”

### **My Discursive Community Can Beat Up Your Discursive Community: Hostility and Enthymemes**

In the previous section, I observed that the notion that “laughter brings people together” is probably less accurate than the obverse: people who are “together” in some way are able to share humor. In this section, I would like to re-examine, along similar lines, an even older truism about humor: the idea that aggression lies at the root of all laughter. Since humor certainly *can* be used to hurt or to oppress, this notion has a certain commonsense cachet. Metaphors about humor are full of violence: we speak of “battles of

wits,” the “butt” of jokes, punch-lines, the “targets” of parody, comedians who can “kill” an audience or “knock ‘em dead”, and so on. There is no denying, either, that humor can be mean-spirited in content, tone, and motive. To reduce *all* humor to a subtle or sublimated form of conflict, however, strikes me as needlessly reductionist, requiring that multiple, divergent forms of humor be contorted to fit a model that explains only some, not all humor. Even so, the many theoretical variations on the idea that humor is fundamentally aggressive are so widespread and influential that they merit a careful critique. The social-enthymematic theory of humor that I am developing explains much more effectively how humor works, even when humor is marked by aggression. Hostility-based humor is thoroughly enthymematic, in that it deploys language to reinforce, and sometime challenge, social norms. It depends upon and plays with socially constructed power relationships and with social conventions regarding politeness and transgression.

Hostility- or aggression-based theories of humor have a well-established pedigree, and continue to hold considerable influence (Feinberg 1978, Quinn 1992, Kolve 1966). From a theoretical perspective, Thomas Hobbes argued that humor results from impulses which are nasty and brutish: “The passion of laughter is nothing else, but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly” (Beattie 591). In Hobbes’s worldview, life is a never-ending battle between the strong and the weak, so it is not surprising that he would see laughter, too, in terms of victory and defeat. Not that Hobbes’s opinion is a relic of the distant past: popular entertainer Mel Brooks expresses a similar view from the

perspective of a comedy practitioner: “Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you walk into an open sewer and die.” One of the problems with the hostility-based theory of humor is illustrated by the problematic claims of one of its current proponents, Charles Gruner, who insists that even laughter provoked by “cute” things that children do is based in aggression. In a presentation at the 1994 International Society for Humor Studies Conference, Gruner argued that when a child dresses up in adult clothes or creates a malapropism, we laugh because the kid has done something stupid and we see that he’s a fool (paraphrased). Gruner is not swayed by the idea that such examples are funny because they are incongruous, or that they are based in a parent’s love for or delight at the child’s surprising inventiveness; instead, he sees only ridicule, perhaps tempered by love, but mostly tinged with disparagement of the child’s foolishness. To adopt the notion of humor as enthymeme I have been using, such disparaging laughter might be said to arise from an enthymematic understanding that the child has broken a social norm, and perhaps from a desire to see norms enforced. For advocates of aggression-based humor, the difference between puns—which supposedly are funny because we get a kick out of the way they transgress the rules of language—and overtly hostile ethnic jokes is but a matter of degree.

I would argue that, aside from the decidedly misanthropic world-view promoted by such theories, they ignore the complex social dynamics at work in the production and interpretation of humor. Even when humor is openly hostile, as in racist, sexist, or homophobic jokes, the appreciation of the humor depends upon a social bond between the teller and interpreter. We can best understand cruel humor by examining the socially constructed assumptions and knowledges shared by the participants. By reframing

discussions of aggressive humor in enthymematic terms—that is, by seeing the perception of aggression and of superiority and inferiority as primarily social phenomena, depending upon the “common knowledge” of what is and isn’t socially appropriate, we can more readily break out of the narrow universalizing about cultural values embodied in the work of theorists from Hobbes to Gruner. “Foolishness” is, after all, a highly context-dependent and ideologically-determined business, not nearly the obvious matter that these theorists postulate. Indeed, Hobbes’s “sudden glory” at “the infirmity of others” sounds very much like an enthymematic “aha!” overlaid with a perception of social or interpersonal relations that the interpreter approves of. The interpreter’s degree of enjoyment of the joke may be a function of the interpreter’s identification with the teller, of the interpreter’s antipathy toward the butt of the joke, or both.

Humor researcher Dolf Zillmann explores the relationships between the interpreter’s socio-political identity (-ies) and appreciation of aggressive humor, arguing that our enjoyment of humor at others’ expense correlates with our “affective disposition toward these persons” (Zillmann 87). That is, we prefer, and laugh more at, humor directed against individuals or groups we dislike, and are correspondingly less likely to find our own misfortunes humorous. Further, our reactions are similarly enhanced or suppressed depending on the agent of the humorous action. If One of Us sticks it to One of Them, that’s likely to be funnier than seeing One of Us stick it to Another of us, or seeing One of Them stick it to Another of Them. We might not find One of Them sticking it to One of Us funny at all. Obviously, an individual’s group affiliation can be strong or weak, highly variable depending upon context, and subject to multiple and sometimes

conflicting influences. For a rather simplistic example, I generally enjoy feminist satire on gender issues, even when it makes fun of men as a group, because I identify more with the feminist political stance than I do with “men” as a group. For instance, one of my favorite satirical essays is Gloria Steinem’s “If Men Could Menstruate,” a hilarious skewering of masculine assumptions of superiority:

What would happen if suddenly, magically, men could menstruate and women could not?

The answer is clear—menstruation would become an enviable, boast-worthy masculine event:

Men would brag about how long and how much.

Young boys would talk about it as the envied beginning of manhood. Gifts, religious ceremonies, family dinners, and stag parties would mark the day. [...]

Sanitary supplies would be federally funded and free. Of course, some men would still pay for the prestige of commercial brands such as Paul Newman Tampons, Muhammad Ali’s Rope-a-Dope Pads, John Wayne Maxi Pads, and Joe Namath Jock Shields—“For Those Light Bachelor Days.” (web page)

When I first read Steinem’s essay in the early 1980’s, I found it a brilliant use of ironic reversal to cast gender bias in a new light—and of course, as a young man who was beginning to think of himself as a feminist, it helped me recognize (because I was ready to *let myself recognize*) the arbitrariness of male-instituted gender assumptions. When I have used the essay in first-year composition courses, some male students react with great hostility to Steinem’s satire, again, on ideological and personal grounds. The essay is not, from their interpretive perspective, a “fair” representation of masculinity, and Steinem isn’t funny; she’s “crazy,” “hates men,” or is a “bitch.” While I don’t approve of their

sexist reactions, I nevertheless share some of the socially-ingrained discomfort that Steinem provokes—that she *crafts* the essay to provoke—in men. As a male feminist, I am in the ambivalent position of wanting to distance myself from male privilege and patriarchal domination even as I recognize that I participate in and benefit from a patriarchal culture. In reading Steinem’s satire, my conscious ideological affiliation has a stronger claim on my sense of humor than does my gender affiliation, which is “merely” the result of a genetic coin-toss. My enjoyment of humor directed at ridiculing male power and macho stereotypes serves to reinforce my ideological bond with feminism, even as I am aware that, as a man, I can also never be fully identified with feminism. A friend of mine once said that I had “made it about as far as you can: you’re a relatively-enlightened male.” I change 50% of the baby’s diapers, but I still resort to sports metaphors.

In addition to determining whether an interpreter will recognize the *content* of a joke, enthymematic understandings of social relations and discourse genres also help determine whether a given act of aggression is deemed “funny” or not. For instance, not even Charles Gruner would laugh, one would hope, at a child who “foolishly” blunders into a genuinely dangerous situation. To be sure, the incongruity of children’s violations of social norms—even taboos against violence—can be funny, but the resulting laughter is almost always ambivalent. Yet another parental dictum holds up: It’s funny until someone gets hurt.

Jerry Suls notes that humor depends on a certain degree of personal distance from whatever/whoever we laugh at: our “perception of incongruity must occur in a safe or nonthreatening environmental [sic] to evoke humor” (41). The perception of such “safe

distance” is more a matter of intuitive, enthymematic understanding than of conscious awareness. Indeed, this sense of social “distance” may well explain even extremely cruel laughter. People who sincerely laugh at the physical suffering of someone they despise, such as German crowds who jeered as Nazis forced Jews to perform humiliating labor, or who laugh at fictional representations of people with whom they fail to identify, as in the notorious example of African-American schoolchildren in Oakland who laughed during an execution scene in Schindler’s List (Weston A13), have disconnected themselves from the victims to such a degree that laughter even at cruelty is enthymematically “safe.” Suls’s insistence on “safe distance” offers a useful amendment to George Orwell’s view of humor as a social leveler: “A thing is funny when [...] it upsets the established order. Every joke is a tiny revolution.[...] Whatever destroys dignity, and brings down the mighty from their seats, preferably with a bump, is funny” (284). If a joke is a “tiny revolution,” we should also remind ourselves that *big* revolutions are seldom laughing matters. We might well be amused by imaginary violence against a representation of an authority figure—a pie in a cop’s face—even as we would be repulsed and horrified by real violence. We laugh at the Keystone Kops, but not at the Zapruder film.

### **Normal Abnormalities**

If the content of humor depends upon socially-constructed, enthymematic knowledge, so too do the discursive frames and markers which signal that a particular utterance is meant as *humor* in the first place. Like resolving incongruity, recognizing a joke as a joke, a parody as a parody, is an enthymematic process that is grounded in the

interpreter's familiarity with communicative norms and their boundaries. We might usefully consider humor as a form of what Richard Rorty calls "abnormal discourse."

Building on Thomas Kuhn's concepts of normal and abnormal science, Rorty defines as "normal" that discourse

which is conducted within an agreed-upon set of conventions about what counts as a relevant contribution, what counts as answering a question, what counts as having a good argument for that answer or a good criticism of it. Abnormal discourse is what happens when someone joins in the discourse who is ignorant of these conventions or who sets them aside. (320)

"Normal" and "abnormal" are social constructions, informed by the discursive practices of language users. Joking and parody might be seen as forms of intentionally "abnormal" discourse, an accepted jumbling of the normal and the abnormal. Humor almost always involves setting aside conventional rules and expectations about language, behavior, even the laws of the physical universe. Because a joke *is marked as* a joke, members of a discursive community in which a joke is told will take for granted—enthymematically—that reality as they know it is likely to be played with for the sake of the joke. Virtually no one would interrupt a joke about a talking frog, for instance, by pointing out that amphibians possess neither the intelligence nor vocal apparatus to produce intelligible speech. We are socialized, through children's stories, fables, and cartoons with anthropomorphic animals, to accept as a fictional conceit the idea that a frog could talk. The contextual social framework of telling a joke—the teller taking a conversational turn, perhaps announcing that a joke is on the way (OK, I've got one[...]), and even the

formulaic phrasing of a joke opening (“This frog goes into a supermarket [...]”)—also set up the expectation that the narrative will not conform to a “realistic” format. If a listener *did* respond to a joke scenario as if it were a literal narrative, interjecting, “Hey, wait, frogs can’t talk,” that reaction might indicate that the interpreter is being deliberately contrary, is somehow unfamiliar with the norms of joking, or is for some reason unable to willingly suspend disbelief and accept the fiction of the joke scenario.<sup>4</sup>

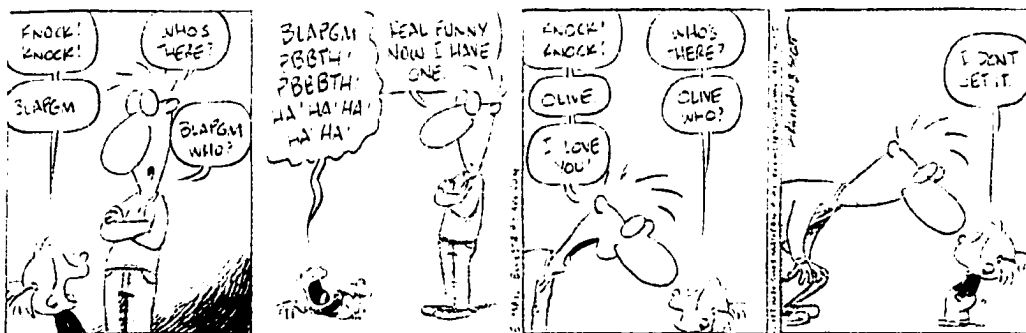
Humor exists in a sort of in-between zone of communication. While it clearly deviates from some normal conventions of discourse, joke discourse is solidly rooted in normal discourse for its source material. As we have noted, the interpreter must be able to successfully make connections between cultural knowledge and assumptions in order to resolve a joke’s incongruities. The success or failure of a joke involves a careful dance between the normal and the abnormal, not unlike the tension between centrifugal and centripetal forces in Bakhtinian theory. The normal elements that are being played with must be placed within a creatively *abnormal* framework in order to create effective incongruity, and at the same time, those normal elements must also be familiar enough that the audience can make the necessary connections.

Further, the discourse of joking and parody has its own norms, although they may be rather slippery to define, and often invite further textual play. Part of the normal discourse of joking is simply the ability to know that a statement is intended as a joke. We internalize various cues that signal the transition from normal conversation into joke

---

<sup>4</sup> Sid Harris drew a lovely cartoon involving a similar clash between the norms of scientific knowledge and of science fiction: a lab-coated scientist stands in a movie theater during a Star Wars-style space opera, shouting, “No! No! Space is a vacuum! It wouldn’t really go KABOOM!”

discourse (“That reminds me of a joke” or “Stop me if you’ve heard this one”), as well as identifiable elements of joke structure and thematic content, such as the question-answer riddle, the knock-knock formula, or the one about the Priest, the Minister and the Rabbi. Long before children understand the content of jokes, simply learning a common formula for joke construction is in itself a matter of delight, as any parent whose preschooler reels off strings of non-punning knock-knock jokes can attest (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2: Baby Blues.**

Rick Kirkman and Jerry Scott. © King Features Syndicate. Reprinted with special permission.

For toddler Zoe in this comic strip, the satisfaction of the knock-knock joke comes mostly from her own ability to play with the forms of discourse; the more “logical” pun in her father’s traditional joke is something of a disappointment for her. While an adherent of the “disparagement” school of humor theory might see Zoe as the butt of the comic for her “stupid” failure to get the joke, I would argue that the strip is gently poking fun at adult expectations about logic and order. In this case, the child’s “play frame” is what really matters. For Zoe, a newcomer to humor performance, it’s far more important to be able to manipulate language for her own ends than to have to worry about trivialities like making sense to an adult.

Parody also has its “normal” discourse, such as the expectation that a parodic text will retain a certain degree of similarity to its “target.” Such parodic similarities can range from the very impressionistic to the fairly detailed. Parodic references in a typical episode of the animated comedy The Simpsons run the gamut from quick, “blink-and-you’ll-miss-it” gags to elaborate parodic set pieces. As an example of the former, one episode features baby Maggie attending “The Ayn Rand School for Tots,” where we see, almost as a throwaway gag, a banner in the playroom reading “Sharing is Weakness” (“A Streetcar Named Marge”). In the same episode, a much more elaborate parody has Marge as Blanche DuBois in *Oh, Streetcar!*, an Andrew Lloyd Weber-style musical version of A Streetcar Named Desire. The dramatic high points of Williams’ play become absurd musical numbers. The grand finale is an upbeat ditty: “You can always depend on the kindness of strangers / A stranger’s just a friend you haven’t met!” (“A Streetcar Named Marge”). In straightforward readings of parody (that is, readings where the reader is familiar with the work(s) being parodied), the “target” work provides a background of remembered textual normality against which the “abnormal” discourse of the parody plays out. The parodic elements stand out as playfully changed versions of their analogues in the original, recognizable because they repeat, with difference, some key elements of the original. Stretch the parody too far beyond the boundaries of the original, and it may no longer be recognizable as a parody at all.

Getting a parody is a matter of the interpreter’s making the parody’s “abnormal” features “normal” by drawing dialogic connections between multiple texts. Parody demands a great deal of intertextual “work,” making

[sophisticated demands] on its practitioners and its interpreters. The encoder, and then the decoder, must effect a structural superimposition of texts that incorporates the old into the new. [. . . like metaphor, parody requires] that the decoder construct a second meaning through inferences about surface statements and supplement the foreground with acknowledgement and knowledge of a backgrounded context. (Hutcheon, Theory of Parody 33-34)

Reading a parody thus involves the reader in a constant, enthymematic back-and-forth between the parodic text and the reader's memories of the parodied text.

Like jokes, parodies often employ various cues to signal to the reader that a parody is "happening." Unlike jokes, however, parodies seldom announce themselves with overt declarations like "did you hear the one about [. . .]" Obviously, this is in large part because jokes are most often found in oral discourse, and are usually marked as deviations from the normal flow of conversation, while parodies are, in the main, creatures of textual discourse. While a joke-teller can announce a joke, and even make sure that the audience will recognize some of the schemata being played with (as in Norrick's "Red Adair" joke example), most parody depends on the interpreter to recognize it for what it is, through its similarities with the target text. Familiarity with the target text is usually simply taken as a given; it is very unlikely that characters in an Airplane!-style spoof would turn to the camera and announce, "hey, folks, this next bit makes fun of Quentin Tarantino's film Pulp Fiction." Not that it *couldn't* happen, and even be funny in its metaparodic violation of the norms of film parody.

Often, popular-culture parodies may “underline” part of a parodic gag to emphasize the parody itself, as in the following dialogue from Rocky & Bullwinkle, in which the moose and squirrel find a bejeweled toy boat with the inscription “Omar Khayyam:”

Jeweler: This little doll here is composed of rubies. Yes, sir, it’s *rubies!*

Rocky: Well, my gosh, if it’s made of rubies [. . .] (pause)

Bullwinkle: If you’re hesitating for *me* to finish the line, you’ve got a *long* wait.

Jeweler: And I don’t have the guts to say it!

Rocky: OK, here goes: if it’s made out of rubies, then this must be ***The Ruby***

***Yacht of Omar Khayyam!***

(Bullwinkle & Jeweler groan and hold hands to their heads)

Narrator: Well, you just don’t come up with an awful thing like that and not hit the front page. (“The Ruby Yacht”)

However familiar or unfamiliar we might be with Persian literature, we can’t possibly ignore all the textual cues that surround the pun. The characters hem and haw before saying it, breaking the illusion of natural dialogue, as if they, fictional creations though they are, are embarrassed to utter the lines that their creators have written. They follow the pun with exaggerated reactions, and even the off-screen narrator calls attention to what an “awful thing” the pun is. Even fairly young viewers of this episode are likely to recognize that there’s a joke here, even if the viewer is not yet prepared to get it. I will discuss such scenarios, and their possibilities for interpretive constructions, in the final section of this

chapter, “What Happens When You Don’t Get the Joke.”

Nevertheless, some parodists alert the reader to their works’ genre with overt labels in their titles: The Brand-X Anthology of Poetry: A Parody Anthology (Burnt Norton Edition), or The Harvard Lampoon’s Bored of the Rings: A Parody of J.R.R. Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings. In these cases, the “parody” subtitle seems intended largely to avoid confusion for the reader/consumer, or perhaps legal action by the target. The title Is Martha Stewart Living? A Parody makes it unlikely that an unwary consumer will return the magazine to the store complaining that it’s not really by Martha Stewart. Other cues may be included in the packaging of the parody—blurbs on the book jacket or video box, for instance, may label the text as a “zany spoof” of some other work. In some cases, secondary sources, such as reviews or catalogues, inform a prospective audience that a parodic text is indeed parodic. For instance, virtually every reference I’ve seen to the film Allegro non Troppo, including its own advertising posters, almost dutifully notes that it is a parody of Disney’s *Fantasia*. These markers of parodic discourse can serve as short-hand introductions to the community knowledge necessary for the parodies to be understood.

### **Seeing Double Voices: Enthymematic Knowledge in Parody**

To discuss the enthymematic operations involved in understanding parody, we might return to Scenters-Zapico’s discussion of oral and textual enthymemes, as discussed above in “Parody and Dialogue.” Keeping in mind that there is considerable intertextual overlap in both oral and textual enthymemes, I would suggest that, in the main, *jokes*,

which are primarily (though not exclusively) transmitted orally, tend to involve oral enthymemes. *Parodies*, on the other hand, are more likely to be constructed within text-oriented genres (books, or visual presentations based on written scripts), and are therefore more likely to depend more upon textual enthymemes. Obviously, I would not expand this generalization into an airtight rule. One can think of jokes that depend upon knowledge of specific texts or bodies of work, such as the following:

*Knock-knock.*

Who's there?

*Knock-knock.*

Who's there?

*Knock-knock.*

Who's there?

*Phillip Glass.*

Obviously, this isn't an entirely *text-based* joke, but it depends upon cultural knowledge that one would only be likely to encounter in fairly well-educated circles. Further, some parodies, such as workers' comic imitations of a boss's verbal and physical mannerisms, are similarly based almost wholly in oral knowledge among members of a fairly discrete community. For instance, high school and college students almost invariably imitate some teachers' verbal tics or classroom mannerisms in parodic performances; a couple of my students told me, in a discussion of classes as communities, that my nervous habit of interrupting my classroom speech with "uhhmm" is a habit that some students fairly consistently make fun of and imitate when talking about my class.

In a reader's straightforward interpretation of a textual parody, the parodist and the knowledge share at least some knowledge about the "target" text. As with rhetorical enthymemes, the question of what constitutes "common knowledge" can obviously become problematic depending upon the relationships and commonalities between parodist and audience. The interpretation of a parodic text involves more than a simple modernist conception of completion, the stable "plugging in" of knowledge about the target text into the framework of the parody. Rather, it involves a complex set of oscillations in the interpreter's consciousness, among multiple texts and contexts—a contingent, strategic process of "intertextual bouncing" that enables the interpreter to choose among many possible interpretations.

To demonstrate the ways in which members of discursive communities use socially-constructed "common knowledge" to interpret a parody, I will apply an enthymematic model of understanding parody to a "normal" interpretation of a parodic text. The following section details some of the many intertextual, enthymematic negotiations at work in my "reading" an episode of the situation comedy Seinfeld ("The Boyfriend"). I have chosen this particular example because it draws upon a broad range of discourses to create a intertextual, parodic melange. Its comedy works on a number of different levels, appealing in multiple ways to several different discursive communities. I am also using this example because it offers a nice counterpoint to an assertion I made in my discussion of humor and hostility at the end of the "Hostility and Enthymemes" section above: I said that, because of the horror of the actual violence it depicts, we would be unlikely to laugh at the Zapruder film of John F. Kennedy's assassination. I also noted,

however, that comic distance can make comedy possible. Shocking though the Zapruder film is, we might nevertheless laugh at a parody of the propagandistic uses that various conspiracy theorists have made of the film.

