Brevity Is The Soul Of Wit

Yan Brailowsky

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Video introduction to issue 1

Yan Brailowsky

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Transcript:

1 Welcome to the first issue of *Angles*. My name is Yan Brailowsky, and I am this issue's guest editor.

2 The editorial committee thought that it would be a good idea to have a video introduction, rather than the usual written introduction, and so this is it. The choice of form is also one of substance: *Angles* wants to study the Anglophone world using different perspectives, different methodologies, taking risks, experimenting, even having fun. You might discover a surprise or two as you browse through the issue.

3 This issue's topic is inspired by the famous adage: 'Brevity is the soul of wit'. I hope that this section won't prove as dreary and repetitive as Ophelia's father. Nobody wants to end up stabbed, hiding in the queen's bedchamber.

4 The adage 'brevity is the soul of wit' is often used to describe humor or sarcasm. It suggests that true 'wit' exists only in shortened form, as if depth of meaning ('soul') required brevity of form. It also hints that humor loses its essence when explicated.

5 We start with two studies on 20th century avant-garde poetry, poetry which aimed at trying to find the essence of language. The first contribution, by Yasna Bozhkova, focuses on Mina Loy, and locates her work in the utopian movements of the early 20th century. This paper allows the reader to travel in time, from 1914 to 1945, from Paris and Florence to New York and Mexico, revisiting the poetic luminaries and revolutionaries of that period.

6 Axel Nesme chose a different approach to study Lorine Niedecker's poetry. He started with Freud's *dictum* that wit works through condensation and displacement, something which Niedecker defined as "condensery". Nesme's paper, which gives us a glimpse of the complexity of Niedecker's puns, also recalls the Post-War context in which she wrote, one in which people feared The Bomb.

7 The Cold War required humor. A contribution by Raphaël Ricaud studies one example of humor used as stress relief, that of John Lackey Brown, a professional US diplomat. In this first stab at analyzing Brown's correspondence, Ricaud introduces the reader to the cultural Cold War, and how diplomats could use wit to advance political causes.

8 After a graphic intermission, this issue offers other papers which study brevity and wit to reveal something about language itself. In a playful contribution, Jean-Jacques Lecercle takes an excerpt from Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*. Through a series of axioms and propositions, Lecercle not only gives us an primer on the wealth and wit afforded by New Englishes, he also makes serious points about the way language, through brevity and wit, questions us all, interpellates us.

9 Using a different material and approach, Shannon Wells-Lassagne also makes serious points when studying American sitcoms, from the early *Dick Van Dyke Show* to the *Big Bang Theory*. Sitcoms can be funny, but they also try to squeeze serious moral lessons between a couple of jokes, as shown in numerous extracts mentioned in the paper.

10 In some cases, the point of comedy is to prove that there is no point in making a point. This is what Thomas Britt shows in his paper on *The Best Show on WFMU*, a radio show in New Jersey. Britt analyses a famous sketch entitled "Rock, Rot and Rule". The sketch shows how the search for critical brevity can lead to chaos, a funny one at that, as Ronald Thomas Chontle, an imaginary author, tries to settle disputes between musical experts by devising a fool-proof method that is just that, foolish. You can listen to the audio clips with the reactions of listeners infuriated by Chontle's flawed rhetoric. If you've ever watched Fox News, you'll recognize some of Chontle's most obvious fallacies.

11 The last piece on Brevity and Wit offers a sort of typology of one-liners using linguistics. But hold on, this is linguistics made fun. In her paper, Catherine Chauvin takes different types of one-liners, ones based on puns, on ambiguous syntax, on set-phrases, to show how central these examples are to key question in linguistics such as "default meaning(s), the role of context, and so on. You'll discover how many one-liners work, and you'll want to try a few examples on students and friends —for documentary purposes, of course.

12 Taken together, these contributions on 'brevity is the soul of wit' provide transhistorical and transcultural analyses, pointing out the formal and aesthetic aspects of certain forms, as well as the cultural and political use of jokes and repartee by writers, screen-writers, political commentators or politicians.

13 The journal has a second section, which has no topic. This issue's *Varia* contains three, very different, and really exciting contributions.