An extended parodic sequence in “The Boyfriend” spoofs Oliver Stone’s conspiracy melodrama JFK by means of a convoluted gag about baseball player Keith Hernandez apparently spitting on irate fans after a Mets game. In Rashomon-like flashbacks, guest star Hernandez and series regulars Newman (Wayne Knight) and Kramer (Michael Richards) compare their differing memories of the incident, with Jerry offering interpretive comments à la prosecutor Jim Garrison in Stone’s film. The recollections are presented as grainy slow-motion film reenactments, clearly mimicking the Zapruder film’s washed-out color and uneven hand-held camera work. Mocking the courtroom analysis of the Zapruder footage in Stone’s film, the spitting reenactments are accompanied with voice-overs and prosecutorial discussions of the angle at which Newman’s head recoils from the saliva, the “secondary spray” hitting Kramer, the mysterious “magic loogie,” and Jerry’s explication of the “second spitter theory.” Our appreciation of the parody depends on our familiarity with the Zapruder film, and, more to the point, on a certain degree of familiarity with the multiple discourses surrounding the Zapruder film, Stone’s JFK, and the constellation of conspiracy theories that have sprung up around the Kennedy assassination. To a lesser degree, we may also need to know a little about professional sports, particularly about violent confrontations between players and fans.

Getting these jokes, particularly Jerry's affected tone and mannerisms as he "reconstructs" the spitting incident, depends on the interpreter's making use of a fair bit of enthymematic intertextual knowledge about various claims that have been made concerning the angle from which Kennedy was shot, the trajectory of the bullet, and the supposed contradictions between the Zapruder film's visual record and other physical evidence—matters that are "common knowledge" to conspiracy buffs or to those who have seen Stone's film. It is possible, of course, that a viewer might laugh at this parody even without knowing much about Kennedy assassination lore or about Oliver Stone's cinematic conspiracy fable. In this particular case, it's unlikely that any viewer would be left as wholly confused as the graduate student in Scenters-Zapico's narrative, wondering what the hell *that* was all about—the sequence involves plenty of physical comedy and exaggeration, and can be enjoyed on those levels alone. Nevertheless, full appreciation of the parody requires that we be able to achieve enthymematic closure between elements of the parody and the texts it draws from. We must belong to the discursive communities that can make enthymematic connections between the sitcom text and the multiple discourses surrounding Abraham Zapruder's accidentally-historic 8mm movie of the presidential motorcade.

Further, part of the humor in "The Boyfriend" depends upon its violation of taboo, our awareness that the topic is normally not something that is taken lightly. Again, our understanding of this Seinfeld spoof is subject to various enthymematic connections. Regular viewers of Seinfeld would be aware of the show's reputation for comedy that manages to address potentially offensive topics in particularly absurd ways, thereby

largely sidestepping their offensiveness for most of the audience.<sup>5</sup> One critic called it “a comedy of manners about people who have none.” Seinfeld’s comedy walks a thin line between offensiveness and silliness. The comic style usually steers toward farce instead of satire, as in an episode in which Jerry finds himself making out with his date during Schindler’s List (“The Raincoats”). The violation of taboo is just enough to make most viewers wince a bit, but stops well short of the wholesale outrageousness that the topic might have inspired in The National Lampoon of the 1970s, or the adolescent gross-out humor of the variety that might be found on Beavis and Butt-Head or South Park. On the other hand, the Seinfeld bit also falls short of making any genuinely satirical commentary on popular culture’s “normalizing” of the Holocaust.

Such gradations of “offensiveness” are, of course, a matter of enthymematic understandings of deeply-ingrained, culturally-determined taste and propriety. While Seinfeld’s parodic take on the Zapruder film is relatively mild, it relies on an enthymematic understanding common to all “sick” humor: we almost instantly recognize that such humor crosses generally agreed-upon boundaries of good taste. The aura of myth and tragedy surrounding Kennedy in the American consciousness makes Kennedy—and the Kennedy mythos—an attractive target for counter-cultural satire. The Kennedy assassination becomes an easy satirical target, an icon to be gleefully smashed in expectation that the bourgeoisie will be shocked. Such shock is an enthymematic reaction, of course, depending upon largely unspoken but viscerally-felt understandings of social

---

<sup>5</sup> Consider the famous episode in which a college newspaper reporter wrongly identifies Jerry and George as gay lovers. Their denials are accompanied by an exaggerated disclaimer that explicitly defuses homophobia: “I’m not gay! Not that there’s anything *wrong* with that!” (“The Outing”).

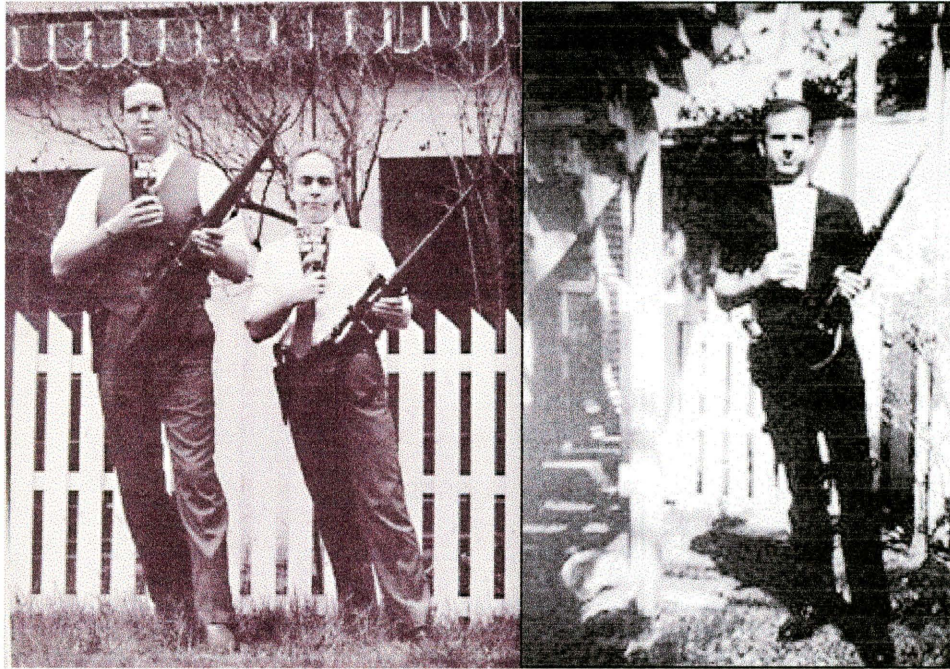
norms. A particularly aggressive, and hence potentially offensive, play on the socially-determined “sanctity” of the JFK and RFK assassinations is found in the name of the punk band “Dead Kennedys.” A name like “Dead Kennedys” derives its shock value from defaming a familiar, even revered, American icon. An even more esoteric sick joke is contained in the title of an “underground” magazine, Zapruder Headsnap (Bagge 25). This title relies on the reader’s possessing both some fairly obscure knowledge and a willingness to take lightly a topic that is widely considered sacrosanct. It refers to conspiracy-theorists’ fondness for the notion that the violent backwards movement of Kennedy’s head, as recorded on the Zapruder film, suggests a shot from the front, not the back. This forensically unsound belief plays a major role in Stone’s JFK and the Seinfeld parody.<sup>6</sup> Where the “Dead Kennedys” name can count on being widely offensive, “Zapruder Headsnap” is somewhat more selective in its deployment of shock humor. To get this sick joke, you have to have a degree of specialized knowledge about the discourse of Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories; it could be argued that that the allusion is more offensive than “Dead Kennedys” precisely because it dwells on the gory details of the assassination.

To close the case on this survey of assassination humor, I will examine the intertextual play in an elaborate parody that is both a forensic science demonstration and a dizzyingly gross comedic shtick. Comedian-magicians Penn and Teller use the Kennedy head-snap hypothesis as the starting-point for a bizarre combination of conspiracy

---

<sup>6</sup> Kennedy’s backward head movement was almost certainly the result of two factors: a neuromuscular spasm caused by the bullet hitting his brain, and the “jet effect” of brain tissue exploding outward (forward) through the exit wound and pushing the head back (Posner 315-16).

debunking and sick humor. In How to Play With Your Food, they offer a wickedly funny do-it-yourself disproof of the head-snap theory, shooting human-head-sized honeydew melons, wrapped with heavy fiberglass tape to simulate the skull. They note, “Every single melon that moved, moved toward the gun” (45). For dramatic flair, they use Mannlicher-Carcano 6.5 mm rifles, the same type as Oswald’s, and recreate Oswald’s infamous self-portrait with rifle and propaganda tracts (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3: Penn and Teller pose as Lee Harvey Oswald**  
 (Left: Jillette and Teller 42, © Villard Books. Used by permission. Right: National Archives)

Penn and Teller insist, however, that they “both feel strongly that putting a melon wearing a pink pillbox hat next to the target melon is in very bad taste” (45). A fair bit of enthymematic juggling is necessary to get the joke here. We must be aware not only of the historical and pop-cultural referents that Penn and Teller are playing with, but we must also be able, as members of a discursive community that plays irony games, to recognize

the disingenuousness of the “warning.” Heaven knows we wouldn’t want “bad taste” to intrude on these comedic instructions for simulating a fatal gunshot wound to the head! Finding any of these parodies funny requires not only that we know a fair bit about assassination lore, but also that we recognize the parodists’ deliberate transgressive intent, and further, that we accept their willingness to joke about what many still consider a sacrosanct subject. Without a fairly well-cultivated sense, an enthymematic understanding, depending upon internalized social norms, of the boundaries of “good taste,” we would have no way of knowing in the first place that jokes about the Kennedy assassinations are “sick.”

### **What Happens After You Don’t Get the Joke**

I have so far been discussing the enthymematic operations at work in the “normal” comprehension of a joke or parody—that is, when the reader recognizes that a text is parodic, has some measure of familiarity with the work(s) being parodied, and appreciates the parody *as* a parody. When a reader/viewer first encounters a parodic text that s/he is *unable* to get, several reactions are possible. The reader may simply pass over the missed parody without realizing that a joke had been made at all: “If the decoder does not notice, or cannot identify, an intended allusion or quotation, he or she will merely naturalize it, adapting it to the context of the work as a whole” (Hutcheon, Theory of Parody 34). Or the reader may recognize that the joke *is* a joke, but that it involves signifiers that they don’t quite get. This perhaps-fleeting recognition (paradoxically, recognizing that one *doesn’t* recognize a referent) is the germinal moment for Wabbit Literacy. The reader may react

with minimal involvement, moving along through the text without paying much attention to the unresolved parody, as when in “Peanuts,” Linus says while reading The Brothers Karamazov, “I just ‘bleep’ right over the long Russian names.” Alternately, if the reader suspects that a parody is afoot, he may actively attempt to construct some tentative schema for resolving the puzzles posed by the parody, even though any such resolution may only be a partial guess at the text’s target. The process of unraveling a parody of an unfamiliar text is sometimes helped along by the parodist; in her discussion of Italo Calvino’s If on a winter’s night a traveler, Linda Hutcheon observes that Calvino assumes a high degree of literary sophistication on the part of his audience; even so, “given the directive nature of the text, any reader would be bound to learn enough from the text itself to “get” some of the parodies, at least” (Theory of Parody 90). While parodists seldom spell everything out for their readers, they often want, like Norrick’s Brandon and his “Red Adair” joke, to give us a fair chance to come to enthymematic closure. Hutcheon also notes that the “didacticism of much contemporary metafiction” suggests that even the “well-read” audience cannot be expected to be fully familiar with every text or genre being parodied: “If literary games are being played with the reader [. . .] at least the rules of the game are being revealed very clearly” (Theory of Parody 90-91).

I found myself in this situation when I saw the 1996 film version of Stella Gibbons’s Cold Comfort Farm, which announces itself fairly overtly as a parody of Lawrentian sensibility, passion, and literary style (heroine Flora Poste, an aspiring novelist, never writes about the sun as simply “the sun,” preferring to call it “The Golden Orb”). I found the film funny on its own terms (and later read the novel), but I

was also certain that a true Lawrence fan would have had a far greater appreciation of the film. I was able to get a number of the jokes well enough from the cues the text provides: “Highly sexed young men living on farms are always named Seth or Reuben, and it would be such a nuisance,” Flora sardonically predicts before departing for the farm, where she encounters both a Seth *and* a Reuben (Gibbons 23). It was fairly easy to extrapolate from these suggestions (and the bit of Lawrence I’ve read) a mostly satisfactory notion of what the film is poking fun at. I have, in essence, constructed a “Lawrence” that I know is being parodied, even though in my own reading I have fairly limited exposure to Lawrence. Given the parody’s clues, its funhouse-mirror distortions and exaggerations, I enthymematically fill in the blanks and begin to create for myself a sense of what the “real” Lawrence *might* be like, keeping in mind, of course, that my imagined “Lawrence” is a hypothetical construct based on Gibbons’ parody of Lawrence and his admirers. Needless to say, when I recently read Lawrence’s “The Horse-Dealer’s Daughter,” my perceptions of his writing were ringing with memories of Cold Comfort Farm. The “real” Lawrence’s rural sensuality—all those powerful, sweaty horses!—reminded me ever so much of Gibbons’s parody of Lawrence! Try as I might to read “Lawrence as Lawrence,” the parody nonetheless seeped into the corners of my reading, and I found myself chuckling at scenes and dialogue that were not, in themselves, supposed to be funny.

To better examine the rhetorical functioning of Wabbit Literacy’s accretion of parody-based learning, let us apply Scenters-Zapico’s discussion of intertextual enthymemes to my earlier example of a youngster who doesn’t get Rocky and

Bullwinkle's "Ruby Yacht of Omar Khayyam" joke, a pun that the writers almost certainly knew that children would be unlikely to get, but that a fair number of adults *would* get (it is worth noting that Rocky and Friends originally ran in prime-time, and, like The Simpsons, was targeted at adult viewers as much as children). Like the graduate student who is befuddled by Bartholomae's "Inventing the University," the child encountering the "Omar Khayyam" joke faces an interpretive dilemma, encountering a text that is currently beyond her ability to understand. This failure to understand is due neither to the child's stupidity nor to the joke's being badly written (Scenters-Zapico 80).<sup>7</sup> Rather, the child simply has not yet had the kinds of textual experiences that will allow for successful interpretation of the joke. From this point of view, it would be premature to call the child's not understanding the joke a "failure" of communication. At the very least, she has had a textual encounter that, however brief, is meaningful, if only in that it may leave her puzzled. Perhaps she will never makes sense of the joke—which is indeed a possibility, since in the short run, she has missed the joke, and there is no guarantee that she will later come to know anything about Omar Khayyam's Rubaiyat. But it's entirely possible that, in a text-rich world, she will hear of the poem and recall the Bullwinkle joke. We must keep in mind Scenters-Zapico's caution against assuming that

the only good knowledge is immediate. To understand the enthymematic nature of discourse, we must take a long-term perspective on the social construction of

---

<sup>7</sup> "Badly written," of course, refers only to the joke's *communicative* properties—in terms of aesthetics, the cartoon script itself takes pain to label the pun "awful."

discourse practices. [. . .] We might hastily assume from the residues of our inherited oral tradition that the death of an idea transpires when it is not immediately grasped [. . . when] in fact the seed might just have been planted. (80)

Wabbit Literacy might similarly be considered an organic outgrowth, a “flowering,” even, of an intertextual seed planted by a *parodic* text—a hybrid strain of knowing, if you will.

Early experience of a parodic text prepares the reader for eventual reception of the “original,” and for possible entry into a discursive community that is able to make sense of particular texts. Wabbit Literacy changes how we read texts which we’ve seen parodied long ago. Even though it may be our first reading of the text, it is not our first encounter with many elements of the text. Because the “target” text contains a missing bit of information, resolving, or more completely resolving, an incongruity we first came across some time before, its reception is foregrounded by the “aha!” of getting that old allusion. Hutcheon notes that a critical, often-overlooked element of the process of decoding allusion is “the pleasure of recognition, the delight in critical difference, or perhaps in the wit of such a superimposition of texts” (*Theory of Parody* 95). In a Wabbit-literate reading, this pleasure is prompted by the reader’s using the *original* text to fill in the blanks in his knowledge of the *parody*, an almost complete reversal of most models of how parody works. We are primed by our knowledge of the parody to receive/interact with the “original” in a way that is different—perhaps more playful, more open to dialogic back-and-forth—from readers who have never heard of it at all, or readers who know only serious allusions to it.

### **Conclusion: “Th-Th-That’s All, Folks! Or is It?”**

This chapter has argued that humor is enthymematic, in that it depends upon the interpreter’s being able to marshal socially constructed common knowledge to make seemingly-intuitive connections between multiple referents. I argue that enthymemes are dialogic, that they depend upon the interpreter’s immersion in the complex weave of voices of the many discursive communities to which she belongs. Similarly, humor, understood as a process of recognizing and resolving an incongruity, can be said to be enthymematic, since it too depends upon dialogic, socially constructed knowledge. I reject the all-or-nothing notion that if understanding of an utterance, a text, or a joke is not immediate, then no understanding has taken place. Rather, following the dialogic model of enthymematic literacy proposed by John Scenters-Zapico, I argue that both enthymemes and jokes can be understood over a period of time, that initial exposure to a text is only one step in a dialogic process of understanding.

Using this model of humor as an enthymematic process, I re-examine several traditional notions about humor. The idea that humor is used as a shibboleth, to test for an interpreter’s membership in a discursive community, is contrasted with the proposition that humor is a cooperative communicative process—for humor to work, tellers of jokes often make efforts to ensure that their audiences possesses the knowledge necessary to achieve enthymematic resolution of a joke’s incongruity. Similarly, the idea that humor is *intrinsically* rooted in hostility is rejected for a model that emphasizes enthymematic understanding and community-identification as the primary loci of humor. Hostility is simply one of the many social factors that can play into the enthymematic “common

knowledge” that makes humor work.

The very structures of humor—joke genres and ways of signaling that humor is happening—are seen to be socially constructed as well. Humor and parody involve complex interplay between the “normal” functions of language and “abnormal” play with discursive norms. The “work” of understanding a parody is largely enthymematic, depending upon a complex web of associative connections in the interpreter’s consciousness. When a reader “fails” to fully comprehend a parody, the discursive process is not necessarily at an end. Rather, later enthymematic understanding (that is, Wabbit Literacy) may grow from ideas or referents encountered in the reader’s first exposure to a parodic text, given further interactions with related texts and realms of discourse.

## CHAPTER 3

## CARNIVAL KNOWLEDGE: COMMUNITIES AND CULTURAL LITERACIES

Any model of cultural knowledge must take into account the multiple purposes and contexts in which culture is enacted. The notion that members of a community depend on shared information and ways of thinking in order to communicate is a foundation of both sociolinguistics and rhetoric, and is embedded in the concept of “discursive communities” that I have so far been using to examine how parody and irony work. In this chapter, I will examine further the strengths and limitations of the concept of “shared knowledge,” particularly in a diverse, heteroglossic, media-saturated discursive environment.

In Chapter 1, I noted that Hutcheon’s “discursive community” and the more commonly-used socio-rhetorical “discourse community” share

a sense that we all belong to many overlapping (and sometimes even conflicting) communities and collectives. . . . This overlapping is the condition that makes irony possible, even though the sharing will inevitably always be partial, incomplete, fragmentary; nevertheless, something does manage to get shared—enough, that is, to make irony happen. (*Irony’s Edge* 92)

The crucial distinction between the two is that, while the “discourse community” is imagined to be somewhat fixed in its demographic outlines (consider “the academic community,” as an example that is both obviously too broad but nonetheless commonly used), the “discursive community” is, as Hutcheon defines it, a highly situational and

transitory grouping of like (or *partly*-like) minds, that makes understanding a given ironic utterance possible.

I want to adopt Hutcheon's concept and apply it to the rhetorical concept of "audience" because it helps emphasize the highly situational nature of discursive understanding, calling our attention to the constructedness of knowledge. "Knowledge" is not a free-floating mass of facts, but is more properly viewed as a series of overlapping interpretive frames. Each interpreter brings a complex accretion of experience and multiple-voiced readings to any text, any fact. To give a rather simplified example, for one interpreter, "Napoleon" may call to mind a set of associations that is mostly shaped by reading of history, comparisons of Napoleon to other generals or rulers, and so on. Another interpreter might first think of the countless cartoon images of lunatics who believe themselves to be Napoleon (a goggle-eyed figure wearing a tri-cornered hat with an "N" on it, epaulets on his shoulders, one hand in his jacket), and then might recall some other information about the historical figure. A third interpreter might simply read or hear the name and mostly "bleep" right over it, consigning it to the undifferentiated chaff of gray facts encountered and quickly forgotten in a history class. The sum of all our encounters with utterances concerning "Napoleon" leads each of us to have a slightly different, more-or-less detailed notion of "Napoleon," including, of course, possible mistakes and confusions. Even though each literate individual has fragmentary knowledge, enough overlap exists between those fragments to allow most adult members of Western cultures to communicate meaningfully, to some degree, about "Napoleon." No knowledge is unitary and self-contained; facts do not exist completely independent of

some kind of interpretive framework. Wabbit Literacy is one way to help recognize and call attention to the gaps between knowledges and systems of knowing: the inflections of context will inevitably shape the way we perceive a fact or text.

### **Cultural Literacy: What You Don't Know Won't Hirsch You**

In tension with this tendency toward the fragmentation of knowledge, there is the urge to systematize and regularize knowledge, to impose some sort of order on the messiness of human consciousness. Like Bakhtin's centrifugal and centripetal forces in language, the two impulses are dynamically linked. Neither complete control nor complete freedom from systematizing knowledge is possible or desirable. Among those seeking to preserve or expand the status quo, there is an understandable desire to try to get everyone singing from the same hymnal, in the name of nationalism, traditionalism, economic efficiency, scientific truth, or even for the sake of individual freedom within a fairly unified national culture. The last decade has seen a fairly lucrative market for books about what's at stake in the perpetuation (or more often, fears about the "erosion") of current systems of cultural power, typified by Alan J. Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind and E.D. Hirsch's Cultural Literacy.