14 The first paper is an analysis of a parodic zombie movie, *Shaun of the Dead*, but the analysis is in comic-book form. Yes, that's right, a serious comic-book studying a parodic zombie movie. In this original contribution, Nicolas Labarre and Jean-François Baillon study the interplay between the romantic-comedy and the zombie film genres. You might also want to read Nicolas Labarre's reflections on the making-of, not of the movie, but the comic-book analysis. His blog provides the necessary background to understand why this contribution works better in this form than in any other, and provides food for thought for academics wishing to follow in his footsteps.

15 The second contribution is a video documentary, in which Mathilde Bertrand interviewed photographer Nigel Dickinson. Dickinson talks about his work covering a

miners' strike at Lea Hall in the mid-1980s. The photographer recalls the context of the strike and how a mining community in Staffordshire used his photographs to tell their story their way. This was a welcome change to the way in which the media told the story for them—and no doubt a lesson for anyone today, such as low-wage Walmart employees, who need to tell the world their story in their terms.

16 The last contribution in this section is a study of a performance of Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* by The Wooster Group. In this paper, Emeline Jouve uses Judith Butler's theories on performativity to see how the Wooster Group 'troubled' the notions of genre and race, by having Emperor Jones, a black man, played by a white woman... in blackface. Jouve's study shows how theater can effectively question the world, and perhaps bring about change.

17 I believe these three contributions in the *Varia* section pave the way for original research on pressing issues but research which can use new forms which make full use of the online format of this journal.

18 Other issues of *Angles* are already in the works, I'm happy to say, and you can find more information on the journal's website.

19 I hope you enjoy this issue.

ABSTRACTS

This video begins by introducing the thematic contributions on the famous adage 'brevity is the soul of wit'. The eight contributions on the topic offer transhistorical and transcultural analyses which point out the formal and aesthetic aspects of certain forms, as well as the cultural context and political use of jokes and repartee by writers, screenwriters, political commentators or politicians. The guest editor then introduces the three contributions in the *Varia* section which give readers/viewers an inkling of the wealth of innovative research made possible by *Angles* and its online format.

La vidéo commence par présenter les contributions thématiques autour de l'adage « Brevity is the soul of wit » (« puisque la brièveté est l'âme de l'esprit »). Les huit contributions proposent des analyses transhistoriques et transculturelles soulignant certains aspects formels et esthétiques de quelques formes, ainsi que le contexte culturel et l'usage politique qui peut être fait de jeux de mots ou de plaisanteries par des écrivains, des scénaristes, des commentateurs politiques ou des politiciens. Le responsable du numéro présente ensuite les trois contributions de la section *Varia*, car elles donnent un aperçu de la richesse et de l'innovation permises par *Angles* et son format numérique.

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Keywords: video, brevity, humour, wit, language, literature, history, film, experimental research
Mots-clés: vidéo, brièveté, humour, langue, littérature, histoire, film, recherche expérimentale

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‘The Language of the Future’ and the Crisis of Modernity: Mina Loy’s ‘Aphorisms on Futurism’

Yasna Bozhkova

THE Futurist can live a thousand years in one poem.
HE can compress every æsthetic principle in one line.
Mina Loy, “Aphorisms on Futurism” (1914)

1 For a long time, the modernist poet and painter Mina Loy remained marginal to, and even absent from, the modernist canon. Her work has gained increasing prominence in recent modernist scholarship, especially in studies which work toward a critical redefinition of Modernism as a variety of competing modernisms rather than as a monolithic and homogeneous phenomenon. Indeed, for various reasons, Loy’s case is especially suited to demonstrate this plurality of “isms” which shaped the modernist movement: the eclectic, protean nature of her work, which spans across visual arts and literature, her cosmopolitanism, her role as a transatlantic mediator between artistic communities in London, Munich, Paris, Florence, and New York, and her ambivalent engagement with avant-gardes with conflicting agendas, among which were Italian Futurism, New York Dada, and Surrealism. Her hybrid aesthetics deliberately explore the tensions generated by the collisions of disparate elements, and her highly idiosyncratic poetic voice simultaneously embraces the radical innovation which characterizes her cultural moment, and ironically points to its limits.

2 This paper focuses on the ironic strategies which emerge in Loy’s first published text, “Aphorisms on Futurism.” The publication of “Aphorisms” in the January 1914 issue of Alfred Stieglitz’s influential journal *Camera Work*[1] put Loy on the map of the international literary avant-garde, marking her turn from the visual arts to poetry. “Aphorisms” was penned in Florence while Loy was amorously and artistically involved with Futurist leaders F.T. Marinetti and Giovanni Papini, editor of the Florence-based Futurist periodical *Lacerba*. Loy’s poems and plays, which also bore the imprint of

Futurist aesthetics, appeared shortly thereafter in the small New York magazines *Trend, Rogue,* and *Others,* causing quite an uproar with their highly fractured syntax, experimental punctuation, and enigmatic imagery. In October 1916, Loy sailed from Florence to New York and became an initiate of the Arensberg circle, a cluster of artists, poets, and intellectuals around art patron Walter Arensberg, which brought together the poets whose work appeared in *Others* and the artists of New York Dada. Even though Loy's Futurist phase was brief, her connections with the Futurists and her "madly elliptical style" were inextricably intertwined in the making of her reputation on the other side of the Atlantic as one of the most innovative European avant-gardists:

> Visiting the shrines of modern art and literature in Paris and Florence, and being accepted as a coeval in the maddest circles, Miss Loy, who is an artist as well as a poet, imbibed the precepts of Apollinaire and Marinnetti [sic] and became a Futurist with all the earnestness and irony of a woman possessed and obsessed with the sum of human experience and disillusion. [...] In an unsophisticated land, such sophistry, clinical frankness and sardonic conclusions, wedded to a madly elliptical style scornful of the regulation grammar, syntax, and punctuation, [...] horrified our gentry and drove our critics into furious despair. (Kreymborg 488)

3 "Aphorisms on Futurism" is usually interpreted as a Futurist manifesto and is often read along with her contemporaneous "Feminist Manifesto," which remained unpublished in her lifetime. Critical appraisals based on a cross-reading of the two texts such as Natalya Lusty's "Sexing the Manifesto: Mina Loy, Feminism and Futurism" focus on her feminist critique of Futurism's misogyny and foreground the acute unresolved tension between a Futurist and a feminist poetics that characterizes Loy's early writings. Less attention has been paid to the project of a "language of the Future" (*LLB* 152) that emerges in "Aphorisms," which resonates differently in the context of what Marjorie Perloff has called "the Futurist moment" than it does in the context of Loy's later literary production, which also engages with subsequent avant-gardes like Dada and Surrealism. While Loy distanced herself from Italian Futurism soon after she relocated to New York, her style retained its epigrammatic and often enigmatic density, her tendency to write terse, cryptic poetry and her long periods of silence growing increasingly pronounced in her later years.

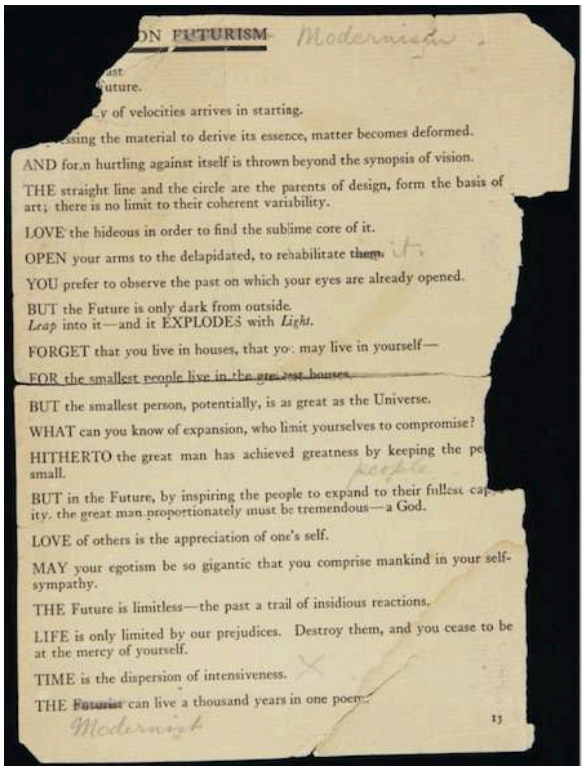
4 On her copy of the printed version of "Aphorisms on Futurism",[2] Loy crossed out the word "Futurism" and replaced it with the word "Modernism." In a note, Loy's literary executor and editor Roger Conover explains that even though Loy might have retrospectively preferred to call this piece "Aphorisms on Modernism," he chose to retain the original title because of its obvious stylistic and thematic debt to Futurism.[3] While indeed the text is undoubtedly influenced by Futurism in its aesthetics and thematic concerns, it resonates more richly and ambivalently within a broader definition of "Modernism":

> THE ~~Futurist~~ Modernist can live a thousand years in one poem.
> HE can compress every æsthetic principle in one line.