Though published over a decade ago, these books continue to have significant ramifications for academe and for discussions of American culture and education, and helped frame the tone and agenda of America's most recent round of "Culture Wars." Bloom's jeremiad was the most popular of several doom-saying tracts that decried the

supposed radicalization and dumbing-down of academe.<sup>1</sup> Hirsch, while sympathetic to the others' cultural conservatism, presents a somewhat more moderate program for systematic educational reform. Cultural Literacy avoids overtly attacking multicultural or feminist academics. Indeed, Hirsch rather disingenuously suggests that his program is politically neutral, and should therefore be embraced by all camps. Hirsch's central thesis is seemingly little more than common sense: members of any society, if they are to be able to communicate effectively, must share a common vocabulary not only of words, but also of cultural knowledge. Hirsch even argues that rote memorization of facts be used as at least a primary step in inculcating cultural literacy, arguing that "it isn't facts that deaden the minds of young children [...] it is incoherence—our failure to ensure that a pattern of shared, vividly taught, and socially enabling knowledge will emerge from our instruction" (133). As with most "common sense," of course, a world of ideological assumptions lies behind Hirsch's proposals for "cultural literacy." Hirsch's stated intent is to reinvigorate American education by calling attention to the "vocabulary" of the "national conversation." The chief problem with Cultural Literacy is that it posits cultural knowledge as a coherent, discrete set of facts—a fairly fixed "vocabulary" that can, like the prescriptivist notion of the lexical vocabulary to be found in a dictionary, be systematized and used by all thinkers in pretty much the same way. But just as language is a much more dynamic, volatile thing than a dictionary's lexicon can describe, cultural

---

<sup>1</sup> Other best-selling polemics on the topic include Dinesh D'Souza's Illiberal Education, Roger Kimball's Tenured Radicals, William Bennett's The De-Valuing of America, Arthur Schlesinger's The Disuniting of America, and Robert Bork's Slouching Toward Gomorrah, as well as the aforementioned Sokal & Bricmont tome, Fashionable Nonsense. As Lawrence Levine notes, the titles alone suggest a "relentlessly apocalyptic" view of higher education and American culture (Levine 3-4).

knowledge is also subject to vagaries of individual and cultural context. Many of the culture-warriors' books seem informed by a nostalgic longing for a Golden Age that never was, a unified national culture that never existed. Indeed, the cohesive "national culture" imagined in many of these works, including Cultural Literacy, most closely resembles the knowledge and ideological assumptions of a *segment* of "American culture" (i.e., the liberal-educated upper-middle-class elite that used to make up the demographic bulk of academe) than of "America" or "Western Culture" at large. "American Culture" has always been a far more fractious and disorderly cacophony than the neat list of names, concepts, and facts listed in Hirsch's 63-page appendix of "what literate Americans know," from "1066" to "Zurich" (Hirsch 152-215).

Hirsch's category of "literate Americans" is an example of what Benedict Anderson calls an "imagined community," that is, a collective defined by an imagined commonality, whose members "will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (cited in Pratt 49). This is not to say that there is no such thing as "literate Americans." Rather, it is to call attention to the constructedness of such a category, to point out that the classification is a rhetorical device, a product of cultural and linguistic activity. Simplified classes like "literate Americans" all too often fail to take into account the "distance between the homogeneity of the imagined community and the fractured reality of linguistic experience in modern stratified societies" (Pratt 51). By focusing on the highly context-dependent nature of learning, *Wabbit Literacy* is one means of examining

the “fractured reality” of knowledge in a society where mass entertainment media play a significant role in the transmission and reproduction of knowledge.

### **Cultural Literacy and Parodic Context**

As Chapter 2 indicates, most models of how parody normally works involve something rather like Hirsch’s cultural literacy. In order to recognize that a parody is happening, we must not only be somewhat familiar with the work(s) being parodied, but we must also know a little about what a parody is and how a parody works. Moreover, the kind of intertextual knowledge needed to make sense of a parody and most other humor is usually, though not always, of precisely the sort that Hirsch describes as the backbone of cultural literacy: “background knowledge [. . . that is] telegraphic, vague, and limited in extent” (Hirsch 26), rather than an in-depth, intimate familiarity with the subject. For instance, we needn’t have actually read Derrida or seen The Godfather in order to get this joke:

What do you get when you cross a deconstructionist with a mafioso?

An offer you can’t understand.

All we need is a little dialogic familiarity with modern literary theory’s reputation for complexity, plus knowledge of the phrase the movie used to describe the Mafia’s favored means of persuasion. Indeed, the phrase “an offer you can’t refuse” has entered the pop-cultural lexicon as a kind of shorthand for gangsterish pressure tactics, and has probably broken at least partially free from its contextual origin as a line in the film. Members of the discursive community that is able to enjoy this joke have all had various encounters

with texts that inform their reading of the joke. What's more, most adult North American listeners who *don't* get the joke will almost certainly attribute their difficulty in interpreting it to a lack of familiarity with the "deconstructionist" part of the setup, not with the "mafioso" part or the punchline's basic structure. The most specialized bit of knowledge necessary to make sense of the joke is the bit whose usage is particular almost solely to academics and those who follow academic discourse, but even in the case of "deconstructionist," second- or third-hand familiarity with the term is sufficiently fragmentary knowledge to work out the joke.

The complex intertextual connections necessary to enable a discursive community to interpret parody are pointed up by an example that Hirsch cites, all too unproblematically, to illustrate what he means by "cultural literacy." He recalls a 1947 book called 1066 and All That, which

dealt with facts of British history that all educated Britons had been taught as children but remembered only dimly as adults. The book caricatured those recollections, purposely getting the "facts" just wrong enough to make them ridiculous on their face. Readers instantly recognized that the book was mistaken in its theory about what Ethelred-the-Unready was unready for, but, on the other hand, they couldn't say precisely what he *was* unready for. The book was hilarious to literate Britons as a satire of their own vague and confused memories. But even if their schoolchild knowledge had become vague with the passage of time, it was still

functional, because the information essential to literacy is rarely detailed or precise. (14)

Again, Hirsch doesn't ask just *who* might be included in the imagined categories of "all educated Britons" or "literate Britons;" for the purposes of his argument, such definitions are less necessary than the reader's willingness to agree with Hirsch's identification of those people and the kinds of knowledge they "all" presumably possessed. It seems reasonable to assume that 1066 and All That was popular with a much narrower class and gender subset than Hirsch suggests. The book's comic strategy of "purposely getting the 'facts' just wrong enough to make them ridiculous on their face" was a reflection of very context-dependent cultural experiences, just as the readers' ability and willingness to laugh at the book's absurdly-wrong "history" was very much a product of their class, gender, nationality, and educational background, as well as any number of other factors that affected their reception of the book.

### **Loose Canons: Fragmentary Knowledge and Ideological Broadides**

The largely-overlooked genius of Hirsch's definition of cultural literacy lies in his recognition that we need not have in-depth knowledge of a particular signifier in order to be able to make useful reference to it. We need not have read Hamlet in order to know that "to be or not to be" is an important question. Ironically, the emphasis on fuzzy awareness of various cultural artifacts that is intrinsic to Hirsch's description of cultural literacy tends to get lost in the detail of

the book's appendix. Hirsch's assertion that "literate Americans" share an identifiable base of common knowledge also seems to preclude the much more reasonable claim that such knowledge we *do* share is fragmentary and rather fuzzy. In attempting to describe "What Literate Americans know," the Appendix's title, the book becomes a vehicle for prescribing "What Every American Needs to Know," the book's subtitle. Indeed, Hirsch dithers a bit as to how specific Every American's knowledge ought to be. On the one hand, he chuckles sympathetically with Britons who couldn't recall much about 1066 and all that; on the other hand, he expresses shock at anecdotal evidence that young people's knowledge of particulars is indeed fragmentary and vague. He cites, with sympathetic tut-tutting, a Washington Post column by Benjamin Stein, who claims, "I have not yet found one single student in Los Angeles, in either college or high school, who could tell me the years when World War II was fought" (Hirsch 6). Hirsch doesn't, however, explore whether those same students have a passing familiarity with *other* knowledge about the war. My guess is that a pretty fair percentage would be able to identify "Hitler," "Pearl Harbor," "Nazi," "the Holocaust," and "Hiroshima" without too much difficulty, although the date "December 7, 1941" may no longer live in infamy for them.

As a counterpoint to such worries over young peoples' apparent historical ignorance, Robert Pattison suggests that they are, like a famous reluctant student in fiction, selective and deliberate in the knowledge-fragments they choose to make use of:

Huck Finn took a passing interest in Moses till he found out he'd "been dead a considerable time; so then I didn't care no more about him; because I don't take no stock in dead people." When cultural literacy impended, Huck lit out for the territory. Huck was as much a critic as a pupil, and there's no reason to think his descendents are any different. ("Finn Syndrome" 713)

Pattison notes that it is highly unlikely that California teens have never *encountered* the dates of World War II; rather, most simply have not had any particular reason to *remember* them: "Students do not want to know the dates of World War II. They don't take stock in dead people" ("Finn Syndrome" 713). American high school students know at least a little something about "Hitler" and "Nazism" because hate and racism are problems that remain contextually *alive* in their cultural and political world. Conversely, the average student would have little contextual need for several of the other World War II references from Cultural Literacy's Appendix, no matter how important they were to the history of the war: "appeasement," "Bulge, Battle of the," "Manhattan Project," or "Remember Pearl Harbor!" for example. It is entirely possible that young people may encounter situations in which such terms become meaningful. Without such a context, however, they would most likely remain merely items on a list to be memorized for a history class, and then rapidly forgotten.

It is also worth emphasizing that the concepts and events included in Cultural Literacy are grounded in very definite ideologies. For instance, "appeasement" is, as a

postwar political concept, an inherently cautionary, even hawkish term that is far from value-neutral. One can only imagine what connotations the word would have if Hitler had *not* invaded Czechoslovakia beyond the Sudetenland. Cultural Literacy too easily assumes that a fairly narrow Western academic literacy, among people of “a certain age,” for that matter, is equivalent to “American” cultural literacy at large, discounting the literacies and discursive practices among different age groups, social classes, ethnic groups, and so on. As Robert Denham objects,

the contents of cultural literacy are not value-neutral. To include Spiro Agnew and J. Edgar Hoover in the list but to exclude Che Guevarra and Marcus Garvey is to load the deck. . . . [If] the list omits the vocabulary needed to communicate a particular point of view, then presumably that point of view does not count in public discourse. (4)

Hirsch partially answers this critique by arguing that the List is meant to represent relatively stable elements of American culture in the late 20th Century, not the ephemera of this week’s bestseller list, movie marquees, or evening news. Thus, he establishes certain socio-chronological “borders” to the List: “materials that are still too new to have passed into general currency” and “items, like *Sherman Adams*, which have passed from view and are now known only by older generations” (138). To be sure, the “temporal context” of a bit of cultural knowledge is of great importance, which is why we don’t hear many jokes about Estes Kefauver these days.<sup>2</sup> The ideological contexts of

---

<sup>2</sup> Of course, it could be argued that “Estes Kefauver” is, for speakers of Standard American English, an *inherently* funny combination of syllables.

knowledge (or more accurately, *knowledges*) must also be considered. Robert Pattison emphasizes that mere shared knowledge of facts does not insure any agreement about the ideological significance of those facts: “Every Irish person north and south knows the date of the Battle of the Boyne, when Protestant King Billy whipped Catholic King James. [. . .] We know where that universal knowledge and universal dialogue have ended” (“Stupidity Crisis” 7). When we speak of “shared knowledge,” we must also consider the ideological underpinnings of what is shared—indeed, we must further examine our ideological notions about the “imagined community” that is *doing* the sharing, as well as how and who is imagining that community.

To take one language-user’s experience with a single set of topics as an example, I would like to reconstruct, as well as I can, the processes and contexts in which I accumulated knowledge about that previously-cited touchstone of cultural literacy, World War II. Although I’m sure that the dates of the war were covered in at least one of my history classes, most of my knowledge of the war ultimately derived from my private mania for airplanes. I started reading voraciously about World War II when I was about ten years old. At the time, I was crazy about airplanes and aviation, and read every juvenile-level history book I could find about the “Flying Tigers,” the Doolittle raid on Tokyo, Pearl Harbor, Midway, the Battle of Britain, and so on. I didn’t particularly care whether it was fiction, nonfiction, comics, TV, or whether it was well-written or shoddily researched, as long as it was about airplanes.<sup>3</sup> I built plastic models of the airplanes I

---

<sup>3</sup> I do, however, recall being annoyed by a comic book in which all six members of a U.S. commando squad escape Germany in a stolen prototype of the German Messerschmitt ME-262 jet fighter, which *any* fool knows was a single-seater...

read about, and vice-versa. My interests reinforced my recreational reading and my playtime as well. Along the way, I learned about more than just aviation—I learned about FDR, Mussolini, Hitler, Göring, the Luftwaffe, *Blitzkrieg*, the League of Nations, Rosie the Riveter, *Kamikazes*, the atomic bomb, and the Holocaust. Most of what I learned about the war came in at the periphery of my awareness; I was mostly interested in those fascinating airplanes and the men who flew them. My learning about WW II was inflected with ideological overtones, just as formal curricular learning would have been, but those ideological messages, such as the assumption that the Allies were fighting a Just War, were nonetheless filtered through materials that I had a degree of freedom in choosing and reading, not dictated from a formal lesson plan. To be sure, even my "self-directed" learning was not utterly "free," since I was dependent on books available in the school and public libraries, comics and novels produced for a mass commercial market, and so on.

It would be safe to say that I absorbed as much ideology about the war as I did information about aviation. The concept that a Just War might be fought using unjust means never occurred to me, at least not until much later, when I read Kurt Vonnegut's novel Slaughterhouse-5, which graphically portrayed the Allied firebombing of Dresden. Most of the children's and adolescent-level histories of World War II that I can recall never questioned the conduct of the Allies; the war was a dirty business, to be sure, but necessary to ensure that Freedom and Democracy prevailed. I recall that I stopped reading about war for a while at one point, though, after reading a book on D-Day which recounted a story of a soldier sheltering a litter of puppies he had found; a German shell

killed the soldier and the puppies. The thought of puppies being wiped out was more than I wanted to think about. My reading up to that point had already inculcated in me a sense that it is normal for people—or more properly, soldiers—to die in wars, but the intrusion of puppies into an otherwise-typical war narrative created cognitive dissonance for me. Oddly, the deaths of the puppies *humanized* the war narrative in a way that other narratives had not. In a very Burkean way, I identified with the puppies much more easily than with the ideologically-simplified but largely depersonalized “fighting men” of most war stories I’d been reading.<sup>4</sup>

My self-directed reading opened the possibility for exposure to resistant, or at least ambivalent, ideologies. For instance, some of my most visceral learning about WWII came from my extracurricular junior-high-school reading of Bill Mauldin’s masterful collection of cartoons and memoirs, Up Front, featuring the muddy, tired, we’ve-seen-it-all dogfaces Willie and Joe. While Mauldin certainly supported the Allied cause, his war cartoons conspicuously avoided simplistic patriotism; his soldiers fought for “America,” but mostly they fought mud, exhaustion, and fear, their focus firmly on the mundane necessities of survival. Mauldin’s deadpan humor, his empathy for front-line GIs, his rejection of the “glory” of battle, and his contempt for the comparatively easy time had by officers and soldiers in the rear echelons made an indelibly populist, anti-authoritarian

---

<sup>4</sup> Many years later, I discovered Garry Trudeau’s “Doonesbury” strip in which Boopsie, the airhead cheerleader, turns against the Vietnam war (and even volunteers for George McGovern) because she learns that the U.S. Air Force is bombing agricultural areas, killing farm animals, including “Baby ducks...Did you hear me? BABY DUCKS!” (October 30, 1972).

impression on my own thinking about the war, and no doubt steered me toward sympathetic high-school readings of Catch-22 and Slaughterhouse-5. Mauldin's sardonic view of blind patriotism also prepared me for the knowledge that such books were considered un-American by some. For the adolescent me, World War II was not simply a collection of names and dates to be memorized. Rather, through my reading, it became a vibrant, complex weave of narratives involving tragedy, loss, absurdity, deadpan humor, and terror, interwoven with the optimism, patriotism, and heroic sacrifice that had been typified by my earliest reading about the war. In the progress of my own reading, I had participated in a dialogue about the aims and conduct of the war. Even though this dialogue included only a limited number of perspectives—I certainly had not, in high school at least, read any radically revisionist views of the war—it resulted in a multifaceted understanding of the events of 1939-1945, with sections of great detail in some areas and gaps in others, that is idiosyncratically mine. Such is the case for any learner. “My World War II” is different from all other understandings of “World War II,” just as they are all different from each other. There are enough overlaps in our multiple knowledges that we can speak of “Pearl Harbor” and know that we are referring to pretty much the same set of referents, although there will inevitably be differences in the details that we each know, and even greater ideological differences in interpreting the event, such as the individual speaker’s decision to call the operation a “sneak attack,” a “surprise attack,” or an example of “tactical genius.”

### ***Liberté, Egalité, and The Brady Bunch***

“Cultural literacy” is both a problematic concept and a prescriptivist pipe dream born of nostalgia for a unified civic culture that never was. Further, an imagined community, even one as hazily-defined as “literate Americans,” depends upon far more than simply a commonly-memorized core of shared facts. Even though “common knowledge” is far from common, and the increasing recognition of diversity and of stresses in the fabric of “American Culture” has frightened some critics into reactionary rear-guard polemics, it is highly doubtful that American civilization is doomed to fly into a bunch of scattered, warring camps. Indeed, Robert Pattison argues that two highly influential institutions in American youth culture, the school system and the mass entertainment media, despite their many substantial flaws, manage to instill a “systematic and reflexive species of democratic behavior,” that is, a commitment to values of egalitarianism, fair-play, good humor, and tolerance. Pattison speculates that, given an absolute choice between students’ having “a shared knowledge of the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. The Board of Education* decision or a shared ability to put into practice the tolerant and egalitarian message of that decision,” he would prefer the latter. Both would be nice, of course, but for “a successful postindustrial society,” he would “choose the shared instinct over the shared knowledge” (“Stupidity Crisis” 7). Needless to say, Pattison does not claim that the values of tolerance and egalitarianism that inform much of youth culture are either fully realized or profound. It is all too clear that prejudices and bigotry are alive and well, and that the virtues sung by such formula fictions are all too often superficially presented. Rather, he simply argues that what some cultural critics

decry as a teenage wasteland is in fact a fertile ground for some of the best American values, even if teens aren't in full Bloom.

Hirsch warns that "The unconscious learning of transitory materials is the least useful kind of memorization" (131). Yet such "unconscious learning of transitory materials" can be a powerful, if often unpredictable, source of cultural knowledge and values. It is hardly shocking to note that what a student takes away from any class is almost always different from the stated goals that teachers dutifully outline in their lesson plans; nor should it be surprising that much, or even most, learning and socialization takes place outside of the classroom.

Looking back, again, on my own childhood, I can think of any number of facts and ideological morsels that I learned from television situation comedies. In 5th grade, the year I was required to memorize the 50 state capitals, I also watched The Partridge Family and The Brady Bunch faithfully every week. The systematic information I was taught about the state capitals has pretty much receded, but I distinctly remember several "facts" and ideological positions that I learned "unconsciously." Via the Brady family, I discovered that Billy the Kid was a coward who shot women and children in the back ("Bobby's Hero"), and that Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "The Day is Done" is insufferably dull ("The Show Must Go On"). When Danny Partridge, ever on the make, pretended to be Jewish so he could meet a cute Jewish girl, I learned that Jews read the Old Testament, wear yarmulkes, and celebrate different holidays than Christians do ("Danny Converts"). From another of Danny's mishaps, when he attempted to pass off an

early Hemingway story as his own work, I not only learned the name “Hemingway,” I also learned what plagiarism is, and why it is frowned upon.

While these entertainment programs were not intended primarily as “educational” in the sense of explicitly teaching facts, they were certainly *normative* in their approach to their topics. The “family-oriented” Brady and Partridge stories were informed by distinct social/ethical/political values. In contrast to the real-world social and political convulsions of the late 1960s and 70s, the dominant ideology of these programs presented a non-confrontational, comforting, suburban balance between respect for Authority and the pursuit of individual fulfillment, played out within a comic framework. Conflicts arose, but were inevitably resolved when everyone genially decided to all get along, pitch in together, be honest, stick up for the little guy, do the right thing, accept personal responsibility, apply the Golden Rule, and above all, keep a sense of humor about themselves and their problems.

While programs like these can, and should, be critiqued for their mawkish moralism and simplistic solutions to problems that are fairly trivial in the first place, there is also no doubting their influence as mass purveyors of cultural information and attitudes. The point of “Danny Converts” was to move Danny from laughable ignorance to respectful multicultural celebration of Jewish traditions. “Bobby’s Hero” suggested that romanticized accounts of the Old West wrongly made heroes of killers. The Bradys’ parodic take on Longfellow made it quite clear that poetry is worse than irrelevant—it is silly and boring, and those who like it (and—horrors!—assign it to their students!) tend to be impossibly snooty and out of touch. However, with a few wacky props and sound

effects, the dead language of Longfellow's poem can be re-energized and made fun. Through it all, the American Family happily sticks together and solves all its problems within 23 minutes.

This is not to say that the comforting banalities of such entertainment can be accepted at face value. Ideological tensions in society at large played out in what The Partridge Family and The Brady Bunch *didn't* say. Although both programs were intended to valorize the American Family as an institution, the "back-story" of each involved the *end* of previous marriages, albeit by death, not divorce. Mike & Carol Brady and Shirley Partridge had all lost their spouses prior to the series' premieres, facts which tended to be mentioned only in the first few episodes and then largely ignored. This seems a rather surprising state of affairs for The Brady Bunch, since the premise of the show turned on the merging of two previously unacquainted families. While stories involving single parents—often widowers—with families was a staple of popular entertainment long before the late 1960s (Bachelor Father, My Three Sons, Bonanza, The Andy Griffith Show, or Sky King, for instance), it also seems reasonable to see shows like The Brady Bunch and The Partridge Family as responses to the growing divorce rates of the times, since they reinforced the comforting myth of the family as a sanctuary from the complexities of contemporary life. Indeed, the first US network sitcom to explicitly make a divorced family the center of its action was Norman Lear's One Day at a Time (CBS 1975), which faced protests from some "pro family" groups for portraying the main character's divorce as fairly normal.

Shifts in popular mores and ideological norms have reshaped how the formula fictions of The Brady Bunch and The Partridge Family are received. Because of their very resistance to the ideological foment of their times, both shows now stand as kitsch classics, widely celebrated as camp by current audiences. The utter unreality of the Bradys' world was played for laughs in The Brady Bunch Movie (1995), which knowingly mocks the TV series' simplistic moral lessons, making the Bradys' unnaturally green Astroturf back yard an ironic icon of the TV family's carefully-constructed distance from social reality.

Movies aimed at the youth market are similarly ambivalent about certain key ideological assumptions in middle-class American culture, even though very few films take a skeptical approach to the idea that "middle-class American culture" is a coherent whole. In particular, an entire sub-genre of teen film, the high-school comedy, explores Americans' ambivalent beliefs about education and literacy.<sup>5</sup> We value learning, but not too much learning, and generally prefer the mythos of clever Yankee ingenuity to the Platonic model of the philosopher-king. Robert Pattison notes that an "endless stream of Hollywood high school movies" spoof American schools as places "where book learning has become a subsidiary activity in the real process of education, which takes place in the corridors, the locker rooms, the principals' office, the backseat—almost anywhere but the classroom" ("Stupidity Crisis" 7). Teachers in these comedies are usually nerdy, out of touch, cruel, boring, or hypocritical. Films such as Fast Times at Ridgemont High, Rock

---

<sup>5</sup> I will leave aside the "inspirational teacher" dramas like Stand and Deliver or Dangerous Minds, where teachers are inspiring, godlike stereotypes instead of buffoonish stereotypes. Although these films engage similar anxieties about education and youth culture, I will keep my focus on comedy.

'n' Roll High School, The Breakfast Club, Heathers, Dazed and Confused, and Clueless portray schools as places where social growth, rather than academic achievement, is the most important value. Even so, Pattison argues that while the high school students depicted in these movies

take a relaxed and skeptical view of book learning, they are also satirical about those who refuse to learn at all, or to think, or to care. The youth philosophy simultaneously celebrated and satirized in Hollywood's high school movies is not opposed to learning. . . or any of the virtues the critics believe have disappeared from American life. [. . . The] first lesson of the kind of education described in these movies is that a sense of humor is the highest educational value. It's not a bad lesson. Certainly, it's a lesson the humanist can live with. ("Stupidity Crisis" 8)

What's more, these films' humor is based upon fairly democratic, egalitarian ideals, embodied though they may be in stereotypical characters. We know that we are supposed to dislike the snobbery of the most popular girls, the bullying swagger of the football stars, the petty inflexibility of the mean, humorless teacher who enforces every last rule. The nerds are a bit ridiculous for being so smart and having such poor social skills, but they at least have something useful to contribute, like breaking into the dictatorial principal's computer and deleting a key file to save the day. Sometimes the nerds are even pretty sympathetic, as in Peggy Sue Got Married and Dazed and Confused. The burnouts and slackers, like Jeff Spicoli in Ridgemont High, the potheads of Dazed and Confused, and the title characters of Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure, are at once

attractive, for their willingness to flout conformity, yet laughable for their utter cluelessness—the humor depends on our seeing ourselves as smarter than these dopes, even as we sort of wish we, too, could spend all our time goofing off like them. We enjoy seeing them and identifying with their carnivalesque rule-flouting, but we don't necessarily want to *be* them. These characters are not all that far removed from good old Huck Finn himself: laughably ignorant by choice, unwilling to be “sivilized,” but possessed of an easygoing good nature and innate decency that are reminiscent of the “wise fool.” Our appreciation of these characters and their misadventures depends upon a broadly-shared set of democratic values and ideologies, not necessarily upon a narrowly fact-based cultural literacy.

Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure is, well, an *excellent* example of humor that depends upon the audience's willingness to identify with its broad ideological premises and upon a certain familiarity with specific cultural signifiers. This 1989 science-fiction comedy concerns two airhead teenagers whose main interests are skateboarding and heavy metal music. For some reason, the fate of the universe is dependent on their passing World History, so a helpful emissary from the future (George Carlin) sends Bill (Alex Winter) and Ted (Keanu Reeves) travelling through time to meet assorted historical personages, who they bring back to modern Southern California (played in the film by Phoenix, Arizona). In order to grasp the movie's humor, the viewer must have at least a rudimentary familiarity with the historical figures and scenes encountered by Bill and Ted, as well as with the youth/pop/rock-culture references in the film. Chances are that the viewers' familiarity with such figures as Napoleon and Lincoln comes from other

pop-cultural artifacts, such as those cartoons parodying Jacques-Louis David's 1812 portrait of Napoleon with his hand tucked inside his jacket, than on any rigorous study of history. Popular culture provides, through its "unconscious learning of transitory materials," a common frame of reference that makes the historical jokes in Bill and Ted comprehensible. Indeed, understanding all the humor in the film requires a broader frame of reference than a purely academic version of cultural literacy. The film fairly bursts with references to soap operas, rock songs, movies, and teen fashions.

The audience gets the historical jokes because they are at least marginally more knowledgeable than Bill and Ted, who quite literally don't know much about history. For instance, a viewer must know a smidgen about the Spanish Inquisition in order to recognize that Bill and Ted shouldn't look forward to a visit to the Iron Maiden (their reaction: "Iron Maiden? Bitchin'!"). I would argue that it doesn't particularly matter whether viewers know about the torture device from formal learning about the Spanish Inquisition, or from having seen it in an old Addams Family rerun. The audience knows, by whatever means, that the heavy-metal band took its name from a medieval torture device.

To be sure, Bill and Ted is no sophisticated satire on learning. Even its depiction of teen social life lacks the caustic accuracy of satiric fantasies like Heathers or The Craft. Much of the humor is just plain silly, such as Bill and Ted calling Billy the Kid "Mr. The Kid," or claiming they know all about who Napoleon was: "That short dead French dude." Even so, many of the historical gags elicit precisely the same kinds of chuckles from a contemporary audience that Hirsch praised in 1066 and All That: we

know that there was more to Napoleon than that he was short, but we might not be able to recall exactly what it was. I would argue that the fuzzy awareness of Napoleon that we share with Bill and Ted is no more a danger to the health of the nation than the fuzzy memories of Ethelred-the-Unready shared by those mid-century Britons. I would also argue that in some ways it makes little difference whether we attain a fuzzy knowledge of Napoleon through pop culture or through formal schooling, as long as we are able to make some practical cognitive use of that fuzzy knowledge. The *channel* of learning may be less important than the fact that we are able to make use of those fragments of knowledge in particular discursive situations, teen comedy movies being just one example.

Like many other teen comedies, Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure also pays homage to the democratic ideals that Pattison argues are essential to American youth culture. Bill and Ted come to realize that education has its virtues, if approached with a sense of humor and humanity. The pair's final summation of what he has learned from his encounters with history is, in its surfer-boy-meets-Hallmark-card sort of way, a valid enough humanistic dictum: "Be excellent to each other." It might not even be stretching the point too far to suggest that the movie supports the concept of "discovery learning"—once out of the dry world of books and lectures, Bill and Ted begin to realize that history isn't simply an accumulation of dates and facts about dead people, but is about how real people managed to respond to the difficulties of their times, from wars to history tests.

These teen films both reflect and transmit Americans' ambivalent, almost schizoid opinions about education—on the whole, we admire it, but we're simultaneously

wary of the overly-educated, or of those who are “book smart” but lack common sense or social skills. The egghead, the rocket scientist, the geek, the “intellectual bum” (an epithet my older brother called me when I preferred reading to household chores) are often objects of suspicion and derision in mass culture. Intellectuals are often depicted as fussy eccentrics, ineffectual dreamers, nutty professors, or, on the more sinister side, as mad scientists or cynical participants in shady business or government schemes. What they really need, the entertainment industry often shows us, is to stop all that troublesome thinking, have some fun, and maybe buy some Pepsi. Indeed, such ambivalence about the acquisition of a collection of literate and cultural practices is reflected by the popularity of works such as Cultural Literacy and Closing of the American Mind. To paraphrase humorist Dave Barry, it seems that the only skill that Americans excel at anymore is producing studies that show how stupid Americans are.

On the other hand, the democratic impulses that Pattison identifies also can work to the nerds’ advantage: if they are social misfits, they are people, too, darn it, and in many popular narratives the nerd is ultimately accepted as a necessary, even valuable part of the peer group. On occasion, nerdy smart people even turn out to be heroes, perhaps best exemplified by The X-Files’ Fox Mulder, a genius FBI agent who is obsessed with the paranormal and with space aliens—and whose social ineptitude and personality quirks are portrayed as comically loveable, not dweeby. To be sure, Mulder’s occasional comic-relief helpers, “The Lone Gunmen,” fit every stereotype possible of conspiracy nuts and smart-but-dorky computer geeks, almost as if the show simply *had* to find an outlet for portraying such characteristics—images which many fans of science fiction

programs enjoy cultivating themselves. In most cases, the nerd is either eventually recognized for his/her own innate qualities, but in others, the nerd, with a little help, undergoes an Eliza Doolittle-esque transformation from ugly duckling to beautiful swan. The latter plot line is typified by an infamous Brady Bunch episode, “My Fair Opponent,” in which Marcia helps a homely friend become gorgeous and popular by convincing her to wear contact lenses instead of horn-rimmed glasses, re-styling her hair, and teaching her a few makeup tips. To reinforce the notion that “being yourself” is the most important thing, the newly made-over girl becomes snooty and puts on airs, but finally realizes that she is alienating her friends. She and Marcia make up and all is happy. The complex dance of messages valuing conformity and individuality in this episode is enough to make your head spin; the sitcom framework, of course, makes it possible for *both* to be fully accommodated, and for the difficulties to be wrapped up quite tidily. Again, this is not to suggest that such simple solutions should be taken at face value; rather, they reflect ideological ambivalence that continues to resonate well past the too-easy endings of the programs themselves.

### **To Read the Impossible Dream**

When we think carefully about the contexts in which we have come to know a thing, we must look at how those contexts differ from each other. The simplest comparison might be between a bit of information that we’ve encountered in a pop-culture text and the “same” referent (only it *isn’t* the same, don’t you see!) encountered in a classroom context. For instance, when I was about seven years old, I watched Mr.

Rogers' Neighborhood faithfully; one of the puppets on the show was “Donkey Hodey,” who lived in a little windmill. Around the same time, my mother took me to see a local amateur theater production of Man of La Mancha, and I was surprised to find that the main character not only had the same name as the puppet, he also had a similar penchant for windmills. I thought that was a pretty neat trick, and wondered if the writers of the play knew about Mr. Rogers’ puppet. Although I didn’t really follow the musical’s plot too well, I think I eventually figured out that the “adult” version, “Don Quixote,” must have come first, and that the puppet took his name from the knight, not the other way around. Over the years, I eventually heard more about “Don Quixote,” including the adjective “quixotic” and the phrase “tilting at windmills.” At some point in high school, I read John Steinbeck’s Travels With Charley, and learned that Don Quixote’s horse was named “Rocinante.”

For my classroom experience of Don Quixote, we fast-forward to 1983, my junior year in college, when I finally read Cervantes in a comparative literature course. The professor had primed us with a brief history of the novel’s reception in various times, warning that the character Don Quixote had acquired an “undeserved” reputation as a romantic dreamer whose fantasies and tilting at windmills were ennobling and emblematic of fighting for a glorious but hopeless cause. Rather, the prof suggested, we should try to take Cervantes at least partly at his narrator’s word: Quixote is a decent man who has foolishly gone mad because he’s read too much bad chivalric fiction. Nonetheless, at the time, I found myself *unable* to read the book without constantly humming “The Impossible Dream” under my breath. The rosy, romantic sentiments of

the song and Man of La Mancha had stuck with me, even though they contrasted violently with Cervantes' often mean-spirited farce about books and their readers. To say the least, my experience of the novel was fairly complicated, though perhaps no more complex than any other reading. At the suggestion of the professor, a decent man who had himself been driven mad by reading too much Derrida, I ended up writing my major seminar paper about Don Quixote as an allegory for the act of reading itself. As I recall, my paper was influenced greatly by the professor's comments in class and in private revision conferences. It may also have been partly shaped by my having read, in a class a year or so earlier, Jorge Luis Borges' short story "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," although I did not directly cite the story in my paper and am only recognizing the possible connections now, years later. "Menard" is an absurdist pastiche of literary criticism about a writer who sets out to write Don Quixote—not to "re-write" it or "translate" it, but to truly *write* the novel anew. Cervantes' and Menard's Don Quixote are identical, word-for-word, but cannot be the *same* book, because, after all, Cervantes wrote his version in 16<sup>th</sup>-Century Spain, while Menard wrote his version in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, using, as a literary device, the quaint 16<sup>th</sup>-Century Castillian of Cervantes. Context makes all the difference between the two, identical though they outwardly seem.

My informal knowledge about Don Quixote and my classroom-based knowledge of the book mingled throughout my reading. While some traditionalists might bemoan the way that my pop-culture awareness of Don Quixote "polluted" my first full reading of the book, my reading was of course no *more* "tainted" by the discursive context in which I read than any other reader's in any other time. Contexts change, and since no text can

exist in a discursive vacuum, Don Quixote is of course read differently by each reader, some thinking of chivalric romances they've read, some humming "The Impossible Dream," and some who can't carry a tune. My Wabbit-Literate awareness of some elements of Don Quixote was not, as I thought at the time, an impediment to my understanding of the novel, but was simply a part of the dialogic landscape that I brought to the book. My fragmentary knowledge about Don Quixote may even have helped me focus, in my own analysis, on the novel's commentary on fiction and reading. After all, in the second part of the novel, published a decade after the first, Don Quixote is amazed to meet other characters who have read the first part, as well as a few who have read an unauthorized sequel by another writer. I was delighted, as a fan of John Barth and Donald Barthelme, to discover that Cervantes was doing metafiction centuries before the term had been coined. All my previous experiences with other versions of, variations on, and references to Don Quixote primed me to see it as a novel about reading and writing, as much as the "text itself" did.

Indeed, when I recently re-read the novel for the first time since 1983, I was playing with a whole new set of intertextual connections, prominent among them my memory of all that earlier reading and writing about the novel, my reading of Vladimir Nabokov's Lectures on Don Quixote, and, of course, all of the thoughts about textual play that I have been juggling while writing this dissertation. As I read, I occasionally tried to pay attention to how these multiple intertextual influences were shaping my reading, an occasionally disorienting process that required me to "step back" from the novel and look at it as a construction, and to look at my reading of it as a dialogue with

all those earlier textual experiences. While I cannot make any grand conclusions about insights I gained into Don Quixote through this reading, I was, at the very least, often acutely aware of being a reader, reading a book that I had read before. And of course, as I write this, I am once again *re*-constructing my process of reading, only conveying a partial sense of how that process works. Curiously, this most recent reading was almost entirely free of “Impossible Dream” humming, except when I consciously thought about my previous reading. Perhaps I had “outgrown” the song or its usefulness as an interpretive aid to the text.

### **Conclusion: Hard Facts, Fuzzy Knowledge, and Slippery Texts**

This chapter has argued that cultural knowledge is embedded in particular contexts, purposes, and practices. “Knowledge” itself is a rhetorical construct; that is, it is not merely a collection of isolated, independent facts, but is more properly viewed as a series of overlapping interpretive frames through which facts are understood. Each member of a culture comes to know about things through different experiential/dialogic routes, and so any given referent is slightly different for each interpreter. Even so, enough common ground exists among individuals in most discursive contexts to allow them to speak meaningfully with each other. Play and parody are among the many frames through which knowledge can be acquired and “read.” Because these frames explicitly work by taking incongruous or creative views of cultural knowledge, “Wabbit Literacy” is a potentially valuable means of interrogating systems of knowledge and of calling attention to the inherent gaps in such systems.

In tension with the fragmentary, quirky and individual nature of cultural knowledge as experienced by the individual, there is the impulse to systematize and normalize particular systems of knowledge, perhaps best represented by E.D. Hirsch's Cultural Literacy. Unfortunately, the systematized (and hence prescriptive) list that makes up the book's appendix tends to overshadow one of Hirsch's most useful insights—that fragmentary and partial knowledge is often perfectly satisfactory for making sense of the world. This idea dovetails quite nicely with Linda Hutcheon's concept of the “discursive community”—a grouping of people, variable in accordance with the discursive situation, who are able through sharing strands of interests and knowledges—to make sense of a particular utterance.

Hirsch's limited model of cultural literacy also denies that it is grounded in any particular ideology beyond the broadest “American” values of democracy and individual freedom, a claim belied by the cultural conservatism of the book's appendix. Further, mere sharing of facts does not necessarily instill ideological agreement or even common ground for discussion among diverse groups. All knowledge is situated within an ideological context, whether that knowledge is transmitted through traditional outlets of learning, such as schools, or through the learner's chance encounters with popular culture and the media. Indeed, youth culture, and media directed to youth culture, may be more influential in reproducing some aspects of cultural knowledge than are classrooms. This is not necessarily cause for alarm, since close reading of several pop-culture texts suggests that youth-oriented entertainment frequently celebrates humanistic values such

as fairness, equality, and having a sense of humor, while encouraging skepticism of extremism and of institutional authority.

Finally, close examination of the interaction between formal and informal means of learning about culture can help us recognize the many intertextual interactions involved in any interpretation of a text. The question is not so much whether traditional or pop-cultural influences should be dominant in textual interpretation, but rather that we should consider *all* the discursive influences that become, as Stanley Fish puts it, “part of [one’s] repertoire for organizing the world and its events” (313). In the following chapter, I will examine ways in which mass-entertainment media shape our “repertoires for organizing the world,” and ways in which playful responses to corporate texts can engage the consumer in resistance to media power.

## CHAPTER 4

## THE AMBIVALENT WABBIT: FROM CARNIVAL TO THEME PARK

*True ambivalent and universal laughter does not deny seriousness but purifies and completes it. Laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naïveté and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality. Laughter [... restores] ambivalent wholeness. (Bakhtin, Rabelais 123)*

Wabbit Literate reading can be seen as a dialogic process, highly capricious and subject to individual variations in interpretation. On a small scale, its clashes between parodic and “straight” learning about literary texts parallel Carnival’s “conflict of official and unofficial forces” (Holquist xxi). These conflicts play out, of course, in the context of a highly commodified discursive environment, in which virtually everything, even irony and play, is packaged and for sale. Ironically enough, commodified irony gives us some discursive tools to take apart the commodified entertainment texts we are immersed in.

Parodic texts, like all other texts, involve a balancing act between centripetal (unifying) forces and centrifugal (disunifying and decentralizing) forces: “Every utterance participates in the ‘unitary language’ (in its centripetal forces and tendencies) and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia (the centrifugal, stratifying forces)” (Bakhtin, Dialogic Imagination 272). Wabbit Literacy pushes the balance of these forces slightly off-kilter: the parodic, centrifugal impulse of parody has temporal prominence over the social/historical grounding of the “established” text.

Parody is a necessarily ambivalent genre, constantly shifting between making fun of the “target” text while repeating enough of the “target” to make the parodic variations recognizable, thus reinforcing to a degree the cultural capital of the target text.

Bakhtin argues that modern parody has degenerated from the ambivalent interplay of death and rebirth embodied by the medieval carnival: “The purely formalist literary parody of modern times. . . has a solely negative character and is deprived of regenerating ambivalence” (*Rabelais* 21). Although modern parody may be but a shadow of its former self, within that shadow we nonetheless find “fragments of grotesque realism, which at times are not mere remnants of the past but manifest a renewed vitality” (*Rabelais* 24). Under the right conditions, the process of learning through parody, and thus learning to think parodically, can revive some of parody’s vitality and anti-authoritarianism, since the parodic reference is, for the Wabbit Literate learner, the starting-point for awareness of a given cultural item. This reversal of the imagined “right” order of reading a parody not only undermines the authority of the original, but also makes possible a kind of “regenerating ambivalence” not unlike that of medieval carnival. Reversing the order in which parody and original are read, Wabbit Literacy encourages active oscillation among many different attitudes toward cultural signifiers. The Wabbit Literate reader does not encounter parody as an allusive, second-order reference to an original text. Rather, the parody has, at least initially, a primary claim on the reader’s consciousness. The “original” will then be read through the filter of the parody’s carnivalesque variations, encouraging ambivalence toward cultural signifiers,

calling into doubt the prestige of the high-culture original, and encouraging, though not guaranteeing, further creative play with cultural signifiers.

In this chapter, I will analyze how both professionals and amateurs play the tricky cultural game of parodic transformation, working out in various ways the puzzles of their relationships to their “target” texts and to the cultural power associated with those texts. The first section will analyze the work of professional film-makers and their divergent approaches to working with classical music in animated film. Disney’s 1941 Fantasia attempted to dignify animation by associating it with the high-cachet genre of classical music, while several Warner Bros. short parodies of Fantasia inverted the Disney film’s relationship to classical music, using popular classics as a means to both ridicule Disney and to spoof the cultural pretensions of classical music in general. The second section will examine the ambivalent relationships between entertainment texts and their fans. First, I will examine how commodification and context influence cartoons’ (and cartoon characters’) reception by the viewing/consuming public, noting that irony can be both a strategy of participation in and of resistance to consumer culture. Next, I will discuss the theme park as a sort of anti-carnival, a place where play is discouraged and passive amusement encouraged. Finally, I will discuss the possibilities for resistant, oppositional “readings” of themed amusements, strategies that some visitors to and employees of Disney World have employed to temporarily alter the corporate-sanctioned experience of the theme park. The final section rounds out the chapter by analyzing an explicitly dialogic, parodic form of reading entertainment texts, as practiced by the television program Mystery Science Theater 3000 and its fans. This last section argues that fans

have the power to “talk back” to popular media, taking a degree of control and power over what is commonly thought of as the “passive” experience of viewing TV and movies.