5 This key revision brings to the fore the irony inherent in Loy's "Aphorisms," underscoring the fact that while the attempt to do away with the verbosity and ornament characteristic of traditional discourse and the call for telegraphic brevity and maximum concision were a common point in many avant-garde agendas and emerge as inseparable from modernity; disparate modernisms used brevity to different ends. While it suggests that the project of a "language of the Future" extends beyond the aesthetics of Italian Futurism properly speaking to the modernist movement as a

whole, Loy's revision also underscores the problem of Modernism as a chain reaction of "isms," each with their own agenda of ever more radical experimentation in search of a new poetic language of modernity.

Figure 1: "Aphorisms on Futurism"



ON FUTURISM Modernism

uture.

y of velocities arrives in starting.

sing the material to derive its essence, matter becomes deformed.

AND for.n hurtling against itself is thrown beyond the synopsis of vision.

THE straight line and the circle are the parents of design, form the basis of art; there is no limit to their coherent variability.

LOVE the hideous in order to find the sublime core of it.

OPEN your arms to the delapidated, to rehabilitate them.

YOU prefer to observe the past on which your eyes are already opened.

BUT the Future is only dark from outside.
Leap into it—and it EXPLODES with *Light.*

FORGET that you live in houses, that yo. may live in yourself—

FOR the smallest people live in the greatest houses.

BUT the smallest person, potentially, is as great as the Universe.

WHAT can you know of expansion, who limit yourselves to compromise?

HITHERTO the great man has achieved greatness by keeping the pe people small.

BUT in the Future, by inspiring the people to expand to their fullest capacity, the great man proportionately must be tremendous—a God.

LOVE of others is the appreciation of one's self.

MAY your egotism be so gigantic that you comprise mankind in your self-sympathy.

THE Future is limitless—the past a trail of insidious reactions.

LIFE is only limited by our prejudices. Destroy them, and you cease to be at the mercy of yourself.

TIME is the dispersion of intensiveness.

THE Futurist can live a thousand years in one poem.

Modernist

13

From: Mina Loy papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. http://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/beinecke.loy

6 This paper uses the aesthetic principles outlined in "Aphorisms on Futurism" as an interpretative lens through which to examine how Loy's poetic strategies of extreme concision and density evolve from her Futurist phase to her later work, which remains formally innovative but has different thematic concerns. It argues that Loy's text must be read with a double focus: on the one hand, attending to the context of its composition, situating it in a climactic moment of acute crisis, a radical call for destruction of language, and an unprecedented fervor of experimentation, and on the other, through the prism of this key later revision, in order to trace how this anarchistic call for destruction of traditional discourse to be replaced by a utopian "language of the Future" later collapses into a poetics of silence, a silence whose dimensions are both aesthetic and historical. The ironic ambivalence of "Aphorisms" is already inherent in its strategic generic ambiguity: it reads *both* as a Futurist manifesto and as a disconnected series of aphorisms, which raises, as should become clear, discrepant horizons of generic expectations and becomes a key vehicle for reflecting ambivalently on the crisis of modernity.