### ***Fantasia, Loony Tunes, and Middle Class Anxieties***

In the commercial realm of animated film, we can see a distinct clash of attitudes toward “high” culture, as played out in cartoons produced by the two giants of American animated film in the mid-20th century. Animators at both Disney and Warner Bros.<sup>1</sup> were well aware that animation was not taken seriously as an art form, and although most of the top animators of the time were devoted to their work, their memoirs have been decidedly ambivalent about whether they considered what they did “art” in the “high culture” sense of the word. Most animators at the major studios were trained in commercial art and advertising graphics, and even those who had some “fine arts” education tended to think of animation as something other than capital-A Art. Chuck Jones, for instance, jokes in his memoir that after graduating from a fine-arts school, he fully expected to “become an easel painter, consumptive and unrecognized, dying picturesquely at [...] thirty-seven in a wonderfully shabby Paris garret [...] the starving part was partially accurate” (55). Most people doing animation knew that their medium was routinely considered second-rate; not surprisingly, their creations reflect a good deal of ambivalence about animation’s status in comparison to “highbrow” art. Disney aimed

---

<sup>1</sup> The abbreviation—“Warner Bros.” instead of “Warner Brothers”—is the film company’s official name, and is standard in referring to the company.

at refinement of technique and technology in a bid to be considered “real Art,” with Fantasia being the most conspicuous example. The Warner animators tended to use sly parodies to show that they also knew a thing or two about Art, glorying in the possibilities of their seemingly slapdash but actually painstaking medium.

The state of the art in the 1940s-50s was marked by two stylistic extremes: Disney’s lifelike, technically innovative feature films, and the Warner Brothers Studios’ relatively inexpensive, frenetic, genre-driven shorts. Disney sought to break new ground in animation technology and filmic “realism,” while the crew of young animators at Warner’s “Termite Terrace” had only two directives from their famously obtuse producer Leon Schlesinger: be funny, and do so within a very tight budget. Disney animators sweated over details of animal anatomy to make the deer in Bambi as lifelike as possible; Warner animators created seemingly boneless “Zip-Crash” creatures like Daffy Duck, “enigmas who lived outside the rules of plot, space and time” (Klein 172). Even the degree of the studio head’s personal involvement in the creative process varied: though not much of a cartoonist himself, Walt Disney closely supervised the animators working under his name. In contrast, the Warner brothers were living caricatures of out-of-touch bosses. In a famous anecdote related by Warner animator Chuck Jones, studio chief Harry Warner said that “he had no idea where our cartoon division was, and added, ‘The only thing I know is that we make Mickey Mouse.’ We were proud to hear that and assured him that we would continue to keep Mickey at the top of his popularity” (Jones 89). In general, Disney embodied an aesthetic of control and artfulness, Warner an

aesthetic of anarchy and play.<sup>2</sup> Disney cartoons, particularly the features, feel mannered, calculated to amaze the viewer with dazzling visual flourishes. Warner cartoons, on the other hand, have a looser, impulsive style that suggests that the laws of physics and visual reality are outrageous limitations that should be done away with whenever necessary for a gag. These institutional differences in style (and in cultural assumptions) are nicely illustrated by the dialogic responses of the Warner Bros. animators to Disney's most self-consciously "artful" film, Fantasia.

Walt Disney, well aware that cartoons were generally considered unworthy of serious attention, sought to raise the cultural cachet of his pictures with the 1940 release of Fantasia. Within the movie industry, the Disney studio had by 1940 already established its reputation as a producer of "quality" films, having won a number of Academy Awards for both short cartoons and its animated feature Snow White. Still, for many, especially the nabobs of "high" culture, the name "Disney" was inextricably linked with children's fare. Pre-release publicity for Fantasia therefore attempted to reposition Walt Disney as not only a "genius" of film, but also as a serious cultural player, making the most of his collaboration with conductor Leopold Stokowski and musicologist Deems Taylor, and stressing Igor Stravinsky's comment that "That is what I must have meant by my music" (Luckett 218). In its original release, Fantasia was billed as a "concert for the screen," playing only in select cities, in theaters that had to install a technically-advanced

---

<sup>2</sup> It would be a mistake to push the generalization too far, of course—Disney's short films, up through the 1940s, retained an element of anarchy in characters like Donald Duck or Goofy, and many of the Warner animators were Disney veterans whose stylistic looseness was the result of careful discipline. In Bakhtinian terms, their ability to flout the conventions of art arose from disciplined study of the craft.

“Fantasound” stereo sound system. Moviegoers attending the 1940-41 release were even given a 32-page concert-style program which “discussed the ideas behind the production of Fantasia and provided background knowledge on each musical selection” (Luckett 215). The film is framed as a concert of eight symphonic pieces conducted by Stokowski, each introduced with a short music-appreciation lecture by Taylor.

Despite the studio’s calculated campaign to position Fantasia as serious art, and Disney himself as a serious artist, Walt Disney also spoke of Fantasia as a means of bringing high culture to the everyday moviegoer: “We simply figured that if ordinary folks like ourselves could find entertainment in these visualizations of so-called classical music, so would the average audience” (Feild 283-84). Such aw-shucks declarations hint at the studio’s ambivalence about Fantasia’s place in the cultural world. The film was aimed both at increasing Disney’s cultural capital and at bringing capital-C Culture to the common man, but the two competing impulses led to a decidedly mixed critical and popular reception in 1940. Film critics were generally positive, while music critics, the cultural gatekeepers that the film’s publicity was at least partly aimed at, were almost universally aghast. Music critics’ main objections “concerned the fusion of classical music and film, the issue of appropriate interpretations and translation of music, and [...] the question of the cultural status of this hybrid of music and film” (Luckett 219-21). For the most part, they felt that any blending of film and music would work to the detriment of the music; others complained that Fantasia simply cheapened classical music by serving it up (with pastel-colored unicorns, no less!) to the musically unworthy (Luckett 223-24).

Not all music critics lambasted Fantasia for middlebrow aspirations; a few attacked the movie's unstated premise that ordinary folks needed the help of Disney and Stokowski to understand "high" culture in the first place. In a review for The Nation, music critic B.H. Haggin objected to Fantasia's "music for the masses" marketing. In particular, he ridiculed the movie program's

statement by Stokowski that "the beauty and inspiration of music must not be restricted to a privileged few but made available to every man, woman, and child"... This act of Stokowski's, in which he brings to the many what has been jealously withheld from them by the privileged few, was phony even ten years ago, when with four one-hour broadcasts spread over months he first brought the beauty and inspiration of music to those who had been hearing Toscanini's two-hour broadcasts with the New York Philharmonic every Sunday. (54)

The situation was not so much that average movie-goers had culture denied them; rather, Disney's marketing team quite deftly exploited the middle-class cultural anxieties that helped launch countless "middlebrow" self-improvement classes and book clubs in the 1930s and 40s.

### **Talking Back to Walt**

The Warner cartoonists replied to the Disney "masterpiece" and its high-art aspirations with three raucous parodies of *Fantasia*: "A Corny Concerto" (1943, Bob

Clampett), “Long-Haired Hare” (1949, Chuck Jones), and Jones’s own masterwork, “What’s Opera, Doc?” (1957). These cartoons’ jazzy riffs on Fantasia recall Bakhtin’s characterization of grotesque realism as “a rejection of that which is finished and completed, of the didactic and utilitarian spirit of the Enlighteners with their narrow and artificial optimism” (Rabelais 37). Where Disney gives us a lecture-hall version of classical music, the Warner cartoons play the part of class clowns, gleefully making armpit music in the back of the classroom. The Warner animators were keenly aware of Disney’s technical superiority in animation. Says Chuck Jones, “Strange thing: that was probably healthy for all of us. We would look at his stuff and say, ‘No matter what we do, Disney is going to be a little ahead of us, particularly in technique.’ So without thinking, we evolved our own style” (Adamson 137).

Linda Hutcheon argues that “parody is a value-problematizing, de-naturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representation” (Politics of Postmodernism, 94). The decidedly populist Warner Bros. shorts question Disney’s reverent attitude toward classical music, acknowledging Fantasia’s technical mastery while spoofing its merging of concert-hall and movie theater, almost as if insisting that while classical music and animation can be merged, there’s no need for a cartoon to apologize for being *cartoony*. Clampett’s “A Corny Concerto” replaces Fantasia’s elegant, “live” lecturer Deems Taylor with the stumbling, very-much-a-cartoon Elmer Fudd. Taylor looks like he was born to wear a tuxedo; he speaks in the cadences of a Chattaqua lecturer, learned but not pretentious. In contrast, the starched front of Elmer’s ill-fitting tux rebels against its wearer; his gloves flop all over his hands, clearly

on the wrong fingers. Elmer's lallation, which normally makes only Elmer ridiculous, serves in this cartoon to extend ridicule to the Highbrow Music Expert. Having the perfectly bald Elmer stand in for Taylor/Stokowski may even involve a bit of a visual pun: *this* classical music expert is clearly anything but a "longhair." Elmer the music lecturer is both teacher and buffoon wrapped into a single figure; a class clown would be superfluous. "Corny Concerto" also deftly parodies some of Fantasia's more excessive stylistic flourishes. The characters move in ridiculous hyper-synchronization with the music: Porky's hunting dog in "Tales from the Vienna Woods" sniffs the air and cries in time to the music, and a mother swan and her three babies swim and quack in unison with the "Blue Danube" waltz. Clampett also spoofs the water-and-reflection effects that Fantasia's animators couldn't seem to get enough of. The short opens with a flower falling on still water, concentric wavelets delicately spreading from the floating bloom. "Blue Danube" ends with a little black duck's shimmering reflection separating from the duck himself as he swims off into the distance. The loose reflection crashes into a tree, then hurries to rejoin itself with the duck as the cartoon irises out. These visual puns are almost a playground taunt aimed at Disney: "Nyah-nyah! We can do pretty effects too, and we don't need a multi-million dollar budget, either!"

In most Warner cartoons set in the concert or opera hall, the cultural authority figure of the conductor or virtuoso performer is uproariously undone. The conductor or performer is satirized in one of two ways: he is either a professorial stuffed shirt who is bedeviled by a clown character intruding upon the action (Bugs, Daffy, a pesky fly, etc.), or the role is played by one of the stock Warner clowns, thus automatically undermining

the dignity of the role. This is particularly evident in Chuck Jones's "Long-Haired Hare," which is driven by a parodic clash between the cultures of popular music and opera. The cartoon opens with Bugs strumming a banjo, singing the ditty "What do they do on a rainy night in Georgia?" The scene pans to the nearby home of opera star "Giovanni Jones,"<sup>3</sup> rehearsing an aria. Bugs's music drifts through the window, the pop song literally invading the domain of the Artist, and Giovanni finds himself singing the popular tune in spite of himself. He runs outside and crushes Bugs's banjo. This scene is repeated, with variations, escalating to Bugs's last-straw declaration, "Of course you realize this means war." Bugs then arrives at Giovanni's concert at the Hollywood Bowl, and proceeds to wreak mayhem, pounding with a mallet on the "acoustically perfect" bandshell, which vibrates madly and sends Giovanni skittering around the stage like a pinball. After instructing the conductor to "just play a vamp" while Giovanni recovers, Bugs sneaks backstage disguised as a bobby-soxer, his ears braided and tied with a red bow, and implores, "Oh, Mr. Jones! Mr. Jones! [. . .] Frankie and Perry just aren't in it! You're my crooner dreamboat loverboy! Can I *please* have your autograph?" Of course, the "pen" is a stick of dynamite. Here, the guise of the pop-music groupie allows Bugs access to, and a victory over, the high-art performer, with little doubt about where our class sympathies should lie. Finally, Bugs enters the orchestra pit as stern-faced "Leopold," as the musicians whisper that name in awe. The conductor hands over his

---

<sup>3</sup> Such tiny in-jokes, using names of Warner creative staff, were ubiquitous in Loony Tunes/Merrie Melodies cartoons. Indeed, "Bugs Bunny" derived from Ben "Bugs" Hardaway, who did some early sketches that another animator worked with, labelling the second set of sketches "Bugs' bunny." (Brasch 83). In-house naming jokes were almost completely absent from Disney productions (Brasch 73).

baton to “Leopold,” and Bugs promptly snaps it in half and begins conducting with his hands alone, Stokowski’s signature. Chuck Jones has great fun with Bugs’s hand gestures in this bit, eventually leading to a sustained high note that has Giovanni popping his buttons, rolling on the stage, and turning various unnatural colors, until eventually the auditorium crumbles around him. With Giovanni vanquished, Bugs produces a banjo and strums “Good Evening, Friends.” The victory of the little guy—and the little guy’s music—is complete.

Jones’ 1957 masterpiece, “What’s Opera Doc?,” manages to parody Wagnerian opera, Fantasia, and the Warners’ own Bugs/Elmer chase genre all at once. This cartoon, declared in a survey of film critics and animation professionals to be the “best animated cartoon of all time” (Beck 1994) reflects definite ambivalence regarding “classical music for the common man.” On the one hand, “What’s Opera” demonstrates how easily (and, yes, artfully) the conventions of High Opera and low cartoon can be merged. On the other hand, there is no doubt that the cartoon is meant to render opera’s conventions silly, as we see in the Elmer/Bugs duet spoofing Tannhäuser. Elmer: “Oh, Bwünnhilde, you’re so wovewy!” Bugs: “Yes, I know it; I can’t help it!” Bugs performs the song as a vampy diva with a Brooklyn accent, throwing himself languorously across a chaise longue, and generally having far more fun camping up the song, and Elmer, than any proper Brünnhilde ought to.

“What’s Opera Doc?” also spoofs Fantasia’s visual style, particularly the Disney film’s use of light and shadow, its lush backgrounds, and its self-consciously “arty” animation. The cartoon opens with a long shot of a menacing, shadowy figure, a la

Fantasia's "Night on Bald Mountain" segment; the camera zooms down to reveal the puny figure of Elmer in his brass Viking outfit. One of the cartoon's most gorgeous sequences involves Bugs' enormous horse, of which Chuck Jones says, "Missing the great pink, busty quality of the proverbial Wagnerian diva, we invested all the fat curves we owned into Brünnhilde's charger" (Jones 207). As this stupendous creature, with Bugs calmly astride, descends to meet the awestruck Elmer, I see a dialogic reply to Disney's "centaurettes" (pastel critters from Fantasia's desecration of Beethoven's "Pastoral Symphony"), with a bit of Hyacinth Hippo's ("Dance of the Hours") dainty bulkiness thrown in for good measure. A more oblique Disney reference comes at the moment when Elmer realized he has in fact "killed the wabbit:" Bugs lies crumpled across a dramatically spot-lit rock, a single broken flower above him dripping water slowly onto his lifeless face. While the scene does not mimic any single image from Fantasia, the entire mood is Disneyesque: the flower, the water, the lighting, the soaring music. Elmer, grieving, lifts Bugs's limp body into his arms and stalks solemnly into the sunset. Bugs briefly breaks character, lifts his head and says to the audience, "Well, whaddya expect in an opera? A *happy* ending?" then collapses again. Bugs's last line constitutes its own miniature lesson in musicology: Opera does not have happy endings, just in case we didn't know.

In both Fantasia and its parodic imitators, we find unresolved ambivalence about the relationship between "high art" and popular entertainment. Disney's film sought to make classical music accessible to the "common man," but also transformed the music, both by editing and rearranging the pieces themselves, and by coupling them with the

visual imagery that so many music critics felt watered down or negated the power of the music. The Warner Bros. shorts, on the other hand, directly lampoon Disney's artistic pretensions, and, to a lesser degree, parody the high-art conventions of classical music itself—the formalwear of the conductor and patrons, the stylized costumes and plots of opera, and so on. What emerges is a polyglot mishmash of high and lowbrow culture, a commercialized carnival in which we can be part of the concert-going crowd, imbibing “culture” and simultaneously laugh at the snootiness of that elitist-seeming notion of “culture.” But as Linda Hutcheon repeatedly observes in On Parody, the very act of parody has a doubling effect: even as it makes fun of a piece of culture, it also sets that work up as being culturally significant enough to merit being mocked. Despite one critic's claim that “What's Opera, Doc?” conclusively “deals a deathblow to at least four separate sequences of Fantasia” (Thompson 219), it is more productive to view these films as variations on several complex themes, within the context of an ever-shifting dialogue about cultural attitudes and modes of expression. The ironic effects of these plays on classical music are not fixed, just as the meanings of the musical pieces themselves are not fixed. Hutcheon argues that such irony “comes into being in the relations between meanings, but also between people and utterances and, sometimes, between intentions and interpretations” (Irony's Edge 13). The quirky readings that result when we run Fantasia up against its parodic counterparts may invite us to see other cultural signifiers as potential sites for play.

Such play may serve any number of purposes. Play can be simple repetition, of course, a re-enacting of a comfortable set of ideologies and signifiers. Play can be an

homage, a witty riposte, a skeptically raised eyebrow or a challenging taunt. It can also simply be play for play's sake—often with no immediate purpose beyond turning things around to look at them from other angles. But even such play is, in small ways, *potentially* transformative, if only because it opens the possibility for new readings.

Hutcheon argues that parody

contests our humanist assumptions about artistic originality and uniqueness and our capitalist notions of ownership and property. With parody—as with any form of reproduction—the notion of the original as rare, single, and valuable (in aesthetic or commercial terms) is called into question. This does not mean that art has lost its meaning or purpose, but that it will inevitably have a new and different significance. ... parody works to foreground the *politics* of representation. (Hutcheon, “Politics of Parody” 93-94)

Play with texts (or other cultural signifiers such as music or visual imagery) invests the player in a new relationship to the text. This need not necessarily be an oppositional relationship, since the player might well identify deeply with the text, as in the case of fan fiction (“fanfic”), fan-produced stories about characters and situations from popular television series or movies, a genre which I will explore in further detail later in this chapter. Some fanfic writers accept the original producers’ basic premises about the fictional worlds they write about, using textual play to strengthen their identification with the characters and situations. Others, while employing the same characters and situations, re-work them to explore differences between their own values or desires, and the

“official” version of the entertainment franchise (Jenkins 152-156). Play is multivalent, but almost never neutral.

### **Corporate Carnivals and the Commodification of Irony**

*“Whee! Packaging youth rebellion is big-ass fun! I feel like MTV!”*  
 --*Milk And Cheese: Dairy Products Gone Bad*, by Evan Dorkin

Not all play with cultural signifiers is necessarily “carnavalesque” in the Bakhtinian sense. When Disney and Time/Warner own the textual fairgrounds (and you have to pay a hefty admission fee), the opportunities for a real carnival may be limited by design. Some play may simply enact a sterile rearrangement of commodified signifiers transmitted by multinational entertainment companies, much as the shape of children’s play has been increasingly shaped by integrated marketing of entertainment programming and toy lines (*G.I. Joe*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, *Star Wars*, *Sesame Street*, and so on). The content of children’s play and their own creative efforts (writing, drawing, singing) is frequently modeled around characters and situations from such integrated TV/movie/toy products. Even when these programs contain parodic references to cultural signifiers from the adult world, the potential carnivalizing effect of the parody may be subsumed by its overwhelmingly commodified context. Disney’s *The Lion King*, for instance, includes a throwaway gag in which an imprisoned good guy is mournfully singing “Nobody Knows the Troubles I’ve Seen.” When his bad-guy captor complains, “Can’t you sing something more cheerful?” the character launches into a spirited rendition of “It’s a Small World, After All,” and the

bad guy gasps, “No! Anything but THAT!” Parents in the audience laugh appreciatively at the film’s in-joke about the syrupy ditty’s ubiquity, but the gag is nonetheless embedded in a highly successful Disney product for which the viewer has already paid the admission fee or video purchase/rental price. Most younger children will probably “miss” the joke even though they may know the song from other Disney products they own. And even as the gag mildly tweaks Disney *within* a Disney production, it also keeps the parody in-house. The joke does not have quite the same parodic bite as a much more satirical parody of Disneyland’s “Small World” ride in The Simpsons’ visit to “Duff Gardens,” where the repetitious tune in the “Little Land of Duff” ride is a relentless advertising jingle: “Duff Beer for Me / Duff Beer for You / I’ll have a Duff / You have one too!” On top of that, the water in the Duff Gardens boat ride is hallucinogenic (“Selma’s Choice”). If a child is unsure what the Lion King joke is about, the answer is conveniently another Disney product. However, despite such apparently seamless media integration, we remain capable, as I will discuss in the next section, of creating carnivalizing counter-texts within highly commodified discursive environments.

The increasing integration of entertainment and marketing makes it surprisingly easy to repackage yesterday’s seeming iconoclast as a commodity. One of the most striking examples of this commodification of rebellion is the highly successful marketing of Warner Bros. cartoon characters in the 1980s and 90s. On mass-marketed merchandise Bugs Bunny *et al* are depicted as having an “attitude,” dressed in pseudo-streetwise hip-hop fashions. A particularly obnoxious transformation has taken place with the Tasmanian Devil, a minor Looney Tunes character who, in his earliest incarnations, was a

grotesque force of nature, a whirling tornado of centrifugal chaos, a demonic threat to wise-guy Bugs, who inevitably prevailed by outwitting the creature. Mel Blanc gave the Tasmanian Devil a voice that was little more than wild bestial sputtering, with occasional monosyllabic utterances in guttural English. In the five Loony Tunes/Merrie Melodies shorts in which the Tasmanian Devil appears, he is an inarticulate brute and comic threat, not a character the viewer is meant to identify with. In the 1990's, the Devil was given a makeover and became "Taz," still whirling, to be sure, but now a contained whirlwind, sharply domesticated as the star of a limited-animation<sup>4</sup> TV series. The modern "Taz" is an icon of corporate-sanctioned "rebelliousness" along the lines of Burger King's "Sometimes you gotta break the rules" ad campaign. This is not wild at all; it's calculated marketing masquerading as brashness. "Taz," as commodity, has lost the dangerous edge that he possessed in the original cartoons. To be sure, those cartoons were themselves commercial products, but they had an ineffable smartness, honesty, and edge that today's debased, prepackaged "attitude" seems to lack. The modern "Taz" feels like the empty posturing of a Dennis Rodman or the pose-striking of a Madonna, style without substance. With a quick trip to the Warner Bros. Studio Store in the mall, one can equip oneself with a Taz T-shirt or a whole Taz ensemble, an off-the-rack proclamation of nonconformity equivalent to tacking up a James Dean poster in a dorm room.

---

<sup>4</sup> That is, animation using fewer drawn frames, more static character designs, and simpler backgrounds than theatrical cartoons' "full animation." This significantly less-expensive (and less visually rich) technique was brought to the fore by Bill Hanna and Joseph Barbera for television productions after MGM shut down its animation shop in 1957 (Klein 243 ff). Limited animation is the norm for TV animation today.

To be sure, ancillary merchandising was an integral part of the cartoon business from its beginnings, and the cartoons produced during the “Golden Age” of animation were of course produced to make money. Until the late 1980’s, Loony Tunes characters had mostly been licensed for reproduction as inexpensive toys and as images printed on other fairly disposable merchandise. The current mode of merchandising WB characters is simply part of an increasingly sophisticated strategy of integrated marketing pursued by the company since the early 1990’s (Simensky, 175-77). It is difficult to define precisely what makes the anarchy of the old cartoons seem more “genuine” than their present-day spinoffs. To a certain degree, my own overlay of knowledge about the circumstances of the Warner shorts’ production may play a role. The artists at Termite Terrace often genuinely thumbed their noses at the studio system, at the inanities of the movie business, and occasionally at their own bosses, pulling stunts and in-jokes that never would have been tolerated at Disney.<sup>5</sup> Such knowledge is not, however, instrumental to the classic cartoons’ sense of anarchic play. Rather, the cartoon texts themselves provide adequate context for the characters’ smart-aleck behavior. There was motivation for Bugs’ cunning, Daffy’s sputtering rage, Wile E. Coyote’s voracious, bumbling cruelty. Stripped of filmic narrative context, these attitudes become “Attitude”—the stuff of marketing, reducing their meaning to mere hipness. The context-dependent difference between satire and hipness is nicely summed up by comic-book artist Evan Dorkin, who says of his own work, “I’m just trying to be funny, not hip, and I

---

<sup>5</sup> For instance, Chuck Jones claims that Daffy Duck’s voice was Mel Blanc’s spoof of producer Leon Schlesinger, who cluelessly reacted to the first screening by exclaiming, “Jeethus Christh, that’s a funny voithe! Where’d you get that voith?!” (Jones 90-91).

think there's a big difference there. If you know what it is, by all means let me know—all I can figure out is that being 'hip' makes you rich, and being funny gets people mad at you" (Dorkin, electronic correspondence). A mass-produced T-shirt image of Bugs striking a hip-hop pose, arms crossed over chest, head cocked, one eyebrow arched, wearing baggy jeans and a backwards baseball cap simply lacks the rhetorical immediacy of the fully-animated Bugs coolly stating, after suffering a series of indignities, "Of course you realize this means war." In the continuum that runs from centrifugal rebellion to centripetal orderliness, the newly domesticated WB characters are "rebellious" only in the mildest of terms. They have become friendly corporate spokes-toons who are happy to guide you to the best values in credit-cards or long-distance phone services.

A similar ambivalence can be found in TV cartoons which parody the conventions of their corporate hosts: do programs like The Simpsons and Beavis and Butthead lean more toward carnivalizing or toward corporate sales? Beavis and Butthead offer ironic commentary on music videos and their consumers, but they have also made obscene amounts of money for MTV and its parent media conglomerate, Viacom. Similarly, The Simpsons regularly pokes fun at cartoon and sitcom conventions. The show frequently aims jokes at its home network, Fox, such as having one character identify Fox as "the earthly incarnation of evil." But considering the huge amounts of revenue the network derives from the show, The Simpsons is mostly feeding the hand that it bites. Still, both shows seem to retain an ironic edge that keeps us from dismissing

them as mere hipness.<sup>6</sup> The difficulty arises from these shows' (indeed, from most of modern TV's) successful commodification of irony itself. The viewer is invited into the in-joke, made to feel superior to those boobs in the herd who aren't as hip as we are to how TV works. TV invites us to congratulate ourselves on being smart enough to sneer at the very programs we're nonetheless intently watching. Whether we're watching with a knowing smirk or with slack-jawed lethargy, what matters to the producers and the advertisers is that we're *watching*. Ultimately, irony itself becomes the product, a state of affairs nicely satirized by The Simpsons in an episode in which Homer's rock-concert sideshow act, in which he is harmlessly shot in the stomach with a cannonball, inspires this blasé exchange:

Teen1: Oh, here comes that cannonball guy. He's cool.

Teen2: Are you being sarcastic, dude?

Teen1: I don't even know anymore. ("Homerpalooza")

To add a further note of ambivalence, Teen 1 is wearing an icon of entertainment kitsch, a "Planet of the Apes" T-shirt. We can read him and his irony as both ridiculous and as an ambivalently hip comment on the pervasiveness of a smirking, self-aware "attitude" that rejects modernist certainties, but is perpetually unsure about other options for viewing the world.

---

<sup>6</sup> We might more justly accuse B & B of mere hipness; its crudeness seems more self-consciously aimed at a market-driven pose of rebellion. One gets the sense that there is something "genuine" behind the satire of The Simpsons, perhaps because its satire seems more ideologically coherent. While B & B goes for cheap laughs about sex and bodily functions, for instance, The Simpsons is more likely to make fun of conservative/corporate absurdities and the superficiality of the media.

### **Imagineered Amusements: Playing Against the Script**

Despite the overwhelmingly monologic tenor of corporatized entertainment, audiences can still take part in engaged, active textual play, even in an environment of highly commodified discourse. Such play can run the range from simple repetition to creative re-inventions that resist the rapacious ideology of consumerism in most mass entertainment. Wabbit Literate learners are enculturated in a media environment that often encourages free play with multi-voiced cultural texts, and at times, their play may recapture some of the ambivalent, “regenerative” power of Bakhtin’s carnival. To be sure, this can be a difficult trick to pull off, given the highly scripted nature of mass entertainment. In their insightful study of Walt Disney World, *The Project on Disney* contends that “Amusement is the commodified negation of play” (Willis 185). In the Disney theme park,

play is all but eliminated by the absolute domination of program over spontaneity. Every ride runs to computerized schedule. [. . .] Order prevails particularly in the queues for the rides that zigzag dutifully on a prescribed path created out of stanchions and ropes. [. . .] The Disney labyrinth is a banal extension of the ride’s point of embarkation, which extends into the ride as a hyper-themed continuation of the queue. (Willis 185-86)

This precise management of amusement stands in stark contrast to the disorder and bustle of the Midway at a county or state fair, to say nothing of the much wilder abandon of the medieval Carnival. Indeed, Walt Disney’s “dream” for the original Disneyland was of a

place that would eliminate the rough edges of the travelling carnival Midway, with its loudmouthed barkers, rigged games, uncouth carnies, garish sideshows, and especially, its literal *earthiness*: the travelling fair was an impermanent show, plopped down in the middle of a field on the outskirts of town, its dusty/muddy pathways littered with popcorn and trash. In place of the travelling carnival's wild, potentially dangerous mix of cheap thrills and hucksterism, Disney dreamed of an amusement park that would enshrine "good clean fun," a vision of utopian blandness. "Partners," a sculpture at Disneyland (California), depicts Walt Disney and Mickey Mouse shaking hands, and is inscribed with a motto of breathtaking insipidity packaged as wisdom: "I think most of all what I want Disneyland to be is a happy place [. . .] Where parents and children can have fun together." Disneyland is the paved, perpetually well-scrubbed, antiseptic antithesis of the carnival. In some ways, the Disney parks' earnest young trash-sweepers, famed for pouncing on litter within seconds, may rival Mickey himself as emblems of the Disney ethos.

The Disney term for the technicians who build the rides is "Imagineers"—imaginative engineers—but they are just as much engineers of the imagination, carefully designing and limiting the experiences that park visitors will encounter. Even in this environment of strictly-scripted "good clean fun," with an almost-Puritanical emphasis on the *clean*, some visitors nevertheless manage to create experiences of the theme park that go against the grain of Disney's authorized "reading." One member of the Project on Disney noted the rather cautious and awkward attempt of a "group of seriously displaced skinheads" to reconcile their "high urban mode—boots, black leather, pale skin" with the

approved Disney World script:

they seemed genuinely at a loss as to how to do the park without betraying themselves. The best they could produce was to convert specific areas into their own urbanlike space: instead of resting or eating at designated tables and benches, they would stretch out on stone walls or steps, self-consciously refusing to sit where they were supposed to.” (Kuenz, “Small World” 74)

Even this mild opposition was limited in its scope, however: the teens avoided locations where they would actually block pedestrian traffic, “safely avoiding any openly disruptive behavior” (Kuenz, “Small World” 75). This example usefully illustrates two themes at once: the power of the “amusement” ethos to ensure that “the consuming public largely polices itself against gratuitous acts which would interfere with the production of consumption as a value” (Willis 188), and the tendency of “rebellion” itself to devolve into little more than a fashion statement. Would *real* skinheads even be caught dead in the Magic Kingdom?

A more successful reinvention of Disney World is effected by groups of young teen girls, aged thirteen or fourteen, who are

old enough to know the pressures of the park’s gender and sexual definitions and young enough to not yet feel compelled to fulfill them.

They traversed the park in varying numbers [. . .] and in general were the most uninhibited people there.

[... While in line,] they brushed and arranged their own and each other’s

hair—a species of eroticism, not vanity—composed and sang songs, played what they will later discover are drinking games, and in one case planned revenge on “the biggest sexist in the class.” [. . .] Elsewhere they demanded attention from whomever they could get it—posing elaborately for strangers’ photographs, calling attention to one girl’s birthday, and compelling the crowd assembled for the start of the midday parade to sing “Happy Birthday” to her. (Kuenz, “Small World” 75)

These girls have managed to direct their own alternative ride through the park, not so much out of any conscious, ideologically-driven desire to resist Disney’s hegemonic text, though that is indeed what they’re doing, but simply because they have almost spontaneously slipped outside of the Disney script. Kuenz speculates that such behavior is simply “characteristic of girls at this age generally [. . . or] a function of their sexually exclusive groups” (75-76). Almost paradoxically, the girls’ freedom may be a liberating effect of the park’s otherwise total exclusion of them.

Throughout Disney, the perspective through which we are asked to see the world is almost exclusively male. [. . .] Rather than leave them out, however, this oversight seems to have freed them up. (Kuenz, “Small World” 76)

As if instinctively sensing the Disney organization’s failure to designate a role for them, the girls Kuenz observed remake the park into their own play space. We might consider this a textbook case of De Certeau’s concept of tactical, local opposition to hegemonic practices, a playful sort of cultural guerilla war. The girls are themselves at a transitional

stage in their life, not quite children but not quite teenagers either, and are perhaps freest in their ability to avoid, for the moment, the cultural/marketing categorization that Disney thrives on. The company does not, as yet, have a marketing niche that quite fits this gaggle of girls. On the other hand, preteen girls are already enthusiastic consumers of other products, such as Sanrio Company's "Hello Kitty" merchandise. There is something almost tragic about Kuenz's description of the playful girls at the Magic Kingdom, a sense of paradise about to be lost: all too soon, these girls will likely be swallowed up by the rigid gender role socialization of teendom. On another level, one also senses that Disney culture is too relentlessly omnipresent to leave a potential market niche unexploited—the Mouse will, by god, find a way to bring these kids into the fold, too.

Another significant, counter-hegemonic practice at Disney World, though one largely unseen by outsiders, arises from the presence of an extensive gay and lesbian community in the Florida park's workforce. Though not officially acknowledged by Disney,

It is no secret in Orlando and among Disney workers that Walt Disney World is gay-friendly and openly so. By "Walt Disney World," they do not mean the company or its policies [. . .] but the people working in the park itself (Kuenz, "Working" 153).

Gay Disney World workers have a flourishing subculture at the park, with its own in-

jokes, slang, and reappropriations of corporate space.<sup>7</sup> Female performers occasionally let male coworkers wear their costumes, turning the performances into “a drag show for knowing employees” (Kuenz, “Working” 154), gay coworkers use coded gestures and glances to comment on the relentless heterosexuality of the park’s official script, and, after hours, Disney World’s Pleasure Island nightclub hosts a weekly, but again, unofficial, “family night.” “Family” is in this case a multivalent term. Among North American gays it serves as both a term of solidarity (Sister Sledge’s disco song “We Are Family” has become something of a gay anthem) and as a code word for use around people whose allegiances may be uncertain (“Is Danielle ‘family’?”). Further, at Disney World, “family” “camps Disney’s notions of family values even as it represents them” (Kuenz, “Working” 155). Camp’s commentary on the status quo is necessarily ambivalent: to those in the know, it offers a clear critique of the heterosexual-dominant official discourse of the Disney corporation, but the inherent exclusivity of that audience may blunt the effectiveness of the critique—gays camping Disney are preaching to the choir, and it is uncertain whether that resistance can be anything more than temporary. Kuenz notes the limitations of such small deviations from the approved script:

[gay employees] work the park, making the dominant function, as De Certeau says, “in another register” [no citation in Kuenz].

But for how long and to what effect? While they certainly make the day go faster—and I do not underestimate the value of this—

---

<sup>7</sup> Kuenz notes that many of the WDW employees she interviewed told her various versions of this joke: “How many Disney straights does it take to change a light bulb on Main Street? Both of them” (153).

alternative practices at Disney do not significantly alter the park's ideological plots nor the status and value of those whose labor is used to produce them. Donald Duck is still Donald Duck ("Working" 155).

As Bakhtin observes, the end of Carnival signals a return to the normal order of things, with the established Order still very much in charge. This seemingly inevitable co-opting of resistance, even of parody, leaving the Mouse Triumphant, is the source of my ambivalence toward the gay and lesbian groups that have held "Gay Days" at the Disney parks, much to the recent outrage of the Southern Baptist Convention. In the interest of presenting a "positive" image of homosexuality, these groups have bought into Disney's corporate self-presentation of its parks as the *sine qua non* of mainstream American values. The goal of normalizing gay life is unfortunately subsumed by yet another affirmation of *Disney's* "normality." One wonders whether even an ostensibly more outrageous, carnivalesque image, perhaps a blithely copyright-infringing T-shirt featuring two very butch Minnies kissing, or two leather-clad Mickeys holding hands, would serve to advance a pro-gay message, or would simply reinforce the apparent universality of the Mouse. Kuenz's question, "for how long and to what effect?" is worth asking of all attempts to read against the grain of corporate monoculture. This is not to say that we may as well just give in and be happy little consumers singing "It's a Small World After All," but rather to call attention to the difficulties involved in attempts to resist the homogenizing influence of mass media culture.

### **You're Livin' in Your Own Private Carnival**

For the postmodern consumer/interpreter of media, no text stands by itself; all texts are in constant, noisy play with each other. Film critic David Denby observes that his preteen boys' speech is "jangled and allusive, shifting at near-electronic speeds from, say, imitations of Apu, the Kwik-E-Mart manager in The Simpsons, to Darth Vader, then to Snoop Doggy-Dogg. [...] The children channel-surf their own minds" (50-51). Such internalized heteroglossia calls to mind Bakhtin's lament that, in contrast to the communal medieval Carnival, most later parody was marked by "a private, 'chamber' character. It became, as it were, an individual carnival, marked by a sense of isolation" (Rabelais 37). We might acknowledge that this is largely the case for Wabbit Literacy, where the learner is most often a solitary viewer, though part of an audience of millions. So while many people may have learned something about opera through the parodic play of "What's Opera, Doc?" we "share" that experience at a remove, mediated by the fragmented, solitary experience of watching the cartoon at different times, in different places. Similarly, when we encounter Wagner in its "straight" form, our *Aha*'s of recognition are spoken to ourselves, not shouted together in a festival crowd. Even viewing a film in a theater is a curiously isolated experience; the theater space, with its individual seats, orderly rows, anonymous darkness, and social strictures against talking, is designed for a certain degree of privacy even within a crowd. Interpersonal interaction during a film is limited to couples or groups of friends, and any carnivalizing

boisterousness is likely to be frowned upon by other members of the audience.<sup>8</sup> There are some exceptions to this norm, most notably cult films, such as The Rocky Horror Picture Show, where ritualized audience participation is *de riguer*.

Of course, at the other end of the dialogic seesaw, even solitary enjoyment of parody in one's own living room depends fundamentally on shared textual information, which is inescapably social at its core. Linda Hutcheon discusses the appreciation of irony as a function of discursive communities:

in ironic discourse, the whole communicative process is not only "altered and distorted" but also *made possible by* those different worlds to which each of us differently belongs and which form the basis of the expectations, assumptions, and preconceptions that we bring to the complex processing of discourse, of language *in use*. . . . it is the community that comes first and that, in fact, *enables* the irony to happen.

(Irony's Edge 89; Hutcheon's emphases)

Wabbit Literacy offers a sort of back door into the discursive communities in which a particular text can be called parodic or not; more specifically, it places the reader into a community that knows of the parody before the reader necessarily knows that there's a "target" text that the parody is derived from. For instance, cartoons such as "What's

---

<sup>8</sup> I am ambivalent as to whether, even for the sake of carnival, I would want to encourage further erosion of these already loose social constraints; people talk too much in movie theaters as it is! On the other hand, as the discussion of "MiSTing" below makes clear, I participate in potentially disruptive parodic talk during bad movies. Perhaps I wouldn't mind people talking during movies if they were *funny*; I just don't want to hear someone behind me saying, "Oh... isn't that the guy who had that diamond earlier?" Perhaps I contradict myself in wanting to privilege parodic commentary and discourage what I hear as idle chatter.

Opera, Doc?” may introduce viewers not only to certain works of classical music, but to a complex, culturally constructed network of conventions, assumptions, and ambivalent attitudes *about* classical music.

Where some theorists, especially Booth, claim that irony creates a community among those who use it and appreciate it, Hutcheon posits instead that “the discursive community *precedes* and *makes possible* the comprehension of irony” (*Irony’s Edge* 94). This position seeks to counter the charge that irony is an “elitist and/or sadistic” trope, by removing the suggestion that those who share an irony somehow possess superior forms of knowledge that those who fail to “get” irony lack. Rather, Hutcheon argues, those who do not get irony are simply in different discursive communities from those who do; they are not, however, “deficient” or “less communicatively competent.” She notes that such judgmental attitudes are common in the literature on irony:

Those who engage the multiple said and unsaid meanings of irony are certainly interpreting *differently* than those who engage only the said; yet, for most theorists, there does seem to be more at stake here than simple difference, and the language in which the distinctions are regularly made is revealing of both implicit power relations and evaluative judgments . . . In the economy of exchange that we call irony, there is always a power imbalance that does not seem to come into play in the same way in a trope like metaphor, in part because irony is simultaneously disguise and communication. (*Irony’s Edge* 95)

Wabbit Literacy immerses the reader into the parodic “disguised” form of a text, often

with a degree of confusion (“what’s the joke about here?”), but often with enough information to make some guesses about the discourse and the contexts surrounding it. The reader who does not get the parody is not utterly powerless, then, but in fact has clues to begin making sense of the parodic discourses in which others participate more fully.

### **Play MiSTy For Me**

As a case study in the ambivalent attitudes toward popular culture that I have discussed in this chapter, I will examine a TV program that may well be the apotheosis of Wabbit Literacy, the 1989-99 cable TV program Mystery Science Theater 3000 (or MST3K, as it’s known to its fans, a.k.a. “MiSTies”). MST3K showcases old, bad sci-fi movies with running commentary from the show’s hosts, Joel Hodgson (replaced in later seasons by head writer Mike Nelson) and two robot puppets (Crow T. Robot and Tom Servo, a.k.a. “the ‘bots”), whose silhouettes are superimposed on the bottom of the screen, as if they were sitting in the front row of a movie theater (see Figure 4).



**Figure 4:** Mystery Science Theater 3000. © Best Brains, Inc. Used by Permission.

The premise of the series is that Joel (and later, Mike) has been kidnapped and marooned on a space station by mad scientists who attempt to drive him insane by forcing him to watch unspeakably bad movies. To preserve his sanity, Joel builds the 'bots, who join him in ridiculing the movies. Throughout the program, Joel/Mike and the 'bots heckle and comment upon the movie, tossing out references to everything from Star Trek trivia to theology. For instance, a character in a low-budget sword-n-sorcery flick says, "A man does not choose his destiny. It is decided for him by the gods." Crow retorts to the screen, "Oh, so now you're a Calvinist, huh?" Joel Hodgson, the program's creator, noted that some of the movies that made the best targets for parody were those whose directors/writers had a self-important agenda or message which they attempted to communicate through a cheesy story about Lobster Women from Venus. The incongruities between such films' high-minded, though usually shallow "statements" and their mediocre artistic achievements practically invite ridicule. The series' premise suggests a critique of mass culture: trapped in an inescapable environment of media dreck, one strategy for staying sane is to deploy strategic parody, a studied refusal to take the movie seriously.

MST3K is a fine bricollage of cultural tidbits, at once critiquing and celebrating the conventions of low-budget science fiction. The title itself parodies late-night TV horror movie programs of the sixties, which no doubt originally aired many of the films that MST3K spoofs. The walls of the main sets are literally a collage of toy parts and assorted household and office detritus, a deliberately clumsy echo of real special-effects technicians' painstaking cannibalization of plastic model kits for miniature spaceships.

The audience-silhouette frame is an homage to the occasional frame-breaking tactics of classic Loony Tunes, where the animated shadow of an “audience member” would sometimes speak with the characters “on-screen.” The host and ‘bots’ comments on the films often assume some familiarity with the mechanics of movie-making itself: “Watch out!” they say to an onscreen jungle adventurer, “You’re about to be attacked by stock footage of a crocodile!” Or, during an “exterior” shot in a science-fiction film: “In the future, everyone will live in beautiful cities made from plexiglas tubes and matte paintings.”