The Language of the Future

7 Most likely composed in late 1913 or early 1914, Loy's "Aphorisms on Futurism" is essentially a product of what Marjorie Perloff calls "the Futurist moment" in *The Futurist Moment: Avant-garde, Avant Guerre and the Language of Rupture*, a concept she herself borrows from Renato Poggioli's seminal study *Theory of the Avant-Garde:*

> the futurist moment belongs to all the avant-gardes and not only to the one named for it [...] the so-named movement was only a significant symptom of a broader and deeper state of mind. Italian futurism had the great merit of fixing and expressing it, coining that most fortunate term as its own label. [...] the futurist manifestation represents, so to speak, a prophetic and utopian phase, the arena of agitation and preparation for the announced revolution, if not the revolution itself. (Poggioli qtd. in Perloff xvii)

8 What Perloff calls the "Futurist moment" is this brief "prophetic and utopian phase" which immediately preceded the eruption of World War I when the language of revolution was omnipresent. Even though this climactic moment was characterized by a ubiquitous call for rupture with tradition, it triggered a chain reaction of radical innovation marked by intense rivalries between different avant-garde groups. United by the idea that traditional language is obsolete, avant-gardes demanded a complete restructuring of language and artistic forms in order to respond to the new episteme charted by new philosophical and scientific theories about the nature of time, consciousness, and being, as well as to a new everyday modernity marked by the advances of technology and early globalization.

9 London-born and having lived in Munich and Paris where she had been precociously immersed in the most innovative artistic currents, in Florence Loy was strategically placed to respond to these disparate strains of modernity, on the one hand through her involvement with Marinetti and Papini, through whom she imbibed the precepts not only of Italian but also indirectly of Russian Futurism, and on the other, through her encounter with Gertrude Stein and other Anglophone avant-gardists at Mabel Dodge's Florentine Villa Curonia.[4] Loy produced her first writings "in the throes of conversion to Futurism",[5] galvanized by their incendiary manifestoes and by the acute schism between Past and Future that Futurism demanded. Founded on January 1st 1913, the Florence-based periodical *Lacerba* edited by Giovanni Papini attracted to Florence Futurist leader Marinetti, who had been shuttling between Milan and Paris. Through her brief amorous involvement with Marinetti and Papini, Loy was initiated into the circle of Futurist painters, witnessed a number of the *serate futuriste* (Futurist evenings), violently provocative spectacles which anticipated the scandal brought about by Dada happenings, and in 1914 took part in the First Free International Futurist Exhibition at the Sprovieri Gallery in Rome. Like the Futurist manifestoes, Loy's "Aphorisms on Futurism" hinges on the break between Past and Future:

> DIE in the Past.
> Live in the Future.
> [...]
> YOU prefer to observe the past on which your eyes are already opened.
> BUT the Future is only dark from outside.
> Leap into it—and it EXPLODES with Light.
> [...]
> THE Future is limitless—the past a trail of insidious reactions. (*LLB* 149-150)

10 The revolutionary rhetoric of the Futurist manifestoes calls for a complete destruction of the Past and a utopian exaltation with the idea of Future, postulating "an abyss between those docile slaves of past tradition and us free moderns, who are confident in the radiant splendour of our future." (FM 25). This desire for a complete *tabula rasa* is summed up in Marinetti's "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism": "We stand on the last promontory of the centuries!... Why should we look back, when what we want is to break down the mysterious doors of the Impossible? Time and Space died yesterday. We already live in the absolute, because we have created eternal, omnipresent speed." (*FM* 22).

11 In this violent obliteration of the Past, not only traditional literary language, but literature itself, become obsolete: for Marinetti, libraries are "cemeteries" which must be destroyed like museums, and the book is a tomb or a "funerary urn" of its author (*FM* 22-3). The Futurist project seeks to abolish the idea of a purely "literary" mode and collapse the boundaries between Art and Life, World and Text. It calls for a complete revolution of language in order to respond to the speed, simultaneity, and everyday ephemerality of modern experience, predicating artistic creation on technology and seeking inspiration in the telephone, the newspaper, the telegraph, and the airplane. Since literary language has become obsolete and the book is the tomb of its author, the Futurist poem emerges as an act beyond literature, a gesture transgressing the boundaries of the written page.