The show’s popularity is due in no small part to its appeal as a kind of test of Wabbit Literacy—it’s fun to watch this program with others and enjoy the shared recognition of what’s going on within the jokes. This opportunity for community-building has helped make MST3K a popular cult show, with its own insider knowledge and codes. Like many TV programs, MST3K has inspired any number of internet web pages and discussion groups. Much of the discourse in these fora consists simply of questions about and explanations of the show’s parodic references, a learner-run school of comic allusions. Beyond this, MST3K encourages satirical critiques of pop culture. A fan-run web page published in response to the show’s 1999 cancellation argues that “MST3K had an attitude that you shouldn’t just settle for the banality prevalent in our culture, [*sic*] you should talk back, even if you can’t change anything” (Troutman, “The End?” web page). In a loving parody of Tom Joad’s farewell to his mother, Troutman predicts that

Its silhouetted trio will yet live, whether the show goes on or not.

Wherever there's a plotless movie, they'll be there. They'll be all around in the dark. They'll be everywhere, wherever TV and movie buffs can look. Wherever there's a monster beatin' up a guy, they'll be there.

They'll be in the way guys yell at the screen in darkened theaters. They'll be in the way people laugh when they see the zipper on the monster's back and they know the filmmakers just didn't care, and where people are gathering to watch movies at home. They'll be there, too. ("The End?"

web page)

This observation nicely illustrates parody's ambivalence: while fans may not control the means of media production, they can choose not to passively consume TV and movies; instead, they can actively talk back to the screen, fundamentally changing the way they interact with the text. It's not revolution (and deep in my bourgeois heart, I'm no revolutionary anyway), but it is at least a conscious decision not to go quietly along with the media machine, a decision to pay some attention to how the system works and laugh back at the system.

Taking inspiration from the TV show's dialogue with bad movies, some MST3K fans attend movies in small groups with the sole intention of making fun of ("MiSTing") a B-grade sci-fi or action film, an amusement in which I sometimes indulge. We improvise a running parodic commentary on the film, pointing out its clichés and absurdities, appropriating its text for our own ends. This is a deliberately carnivalized approach to movie-going: we aren't simply going to "see" the movie; we are there to

yuck it up with each other, to construct a parodic counter-text to the onscreen text. For example, at the Jackie Chan martial-arts comedy “Rumble in the Bronx,” we already knew that it had been filmed in Vancouver, British Columbia, to reduce production costs, a strategy resulting in absurdities like scenes with pine-covered hills in the background of “the Bronx.” Whenever the film used a stock-footage establishing shot of the Manhattan skyline, we lampooned the film’s low-budget attempt to frame the action by saying, in unison, “*New York!*”

While MiSTing, we willfully suspend our willing suspension of disbelief, treating the filmic text as a construction which is open to playful revision even as it unfolds before us. Of course, we are no cultural guerillas; as previously noted, “the consuming public largely polices itself against gratuitous acts which would interfere with the production of consumption as a value” (Willis 188). When MiSTing a movie, we minimally adhere to politeness norms expected in a theater by making an effort to go to second-run shows, which will be less heavily attended, and to sit in the side aisles, as far from other patrons as possible. Needless to say, none of this is revolutionary; we are not overthrowing any dominant paradigms, creating a more socially just world, or even affecting Hollywood’s bottom line. After all, even when we MiST movies at a second-run theater, the studio still gets a cut of our ticket price, and our attendance therefore supports the market for crappy movies, even though we’re camping them up. Nevertheless, we are reading the film in an oppositional mode, making the Hollywood product ours by consuming it on our own terms—they get a bit of our money, but we know that we haven’t really bought what they’re selling. In a consumer society, perhaps

alternative forms of consuming are among the few options one has for resistance, short of dropping out of the consumer market altogether.

On the Internet, “MiSTing” has become a unique new genre of written discourse, in which various texts (scripts for TV programs, political/religious polemics, fan fiction, etc.) are treated as if they were the subject of MST3K. An online guide to MiSTing explains:

A MiSTing is a work of fiction, generally in text format, in which some other work (also generally text) is given the MST3K treatment. Joel or Mike [...] are placed in the theater and forced to read the target text. Their comments are inserted in a sort of a script format. Anything is fair game for MiSTings. SPAM, advertisements, UFOlogy, and religious rants were the most common targets in the beginning, but today [most MiSTings] focus more on fan fiction. (Beall, “What is this MST3K thing, anyway?” webpage)

Written MiSTings are almost exclusively an online genre, composed by using an e-mail program’s “reply” function, although they are not infrequently printed out and shared with other fans in “RL” (real life). The MiSTer appropriates the subject text and reinscribes it through the frame of MST3K’s characters and comic styles, in essence taking control over both the parodied text and the MST3K world whose conventions s/he deploys to make fun of that text. Several websites have evolved which are devoted to the archiving and critique of various internet MiSTings; one site, “Mystery Usenet Theater 3000,” explains MiSTing as a way of speaking critically about the “really awful dreck”

on the internet: “We’ve all gotten SPAM in our mailboxes, read crossposted screeds on USENET,<sup>9</sup> spotted religious rants on our favorite BBSes [electronic bulletin boards], or read lousy fanfiction stored in WWW archives around the world. And we’ve all hated it” (Beall, “What is...?” webpage). MiSTing texts from the internet is a way to comment on, and to build a critique of, internet culture. Internet MiSTs are sometimes little more than mundane put-downs, as in this spoof of a Usenet message suggesting that aliens are seducing humans: “[Original Message:] People do talk in UFO circles of Aliens having sex with us humans. Mike: Mostly because people in UFO circles probably don’t have sex with us humans” (“Lynsa,” MiST of “Alien Sex Machines”). Others present rather knowledgeable deconstructions of religious tracts’ assumptions (These texts were composed using the “reply” feature of e-mail; therefore, text preceded by a caret (>) is the original text, while the dialogue for Mike, Crow, and Tom is written by the MiSTers):

> [The Bible] can and must be understood by all.  
 Crow: And misinterpreted by many.  
 > Every word in the Bible from Genesis to Revelation is true.  
 Tom: Except for the bits they had to cut out.  
 Crow: Oh, like the fourth book of Maccabees?  
 Mike: How do you guys know about this stuff? (White, MiST of “Global Alert For All: Jesus is Coming Soon”)

In both cases, the MiSter asserts textual power over the parodied text, viewing it in a critical light and ridiculing its assumptions. The tone of most MiST’s is usually laced with irony; fans take pride in accurately replicating Joel/Mike and the ‘bots TV personae,

---

<sup>9</sup> “Usenet,” a contraction of “Users’ Network,” is a collection of thousands of internet discussion groups, usually called “newsgroups,” each devoted to a particular topic area.

with a playful mixture of cool skepticism, populist common sense, nerdy nitpicking, and a healthy dose of adolescent foolishness.

### **And the Fans Play On: MiSTing as Vernacular Theory**

MiSTing is a comic manifestation of what Thomas McLaughlin calls “vernacular theory;” that is, theory that arises from “the practices of those who lack cultural power and who speak a critical language grounded in local concerns, not the language spoken by academic knowledge-elites” (6). McLaughlin examines the kinds of theorizing about language and power that is practiced by people in various nonacademic communities, such as activists in the fundamentalist Christian anti-pornography movement, writers and readers of fan-produced magazines (“fanzines”), workers in an advertising agency, and so on. McLaughlin argues that the audience (or at least, substantial parts of the audience) for mass culture does not passively absorb its pedagogy about “codes of behavior, belief, and value;” rather, he aligns himself with critical theorists who

have emphasized fans’ resistance to that teaching, their insistence on constructing a meaning of their own out of what is available in the everyday. I want to claim that fans can and do recognize the existence of this pedagogy and understand its intention, that they theorize. (14)

Fans who MiST movies or written texts are quite aware that they are in dialogue with textual constructions, and they are quite willing and able to reject, speak back to, or subvert the creators’ premises. More to the point, they are engaging with a community-generated set of critical ideas about *how* to read a given text.

MiSTing generates discussion of texts, from commercially-produced entertainments to amateur fan fiction on the internet. Where MiSTs of movies target a commercial product and the corporate culture they represent, MiSTing of fanfic is somewhat more problematic, since it critiques texts produced within the fan community. Authors of fanfic already occupy a somewhat tenuous position *vis-à-vis* the texts they produce. They are, after all, writing unauthorized stories about copyrighted characters and trademarked fictional worlds; but as Henry Jenkins argues, the ongoing process of fan rereading results in a progressive elaboration of the [TV] series “universe” through inferences and speculations that push well beyond its explicit information; the fans’ meta-text [...] constitutes a form of rewriting (155). To MiST a fanfic is to criticize a fellow fan, a rather different game than criticizing the producers of commercial entertainment texts. Authors of online guides to MiSTing frequently voice ambivalence over MiSTing’s power to speak back to the writers of fan fiction, reminding would-be fanfic MiSTers to remember that they are

making jokes about something that someone else probably spent a lot of time on. As such, one must be sensitive to the fact that your subject may not be happy to find their works MiSTed. A MiSTing should never ever **EVER EVER** be a way to taunt the author or personally attack him or her. [...] Some authors appreciate the MiSTings as a form of criticism (such as Stephen Ratliff)<sup>10</sup> but others will be offended or even hurt—especially if

---

<sup>10</sup> Whose oft-MiSTed fanfic will be discussed below; Beall’s web page links to Ratliff’s home page.

you're not being sensitive to the fact that just because you think it's funny doesn't mean they think it's funny. (Beall, "How to Write MiSTings" web page; emphasis in original)

This sort of warning to "play nice" would be nearly unthinkable in a discussion of MiSTing commercial movies—Hollywood will make plenty of money from its product, and the producers are safely insulated from viewers' ridicule. At most, a guide to MiSTing in theaters would remind MiSTers to try to avoid disrupting other patrons. Fanfic writers, on the other hand, belong to much the same fan community as those who MiST their writing. This commonality doesn't guarantee that MiSTers will go easy on fanfic, but it does involve a more problematic set of power relationships than MiSTing a commercial film. Fanfic MiSTs grow out of the fan community's dialogues about what constitutes "good" and "bad" fanfic, and their humor often relies on knowledge that seems obscure to outsiders. In a sense, they are a way for fans to playfully "police" fan writing and fandom, presenting critique in the form of parody.

The internet has proved a fertile medium for the proliferation of both fanfic and MiSTings. One popular website, "The Temple of Marissa Picard," collects online MiSTings of a particularly bad writer of Star Trek fan fiction, one Stephen Ratliff, a college student whom parodists have dubbed the "Ed Wood of Fan Fiction." This site offers a parodic meta-analysis of fans' textual relations to both Star Trek and MST3K. Since he began posting fanfic to the Usenet newsgroup "alt.startrek.creative" in 1994, Ratliff has actually attracted a small cult following, although in this case the MiSTers are apparently "following" him with pitchforks and torches. In his fanfic, Ratliff has elevated

“Marissa Flores,” a nine-year-old girl who appeared in only one episode of Star Trek: The Next Generation, into the central character of his own version of the Star Trek universe. Ratliff’s Marissa has, through various plot contrivances that are improbable even in Star Trek stories, taken command of the Starship *Enterprise*<sup>TM</sup>, instituted a “Kids’ Crew” of children who run starships, been adopted by *Enterprise* captain Jean-Luc Picard, travelled back in time to have adventures with Chelsea Clinton, and become the princess of a planet. Ratliff’s various MiSTers creatively deploy the characters from MST3K to ridicule his inept spelling, wooden dialogue, plot contrivances, and perhaps most importantly from a *Trek* fan’s perspective, deviations from the understood “rules” of the *Trek* universe. A few examples, from David Hines’s 1994 MiST of Ratliff’s first Marissa story, “Enterprized” (*sic*):

> This is a next Generation story  
 > All spelling errors are to be ingored  
 Tom: Oh, please, tell me he’s joking there.  
 Crow: I hate to say it, but I don’t think so.

>The Romulans soon took the Enterprise seriously  
 >as it destoryed a warbird.  
 Crow: I wish somebody would destroy this fanfic.  
 Tom: I don’t know about that, but it’s already been destroyed.

> “Any more takers for death?” [said by a villain]  
 Mike: Oh, c’mon! That line was lifted from a Speed Racer cartoon!  
 Tom: Which episode?  
 Mike: Er, most of them, actually.

Tom: Huh? For a *Trek* fan, this guy [Ratliff] doesn’t seem to care much about continuity.  
 Crow: Neither do the *Trek* producers.

> “Seal all connecting cooridors and turbolifts, Mr. Data”  
 > “All turbolifts cleat,” Data said

All: "CLEAT?"

> "Release docking latches."

> "Docking latches released."

Mike: Bore audience!

Tom: Audience bored! (Hines web page)

Although much of this MiST involves Hines chastising Ratliff for his inept writing, several of the comments also critique popular media in general, such as the jokes about the repetitive writing in the cartoon Speed Racer and the lack of continuity in Star Trek itself, a common complaint among fans of the series, and itself a frequent inspiration for fanfic.

It is not surprising that fans would adopt the MST3K framework as a textual vehicle for criticism of mass culture. The original program overtly engages the clichés and superficialities of the films it parodies, deploying references from other pop-culture texts as critical tools. A fan who borrows the textual paraphernalia of MST3K to comment on another text is employing a set of strategies that a fan audience will instantly recognize as parodic and critical. Through such tactics, consumers of mass entertainment are able to re-appropriate and re-direct, at least partially and locally, the products of the culture-manufacturing industry. More immediately, they are having fun with other fans, and, in the case of Stephen Ratliff, conducting something of a writing workshop. On his own home page, where he includes a misspelled self-deprecating joke about himself ("Home of the Insufficiently Relucant [*sic*] Fan-Fiction Writer"), Ratliff says, "I'm a fan of Mystery Science Theature [*sic*] 3000, which is a good thing, because otherwise, I probably wouldn't understand the MSTings of my works. I've become infamous with MSTers, mainly because I provide good fodder and don't get mad easily" (Ratliff, Web

page). In response to reader comments (including the MiSTings), Ratliff actually rewrote a few of his earliest Marissa stories, correcting quite a few of the spelling errors; whether the revised plots are any more plausible is open to debate. Unlike MiSTings of Hollywood products, the “in-house” critiques from fellow fans actually reached this writer, and, taking the next step in a dialogue, he replied with a revised narrative.

### **Conclusion: The Ambivalent Playground**

This chapter has argued that the relationship between text and receiver/audience is ambivalent, as is the relationship of the parodist to both the work being parodied and to the parodic work. The act of parodying involves a constant dialogic back-and-forth of Bakhtinian interplay between centrifugal and centripetal forces. Similarly, the act of interpreting a parody is also dialogic and ambivalent, since it constantly shifts between making fun of the “target” text while repeating enough of the “target” to make the parodic variations recognizable. Because it gives primacy to the parodic (centrifugal) impulses in texts, Wabbit Literacy encourages readers to think parodically. And even though irony has itself become a commodity, irony and parody nonetheless remain powerful discursive tools for examining and questioning commodified entertainment texts.

Ambivalence lies at the heart of the various discourses that I have examined in this chapter, from the Disney and Warner Bros. animators’ differing approaches to the problem of finding a place for animation in the pantheon of “Art,” to the problematic relationship between consumers of popular culture and the texts they consume, and to the

interplay between fan-critics, the objects of their fandom, and other members of the fan community. I have emphasized play as an essential part of such dialogues, because play seems to be one area where lines of cultural power can be blurred, even if they cannot ultimately be overthrown. Amateur parodists on the internet, for instance, can spoof the corporate hegemony of the entertainment industry and reach an audience of like-minded readers, fostering resistant readings of the industry's products. Such play is admittedly unlikely to topple the Powers That Be, but at the very least, it may enable the playful reader to see how the game works, to recognize the patterns of stitching in the emperor's clothes. While it may not ultimately be possible to change the world, it may be enough to settle for changing one's world-view.

## EPILOGUE

## FUDD FOR THOUGHT: IMPLICATIONS AND EXTENSIONS

This epilogue will examine possible extensions of the concepts that I have developed in this dissertation, focusing on two main areas: implications for education and possible research that could grow from this dissertation.

As I have shown, Wabbit Literacy involves what might conventionally be considered mis-readings, or at least partial readings, of a parodic text, followed by a later encounter with the “original” text, the target of parody, resulting in a recovery or reconstruction of the parodic text’s meanings, as well as a dialogic reaction to the “target” text—it is read “for itself” *and* in the light of the earlier parody. In a sense, Wabbit Literacy can be seen as an inadvertent means of the critical engagement with texts that Bartholomae & Petrosky call “reading against the grain” (10)—we might call it “reading against the grin.” To be sure, the comparison is a bit gap-toothed. Bartholomae and Petrosky focus upon learning as a means of adapting to a dominant discourse community, namely, college freshmen accommodating to the discursive standards of the academic community. I conceive of Wabbit Literacy as a more centrifugal kind of knowledge-making, inviting broader and considerably less linear textual play. Wabbit Literacy involve readers whose memories of parodic texts smash together with other texts to generate new meanings.

As Chapter 4 suggests, in an increasingly media-saturated society, the playful attitudes encouraged by Wabbit Literacy may provide a means of local, albeit

idiosyncratic resistance to dominant media narratives. The explosion of electronic media since the 1950s, coupled with wider access to higher education, has made Wabbit Literacy a more common phenomenon. It's already something of a cliché to point out that popular culture may account for greater exposure to cultural information than formal education supposedly does—for instance, it seems safe to assume that in the late 1970s more Americans knew more about slavery from having watched Roots than from having learned about it through history classes. Even such relatively “straight” popular presentations of history and “high” culture transform the events and people they portray, presenting them with a definite ideological spin; the transformation is even more pronounced when it's played for laughs. The knowledge that we acquire from parodies in popular culture seems worth examination precisely because these sources usually present us with deliberately *playful* transformations of the cultural items they refer to. When Play is part of the interpreter's context for thinking about a text, there's no telling exactly what will result.

Understanding the quirky nature of Wabbit Literacy can contribute to our understanding of “normal” processes of learning as well. Wabbit Literacy is one means by which children and other learners come to know about the world, and teachers have classrooms full of kids whose knowledge of the world is significantly informed by parody. Although Wabbit-Literate learning, informed by pop culture instead of an official curriculum, is unlikely to be recognized by traditionalists as “real” learning, one could also argue that learning in the “banking” mode is equally scattershot, dialogic, and idiosyncratic. Formal learning seldom involves simply transmitting bodies of

unproblematic facts from teacher to learner; students pick up a little here, a little there, and then are sent through the mill of standardized tests to see what “took.” Inevitably, lesson plans go awry, preparations for a pep rally interrupt the unit on the Civil War, the VCR is on the fritz the week we were supposed to watch *Roots*, and half the class is home with the flu during Reconstruction. Emphasizing the inherent squirrelness of knowledge and learning, as Wabbit Literacy does, may encourage educators to embrace piecemeal learning and to move away from “the premise that urchins arrive at school like so many floppy discs fresh from the factory. There the teacher formats them for use in the economy and sends them on their way” (Pattison, “Finn Syndrome” 713). Rather, we must recognize and give credit to what students already know, and not be worried if students know about history more from Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure than from last year’s history survey, which had to cram most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century into the last 4 weeks of the school year anyway.

Wabbit Literacy offers significant insights into the political, class, and gender assumptions underlying educational policy, evaluation, and curricula. These processes of learning are deeply implicated in the imposition and maintenance of political and cultural power. Parodies are, like any other texts, creatures of their times; while parodies are playful and likely to have fun with the status quo, they also tend to be rooted in their own sets of cultural values as well. “What’s Opera, Doc?” spoofs Wagner and classical music, but also does so with Bugs Bunny in drag, as a “wovewy” Rheinmaiden who Elmer is foolish enough to find seductive, complete with the ambivalent sexuality of Elmer’s almost kissing a—*yuccch!*—guy. The transvestite near-kiss temporarily shakes up but

ultimately reinscribes traditional gender boundaries (Sandler 168). Within the primary parodic text, we find a secondary text that reinforces the cultural assumptions of 1950s America. Yet even that centripetal impulse can become the object of further, centrifugal play. The trope of Bugs Bunny in drag is familiar enough to figure in a rather sweet comic sequence about adolescent males and ambivalent sexuality. The 1992 movie Wayne's World includes a scene where Wayne and Garth are staring into the night sky, musing on the big questions of life and love. After a brief pause in the conversation, Garth suddenly asks, "Did you ever find Bugs Bunny attractive when he put on a dress and played a girl bunny?" Wayne laughs derisively and exclaims, "No!" to which Garth replies, meekly, "Neither did I. I was just asking." Garth allows himself that brief moment of norm-questioning vulnerability, and although the scene as a whole certainly paints Garth as a bit weird (a bunnyphile?), he at least *asks* the question, playing off the audience's collectively-tooned unconscious and calling attention to the ambivalent assumptions behind sexual/gender standards.

The pleasure and puzzle of encountering new discourse in a parodic context may make Wabbit Literacy a potentially powerful form of learning. Hutcheon argues that "The pleasure of parody's irony comes . . . from the degree of engagement of the reader in the intertextual 'bouncing' (to use E. M. Forster's famous term) between complicity and distance" (Parody 32). Reading in a limited, "instructional" framework often leads students to "tune out" of the reading experience. I've long felt that any reading that is assigned becomes automatically "boring"—and indeed, when I've used horror stories by Stephen King in classes, I have had students complain that they were "dull." Injecting a

bit of Wabbit Literacy's informal, extracurricular, highly idiosyncratic forms of learning into formal education could encourage more variation in the kinds of learning that can come out of the classroom. Although the quirky randomness of Wabbit Literacy in its "natural" environment, through entertainment media that are *not* framed as "educational," would be nearly impossible to replicate in a classroom, teachers might nonetheless encourage students to read with "intertextual bouncing" in mind. Such an approach might make room for interpretations that connect with students' own discursive worlds, perhaps even allowing for "weird" questions, like why cartoon rabbits in drag might be attractive. While it is not within the scope of this dissertation to lay out any formal plans to apply Wabbit Literacy in classrooms, awareness of the heterodoxy and varied temporal contexts of cultural knowledge can help educators become more attuned to the widely divergent kinds of knowledge that learners bring to the classroom.