12 Futurism's revolutionary project for an absolute liberation of the Word finds its most synthetic expression in Marinetti's seminal manifesto "Destruction of Syntax—Imagination without Strings—Words-in-Freedom," published in Papini's *Lacerba* in June 1913, which calls for a "multilinear lyricism" of "telegraphic images":

> With words-in-freedom we will have: CONDENSED METAPHORS. TELEGRAPHIC IMAGES. MAXIMUM VIBRATIONS. NODES OF THOUGHT. CLOSED OR OPEN FANS OF MOVEMENT. COMPRESSED ANALOGIES. COLOR BALANCES. DIMENSIONS, WEIGHTS, MEASURES, AND THE SPEED OF SENSATIONS. THE PLUNGE OF THE ESSENTIAL WORD INTO THE WATER OF SENSIBILITY, MINUS THE CONCENTRIC CIRCLES THAT THE WORD PRODUCES. RESTFUL MOMENTS OF INTUITION. MOVEMENTS IN TWO, THREE, FOUR, FIVE DIFFERENT RHYTHMS. THE ANALYTIC, EXPLORATORY POLES THAT SUSTAIN THE BUNDLE OF INTUITIVE STRINGS. (*FM* 100)

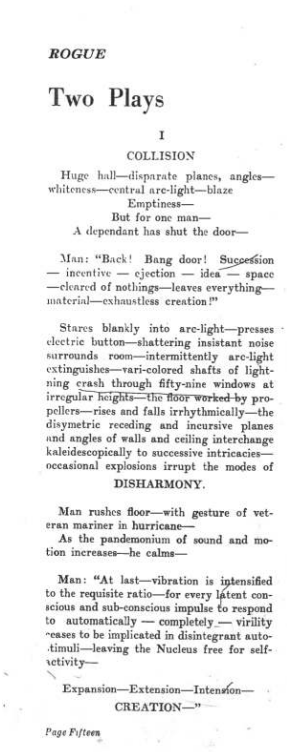
13 Marinetti's *immaginazione senza fili* has been translated both as "imagination without strings," evoking the liberation of the Word from the chains of traditional syntax, and as "wireless imagination," which points to the telegraph as the new avant-garde mode of poetic creation, best able to convey the simultaneity and speed of modern experience. The Futurist language is "telegraphic" not only because it abolishes traditional syntax and punctuation and presents liberated words freely flowing on the space of the page, but also because in its most extreme form it should not be written on a page at all, but charted by an airplane in the sky, as in Marinetti's "Bulgarian Airplane,"[6] written when he was a war correspondent in the Balkan war. The Futurist poet no longer composes books of poetry but is, for instance, a war correspondent sending telegraphic news from the front. It is hardly accidental that Marinetti reaches the conclusion that traditional syntax is obsolete while riding on an airplane: "Sitting astride the fuel tank of an airplane, [...] I felt the ridiculous inanity of the old syntax inherited from Homer. A raging need to liberate words, dragging them out from the prison of the Latin period!" ("Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature," *FA* 119). The

poetic language of the Future is the one of the "swirling propeller" (*FA* 119) of the airplane.

14 Loy's Futurist play *Collision*, contemporaneous with "Aphorisms on Futurism" and published in *Rogue* in August 1915 (see Figure 2), engages with the Futurist idea of a telegraphic language, where traditional syntax is completely subverted. Barely a page long, it presents an inextricable fusion between the stage directions and the lines of the character, a fusion which is particularly interesting since *Collision* is essentially a play about the dynamics of creation:

> Huge hall—disparate planes, angles—whiteness—central arc-light—blaze
> Emptiness—
> But for one man—
> [...]
> Man: "Back! Bang door! Succession—incentive—ejection—idea—space—cleared of nothings—leaves everything—material—exhaustless creation!"
> Stares blankly into arc-light—presses electric button—shattering insistent noise surrounds room—intermittently arc-light extinguishes—vari-colored shafts of lightning crash through fifty-nine windows at irregular heights—the floor worked by propellers—the dissymetric receding and incursive planes and angles of walls and ceiling interchange kaleidoscopically to successive intricacies—occasional explosions irrupt the modes of
> DISHARMONY.
> [...]
> Expansion—Extension—Intension—
> CREATION—
> (*LaLB* 78)

Figure 2: Extract from *Collision*



ROGUE

Two Plays

I

COLLISION

Huge hall—disparate planes, angles—whiteness—central arc-light—blaze
Emptiness—
But for one man—
A dependant has shut the door—

Man: "Back! Bang door! Succession — incentive — ejection — idea — space —cleared of nothings—leaves everything—material—exhaustless creation!"

Stares blankly into arc-light—presses electric button—shattering insistant noise surrounds room—intermittently arc-light extinguishes—vari-colored shafts of lightning crash through fifty-nine windows at irregular heights—the floor worked by propellers—rises and falls irrhythmically—the disymetric receding and incursive planes and angles of walls and ceiling interchange kaleidescopically to successive intricacies—occasional explosions irrupt the modes of
DISHARMONY.

Man rushes floor—with gesture of veteran mariner in hurricane—
As the pandemonium of sound and motion increases—he calms—

Man: "At last—vibration is intensified to the requisite ratio—for every latent conscious and sub-conscious impulse to respond to automatically — completely — virility ceases to be implicated in disintegrant autostimuli—leaving the Nucleus free for self-activity—

Expansion—Extension—Intension—
CREATION—"

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Source: https://mlarchive.suzannechurchill.com/items/show/1.

15 Even though Marinetti's *parole in libertà* which do away with linear models of reading have been as influential in twentieth-century avant-garde as Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, Marinetti's call for an extreme telegraphic brevity has its obvious limitations: the utopian idea of a complete revolution of language brought about by the abolition of traditional syntax and the liberation of the word culminates in what he calls a "numerical sensibility":

> My love of precision and essential brevity has naturally given me a taste for numbers, which live and breathe on the paper like living beings in our new *numerical sensibility*. [...] The mathematical signs + – x = serve to achieve marvellous syntheses and share, with their abstract simplicity of anonymous gears, in expressing the geometrical and mechanical splendours. For example, it would have needed at least an entire page of description to render this vast and complex battle horizon, when I found this definitive lyric equation: 'horizon = sharp bore of the sun + 5 triangular shadows (1 kilometre wide) + 3 lozenges of rosy light + 5 fragments of hills + 30 columns of smoke + 23 flames.' (*FM* 158-159)

16 As the above lines make clear, as revolutionary as Marinetti's principles are, they essentially amount to reducing discourse to a mathematical equation: his experimental words-in-freedom such as "BATAILLE POIDS + ODEUR" (Marinetti 1987: 75-80) exemplify such a mode of creation. Likewise, Marinetti's use of onomatopoeia, which spectacularly collapses into unintelligibility in words-in-freedom like *Zang Tumb Tuuum* and *Dunes*, illuminates the irony inherent in Loy's idea of a "language of the Future":

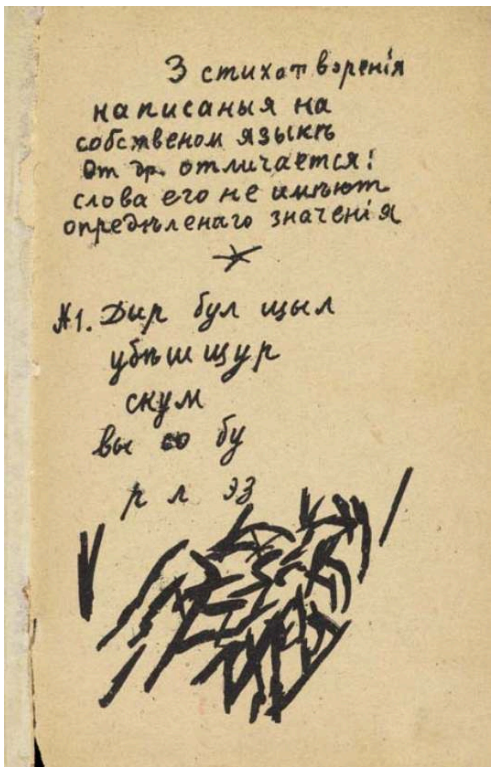
> AND so these sounds shall dissolve back to their innate senselessness.
> THUS shall evolve the language of the Future. (*LLB* 152)