From the perspective of the learner, it is possible to make many different uses of the unresolved fragments of knowledge encountered in Wabbit Literacy. On perhaps the simplest level, partly-understood parodies can motivate a viewer to actively seek out information that will help resolve the incongruities in the parody. For instance, when I was around ten to twelve years old, I started getting interested in politics, largely because I constantly read MAD magazine and watched Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In. To be sure, the prevailing cultural climate also encouraged interest in politics and satire; the Nixon administration was busy playing itself out as a tragicomedy that begged for parody. I didn't really understand what they were talking about during the Watergate hearings, but I watched anyway, amazed at the real-life examples of doubletalk that I had first seen

ridiculed on comedy shows. But my strongest initial connection to politics came about because I wanted to get the jokes I was reading in MAD and elsewhere—I was reading Herblock's syndicated political cartoons and Art Buchwald's columns in our local paper long before I began reading real editorials or watching the TV news. I was moving into new discursive territory, making tentative forays into the world of grown-up political and cultural discourse. This involved making transitions from genres and texts that were familiar to me—cartoons and humor—to those that I had previously been uninterested in, like "The News," which had previously been an undifferentiated blur of noise and images on the television, something my father had to see every night, but that I previously considered a cartoon-interrupting nuisance. Further, because my first reference-point for signifiers like "Nixon" and "Watergate" had been in parodies, I recall that I approached the news with some predisposition to skepticism. I had learned to laugh at "Richard Milhous Nixon" well before I knew what was funny about him. While it would be something of a stretch to attempt to incorporate such mostly serendipitous moments of transition into a formal curriculum, educators would do well to recognize the varying discursive backgrounds that students bring with them into the classroom.

In Chapter 4, I discuss fan writing and fan parodies as examples of "vernacular theory," criticism and theory that are generated by the consumers of popular texts, rather than by academic elites who may be outsiders to the communities that interact with those texts. One of the functions of fan communities is to educate each other about the objects of their fandom, through word of mouth, through 'zines (fan-published magazines), and most recently and dramatically, through internet newsgroups and World Wide Web

pages. In many of these fora, fans seek out further explanation of parodic references that they don't get. Readers of the internet newsgroups alt.animation.warner-bros and alt.tv.simpsons, for instance, regularly ask other participants to explain the various cultural and political gags in these cartoons. In the Simpsons newsgroup and elsewhere, fans have developed a way of calling attention to and explaining parodic content. Literally within minutes after a new episode airs, fans are at their computers, writing reviews and posting what has come to be called, in alt.tv.simpsons, "DYN" (Did You Notice) messages. Some DYN's call attention to small bits of comedic business that a viewer might otherwise not notice. For instance, one fan points out that in a Halloween episode, "the Dewey decimal number for books in the occult section is 666" (*The Simpsons Archive*). The majority, however, point out parodic references and identify—or attempt to identify—their sources. When Bart visits the offices of MAD magazine, he asks a secretary, who is sitting directly under a huge sign with the "MAD" logo, "Excuse me, is this MAD magazine?" The secretary replies, "No, it's Mademoiselle. We're buying our sign on the installment plan" ("New York vs. Homer Simpson"). In a DYN explanation, fan Benjamin Robinson notes that the question and reply are modeled on "Snappy Answers to Stupid Questions," a regular feature by cartoonist Al Jaffee in MAD (*The Simpsons Archive*).<sup>1</sup> Multiple communal purposes are served by "DYNs." For the individual poster of a DYN, it demonstrates that the writer got a joke, establishing or perhaps even enhancing her status in the fan

---

<sup>1</sup> I have to admit that, although this gag appears in one of my favorite scenes from The Simpsons, I hadn't noticed that particular parodic reference until I went looking for examples of DYN's on the internet. Not quite Wabbit Literacy, since I was already familiar with the MAD feature. But it was definitely a missed joke that required the help of other fans for me to notice.

community. For some members of the community, DYN messages point out gags they might have otherwise not noticed or understood. Finally, familiarity with the term “DYN” is itself a marker of membership in the fan community. Substantial argument has sometimes arisen in the newsgroup regarding how obscure a reference should be in order to merit a “DYN.” Such disputes are part of the process by which a segment of the fan community defines its critical approach to the object of its fandom and promotes the learning that is intrinsic to the fan community.

I have largely avoided any discussion of how Wabbit Literacy might be formally integrated into a school curriculum. Wabbit Literacy is by its nature a form of informal or incidental learning, and any attempt to systematize it or harness it would change it into some other animal, so this dissertation has mostly been hunting Wabbits “in the wild.” Even so, ideas from Wabbit literacy could be worth further examination in formal educational settings. Some music educators have used Loony Tunes to teach children about classical music, for instance. While using parodies as a teaching tool would not result in Wabbit Literacy as I have described it—the spontaneity of chance discovery would be lost, among other things—parodies taught in conjunction with their “targets” could nonetheless be used to introduce students to the concept of intertextuality, since they provide fairly obvious examples of reading one text through another. The evaluative edge of parody could be used to illustrate the ideological contexts of texts by examining, for instance, the gender assumptions in Bugs Bunny’s cross-dressing, or in Waynes’ World’s commentary on that comic trope. While using parody in the classroom might “de-fang” parody, once it is framed in an institutional environment, it might nevertheless

offer opportunities for students to explore intertextual connections, much as fans of television shows use the internet to expand their knowledge of and connections with the programs they are devoted to.

### **Implications for Further Research**

This dissertation has investigated the ways in which parody, community, cultural knowledge, and ideology are interrelated. For the most part, the dissertation has focused on theoretical questions about the social construction of parodic understandings, the dialogic nature of interpreting parody and humor, and the possibility of textual play as a means of resisting the hegemony of corporatized entertainment. In this section, I would like to suggest opportunities for extending the work that this dissertation has begun, first in the area of formal education, and then in broader terms of cultural/textual analysis.

Wabbit Literacy could also provide a useful springboard for examining how interpreters come to identify with texts and their ideological contexts. To return once more to the “Kiww da Wabbit”/ “Ride of the Valkyries” example, I am by now quite familiar with the Wagner piece, even though I have never heard or seen Die Walküre, and have never experienced the piece in its full musical/theatrical context. In addition, I have a general sense of the mythological significance of the Valkyries, and know about other contexts for the music and myth, such as Hitler’s appropriation of Wagner for propaganda, the Air Force’s dubbing the XB-70 bomber the “Valkyrie,” and so on. But my most visceral connections with it remain Apocalypse Now and the Bugs Bunny cartoon “What’s Opera, Doc?” as well as some lesser memories of its use in other movies

and commercials. So the “original” piece of music is, for me, mere academic knowledge, something I “know about” but not something I “know” as directly as I know its parodic uses. I have acquired some fairly powerful associations with the music as Coppola used it in the helicopter-attack scene in Apocalypse Now. Compared to these, the facts that I’ve acquired about the music have relatively little significance. It’s all “academic,” in the pejorative sense of the word. In contrast, now that I have read and come to love Don Quixote, my previous knowledge of parodic references to the novel has become largely unimportant to me, except for its utility as an example of Wabbit Literacy. Further investigation of how readers come to make connections with texts, both “originals” and parodies, could contribute to a better understanding of literate practices and their ideological contexts.

As I note in Chapter 4, we seem to be in the midst of a parody boom, driven largely by marketing. Irony sells. I am, however, ambivalent about the implications of the commercialization of irony and parody. While frame-breaking and parody have always been a part of TV, as with the Ernie Kovacs show or Jack Benny’s asides to the audience, it seems to me that more and more television is explicitly about TV and how to watch TV—often with a hip, cynical view that is not necessarily critical, but is rather simply dismissive (Denby 1996). The relationships between interpreter, irony, and ideology are complex and deserving of close analysis. While Americans have long valued a sense of skepticism and practicality, much current ironic comedy seems almost an empty gesture, not so much skepticism as cynical dismissal of the possibility of individual or collective action for change. Consider the cynicism that makes this phrase immediately recognizable

as a joke: "I'm from the government. I'm here to help you."<sup>2</sup> We could benefit from further exploration of how such tensions get played out in popular entertainment, for instance, in a recent parodic response to William Bennett titled The Book of Vices, or in the innumerable collections of humor about "political correctness."

One of the interesting questions for me is how much of such controversies is actually understood by the audiences who enjoy such parodies. For instance, I get the impression that many people understand "P.C." to simply involve wordy euphemisms, such as "Developmentally disabled" instead of the seemingly more familiar "mentally retarded." Parodic constructions modeled on such locutions, like "Vertically challenged" (short) and "Circumferentially gifted" (fat) have become so widespread that a lot of people seem to think that such circumlocutions are the main point of "political correctness." A joke currently being e-mailed all over the world imagines this scenario:

The National Football League recently announced a new era. From now on, no offensive team names will be permitted. While the owners of the teams rush to change uniforms and such, the National Football League announced, yesterday, its name changes and schedules for the 1999 season:

The Washington Native Americans will host the New York Very Tall People on opening day. Other key games include the Dallas Western-

---

<sup>2</sup> In a sense, this is little more than a modern adaptation of Thoreau's dictum, "If I knew that a man were coming to my house with the intention of doing me good, I should run away as fast as possible," except that the tone is more sharply pessimistic; Thoreau's witticism suggests self-reliance, while the modern phrase implies that things can only get worse.

Style Laborers hosting the St. Louis Wild Endangered Species, and the Minnesota Plundering Norsemen taking on the Green Bay Meat Industry Workers. (Politically Correct NFL web page)<sup>3</sup>

This parody completely misses the point about why Native Americans have been protesting the name “Redskins,” the only truly offensive team name in the NFL. Indeed, in the attempt to use circumlocution for its own sake, the piece turns a relatively neutral name, “Vikings,” into the somewhat denigrating “Plundering Norsemen.” If the intent had truly been to spoof “P.C.,” the Dallas Cowboys might have become the “Genocidal Despoilers of Native American Lands” and New England Patriots might have been “Nationalist Xenophobes Seeking Hegemony.” Such parodies rather miss the point that conservative or libertarian critics of “P.C.” are making, not to mention the claims of liberals who argue that the whole question of “political correctness” involves a backlash against the gains made by feminism, civil rights, and other liberal movements. It would appear that many Americans have a Wabbit-literate understanding of “P.C.,” in that their familiarity with the issue seems to come largely from various parodic commentaries on it. In this case, the parodies have almost overwhelmed the “real” issue of “P.C.” What are

---

<sup>3</sup> The rest of the text reads as follows (spacing between lines eliminated): In Week 2, there are several key matchups, highlighted by the showdown between the San Francisco Precious Metal Enthusiasts and the New Orleans Pretty Good People. The Atlanta Birds of Prey will play host to the Philadelphia Birds of Prey, while the Seattle Birds of Prey will visit the Phoenix Male Finches. The Monday night game will pit the Miami Pelagic Percoid Food Fishes against the Denver Untamed Beasts of Burden. The Cincinnati Large Bangladeshi Carnivorous Mammals will travel to Tampa Bay for a clash with the West Indies Free Booters later in Week 9, and the Detroit Large Carnivorous Cats will play the Chicago Large Mountain Mammals. Week 9 also features the Indianapolis Young Male Horses at the New England Zealous Lovers of Country (“Politically Correct NFL”).

the implications for parody, or for public discourse, when a parody outstrips public awareness of the topic it satirizes?

Finally, Wabbit Literacy encourages us to see all texts, all genres, as open to play and recombination. The centrifugal action of parody, however, is counterbalanced by the centripetal demands of narrative norms and of technological limits. In animated cartoons, as Daffy Duck reminds us in Chuck Jones' bizarre "Duck Amuck" (1953), *anything* can happen, and usually does—no frame is completely stable. In this cartoon, Daffy gets partially erased and redrawn in increasingly outlandish forms and situations by an offscreen "animator." At the end of the cartoon, the camera appears to pull back from the drawing board to reveal that the "animator" is Bugs Bunny, who smirks, "Ain't I a stinker?" Yet there are limits to the reality-bending that can go on: the cels must be drawn and painted, the film must be shot, exposed and printed frame-by-frame, run through the projector sprocket-by-sprocket at 24 frames per second to create the *illusion* of "anything" happening. And even a fairly radical cartoon like "Duck Amuck" has to stay in orbit around some commonplace realities and conventions, the centripetal forces which allow us to perceive the film as a coherent narrative. Centrifugal and centripetal forces are in tension here—the film employs conventional elements of story and visual depictions even as it explodes its own constructedness. It is this balancing act, this constant back-and-forth between sense and nonsense, the familiar and the strange, that gives parody its energy—and makes Wabbit Literacy a memorable means of learning about the world and discourse.

## APPENDIX: PERMISSIONS

Page 63: Kirkman, Rick, and Jerry Scott. Baby Blues comic strip. 5 April 1997. Reprinted with special permission from King Features Syndicate.

Page 74: Jillette, Penn, and Teller. Penn & Teller's How to Play With Your Food. New York: Villard, 1992. 42. Reprinted with permission from Villard Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

Page 145: Mystery Science Theater 3000, Episode 302, "Gamera," 1991. Image reprinted with permission from Best Brains, Inc.

## WORKS CITED

- Anderson, Joe. "Chuck Jones Interviewed." The American Animated Cartoon: A Critical Anthology. Ed. Danny Peary and Gerald Peary. New York: Dutton, 1980. 128-141.
- Aristotle. Rhetoric. A hypertextual resource compiled by Lee Honeycutt. 14 Jan 2000. <<http://www.public.iastate.edu/~honeyl/Rhetoric/rhet1-2.html#1357a>>
- Bagge, Peter. Letter Column. Hate April 1995: 25.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P, 1981.
- . Speech Genres and Other Late Essays. Ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Trans. Vern W. McGee. Austin: U of Texas P, 1986.
- . Rabelais and His World. Trans. Hélène Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984.
- Bartholomae, David, and Anthony Petrosky. "Introduction." Ways of Reading 4th Ed. Boston: St. Martin's, 1996. 1-18.
- Beall, Kristen. So what is this MST3K thing, anyway?. 22 Aug. 1999. <<http://www.geocities.com/Area51/Nebula/8085/mst/about.htm>>
- . How to Write MiSTings. 11 Sept. 1999. <<http://www.geocities.com/Area51/Nebula/8085/mst/write.htm>>
- Beck, Jerry, Editor. The 50 Greatest Cartoons: As Selected by 1,000 Animation Professionals. Kansas City, MO: Andrews and McMeel. 1994.
- Beck, Jerry and Will Friedwald. Loony Tunes and Merrie Melodies: A Complete Illustrated Guide to the Warner Bros. Cartoons. New York: Henry Holt, 1989.
- Bell, Elizabeth, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells. "Introduction: Walt's in the Movies." From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995. 1-17
- Bitzer, Lloyd F. "Aristotle's Enthymeme Revisited." Quarterly Journal of Speech 45 (1959): 399-408.
- "Bobby's Hero." The Brady Bunch. ABC-TV. 2 Feb. 1973.

- Booth, Wayne. A Rhetoric of Irony. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1974.
- Brasch, Walter M. Cartoon Monickers: An Insight into the Animation Industry. Bowling Green: Bowling Green U Popular P, 1983.
- "The Boyfriend." Seinfeld. NBC-TV. 12 Feb. 1992.
- "The City of New York vs. Homer Simpson." The Simpsons. Fox-TV. 24 Sept. 1997.
- "Danny Converts." The Partridge Family. ABC-TV, 1974.
- Denham, Robert D. "From the Editor: Notes on Cultural Literacy." ADE Journal 88 (Winter 1987): 1-8.
- Denby, David. "Buried Alive: Our Children and the Avalanche of Crud." The New Yorker 15 July 1996: 48-58.
- Feild, Robert D. The Art of Walt Disney. New York: MacMillan, 1942.
- Feinberg, Leonard. The Secret Of Humor. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1978.
- Fish, Stanley. Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980.
- Gabin, Rosalind. "Humor as Metaphor, Humor as Rhetoric." Centennial Review 31 (1987): 33-46.
- Gage, John T. "Enthymeme." Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition. Ed. Theresa Enos. 223-25.
- Haggin, B.H. "Music" (Review of *Fantasia*). The Nation 11 Jan 1941: 53-54.
- Hines, David. MiSTed fanfic: "Enterprized." 11 Sept. 1999. <<http://lefty.simplenet.com/svam/Marissa-MSTings/enterprized.txt> >
- Holquist, Michael. Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World. London: Routledge, 1990.
- "Homerpalooza." The Simpsons. Fox-TV. 19 May 1996.
- Hutcheon, Linda. Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony. London: Routledge, 1994.
- . The Politics of Postmodernism. London: Routledge, 1989.

- . A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms. London: Methuen, 1985.
- Jenkins, Ron. Subversive Laughter: The Liberating Power of Comedy. New York: Macmillan/Free Press, 1994.
- Jillette, Penn, and Teller. Penn & Teller's How to Play With Your Food. New York: Villard, 1992.
- Jones, Charles M. Chuck Amuck. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1989.
- Katz, Alyssa. "The Girl Can't Help It." The Nation, 24/31 August 1998: 35-36.
- Kirkman, Rick, and Jerry Scott. Baby Blues. Comic strip. King Features Syndicate, 5 April 1997.
- Klein, Norman M. Seven Minutes: The Life and Death of the American Animated Cartoon. London: Verso, 1993.
- Kolve, V. A. The Play Called Corpus Christi. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1966.
- Kuenz, Jane. "It's a Small World After All." The Project on Disney. Inside the Mouse: Work and Play at Disney World. Durham: Duke UP, 1995. 54-78.
- . "Working at the Rat." The Project on Disney. Inside the Mouse: Work and Play at Disney World. Durham: Duke UP, 1995. 110-162.
- Luckett, Moya. "Fantasia." Disney Discourse: Producing the Magic Kingdom. Ed. Eric Smoodin. London: Routledge, 1995. 214-236.
- "Lynsa" (pseud). MiST of "Alien Sex Machines". 23 Aug. 1999. <[http://pinky.wtower.com.mst3k/archive/alien\\_sex\\_machines.L.txt](http://pinky.wtower.com.mst3k/archive/alien_sex_machines.L.txt)>
- Morreal, John. Taking Laughter Seriously. Albany: State University of New York, 1983.
- "My Fair Opponent." The Brady Bunch. ABC-TV. 3 Nov 1972.
- Norrick, Neal R. Conversational Joking: Humor in Everyday Talk. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993.
- . "Intertextuality in Humor." Humor: International Journal of Humor Research. 2.2 (1989): 117-139.

"The Opera." Seinfeld. NBC-TV. 4 Nov. 1992.

Orwell, George. "Funny, but not Vulgar." The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell. Ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus. New York: Harcourt, 1968. III, 283-288.

"The Outing." Seinfeld. NBC-TV. 11 Feb. 1993

Peary, Danny, and Gerald Peary, Eds. The American Animated Cartoon: A Critical Anthology. New York: Dutton, 1980.

The Politically Correct NFL. 27 Jan. 2000. <<http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Farm/7478/pc-nfl.htm>>

Posner, Gerald. Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK. New York: Random, 1993.

The Project on Disney. Inside the Mouse: Work and Play at Disney World. Durham: Duke UP, 1995.

"The Raincoats." Seinfeld. NBC-TV. 28 Apr. 1994.

Ratliff, Stephen. Home page. 18 Sept. 1999. <<http://www.cs.runet.edu/~sratliff/>>

Rose, Margaret. Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Postmodern. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993.

"The Ruby Yacht." The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle, Vol. 2: Birth of Bullwinkle. Videocassette. Buena Visa Home Video, 1992.

Sandler, Kevin S. "Gendered Evasion: Bugs Bunny in Drag." Reading the Rabbit: Explorations in Warner Bros. Animation. Ed. Kevin S. Sandler. New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1998. 154-171.

Scenters-Zapico, John. "The Social Construction of Enthymematic Understanding." Rhetoric Society Quarterly. 24.3-4 (1994). 71-87.

Schneider, Steve. That's All, Folks! The Art of Warner Bros. Animation. New York: Henry Holt, 1988.

"Selma's Choice" The Simpsons. Fox-TV. 21 Jan. 1993

"The Show Must Go On." The Brady Bunch. ABC-TV. 3 Mar 1972.

Simensky, Linda. "Selling Bugs Bunny: Warner Bros. And Character Merchandising in the Nineties." Reading the Rabbit: Explorations in Warner Bros. Animation. Ed. Kevin S. Sandler. New Brunswick: Rutgers 1998. 172-192.

The Simpsons Archive. Web page. January 26, 2000. <<http://www.snpp.com/episodes/9404.html>> and <<http://www.snpp.com/episodes/4F22>>

Smoodin, Eric. L. Animating Culture: Hollywood Cartoons in the Sound Era. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1993.

Steinem, Gloria. "If Men Could Menstruate." Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions. New York: New American Library, 1986. Reprinted on web page of Nancy Kohn. 18 Jan 2000. <<http://www.haverford.edu/psych/ddavis/p109g/steinem.menstruate.html>>

"A Streetcar Named Marge." The Simpsons. Fox-TV. 1 Oct. 1992.

Suls, Jerry. "Cognitive Processes in Humor Appreciation." In Handbook of Humor Research. Ed. Paul E. McGhee and Jeffrey Goldstein. New York: Springer-Verlag, 1983. I, 39-48.

Thompson, Richard. "Meep-Meep!" The American Animated Cartoon: A Critical Anthology. Ed. Danny Peary and Gerald Peary. New York: Dutton, 1980. 217-225.

Troutman, Michelle. The End? 10 Aug. 1999. <<http://mst3k.about.com/library/weekly/mcurrent.htm?pid=2833&cob=home>>

Trudeau, Garry. Doonesbury. Universal Press Syndicate. 30 October 1972.

Weston, Kevin. "We Can't Understand Black Kids' Laughter." Arizona Daily Star. February 3, 1994: A13.

White, David G. MiST of "Global Alert For All: Jesus is Coming Soon." 23 Aug. 1999. <[http://pinky.wtower.com/mst3k/archive/global\\_alert.DW.txt](http://pinky.wtower.com/mst3k/archive/global_alert.DW.txt)>

Willis, Susan. "Public Use/Private State." The Project on Disney. Inside the Mouse: Work and Play at Disney World. Durham: Duke UP, 1995. 180-198.

Zillmann, Dolf. "Disparagement Humor." In Handbook of Humor Research. Ed. Paul E. McGhee and Jeffrey Goldstein. New York: Springer-Verlag, 1983. I, 85-108.