17 This ironic idea of a language of the Future which dissolves into senselessness may be related not only to the project of Italian Futurism but to Russian Cubo-Futurism as well. Contemporaneously with Marinetti's "Destruction of Syntax," Alexei Kruchenykh's manifestoes "Declaration of the Word as Such" and "New Ways of the Word: The Language of the Future, Death to Symbolism" laid the foundations of *zaum*, variously translated from Russian as "transreason", "transration" or "beyonsense," which is essentially a "free" language liberated from "meaning"—"a language which does not have any definite meaning, a transrational language" (*RF* 67). In "New Ways of the Word," Kruchenykh writes: "In our art we already have the first experiments of the language of the future." (*RF* 70). Loy's ironic idea of a "language of the Future" which ultimately "dissolve[s]" sounds "back to their innate senselessness" reflects the linguistic project of *zaum*, a language rich in sound effects but deliberately devoid of meaning. The linguistic project of Russian Cubo-Futurism hinges on a paradox: on the one hand, *zaum* is a language deliberately "liberated" from meaning, but on the other, it is also predicated on the utopian idea of a universal poetic language, an organic version of Esperanto: "Transrational works can provide a universal poetic language, born organically, and not artificially like Esperanto." (Kruchenykh, "Declaration on Transrational Language," *RF* 183). In practice, however, the poetic experiments of *zaum* "dissolve" into unintelligibility, as in Kruchenykh's 1913 poem "Dyr bul schyl" (Figure 3):

> ДЫР БУЛ ЩЫЛ
> УБЕШЩУР
> СКУМ
> ВЫ СО БУ
> Р Л ЭЗ
> (Russian Original)

dyr bul shchyl
ubeshchur
skum
vy so bu
r l èz
(Transliteration)
(*RF* 60)

Figure 3: Kruchenykh's 1913 poem "Dyr bul schyl"



Facsimile: http://archives.getty.edu:30008/getty_images/digitalresources/russian_ag/pdfs/gri_88-B26240.pdf

18 Loy's play *The Sacred Prostitute* features a character named "Futurism" who delivers a Futurist "proto-poem," which ostensibly parodies both Marinetti's onomatopoeias and the *zaum* of the Russian Cubo-Futurists:

Tatatata ta ta ta ta ta ta ta ta ta
plum plam plam pluff pluff frrrrrr
urrrrrrrrrrrraaaaaaaaa
pluff plaff plaff gottgott gluglu
craaa craaa
cloc-cloc gluglu gluglu cloc-cloc
gluglu
scscscsc —— (SE 196)

19 This split between language and meaning must be read through the prism of the Saussurean linguistic revolution: while Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* would not be published until 1916, it only made explicit the split that the avant-gardes were already intuitively aware of and deliberately working toward. Saussurean linguistics brought about the emergence of language as an autonomous system, distinct from meaning: "*[l]anguage is a form and not a substance*. [...] This truth could not be

overstressed, for [...] all our incorrect ways of naming things that pertain to language, stem from the involuntary supposition that the linguistic phenomenon must have substance." (Saussure 122; emphasis his). In this irreversible split between language and meaning, language emerges as pure form. This turning away from the idea of language as a transparent vehicle of "meaning," and an increasing focus on the materiality of language itself is a turn similar to the early twentieth-century turning away from mimetic representation in visual arts, and may also be related to Cubist experiments with collage that feature letters, which deliberately oscillate between a linguistic and a purely visual interpretation of the letter. What Loy's ironic idea of a "language of the Future" that collapses into "senselessness" foregrounds is that this radical linguistic experimentation, which seeks to do away with "meaning" and bring about a liberation of language as pure form, ultimately leads to a semantic silence.

A is A is A: A "Radium of the Word"

20 Loy's other decisive Florentine encounter was with Gertrude Stein, who was a regular visitor at Mabel Dodge's Villa Curonia. Her turn from visual arts to literature was precipitated among other things by her encounter with Stein's unsettling poetics and her radical experiments with syntax and punctuation. The publication of Loy's "Aphorisms" in *Camera Work* inscribes it in the context of Stein's portraits "Matisse" and "Picasso" and her "Portrait of Mabel Dodge at the Villa Curonia," which had appeared in the same journal in 1912-1913. In Florence Loy also read the manuscript of Stein's *The Making of Americans*, and her response to Stein's challenging experimentation with syntax and punctuation is referred to in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*: "Mina [was] among the very earliest to be interested in the work of Gertrude Stein. [...] [She] was able to understand without the commas. She has always been able to understand." (Stein 2013: 92). Loy was also undoubtedly acquainted with Stein's "device" "Rose is a rose is a rose," (Stein 1922: 187), which dates from the 1913 poem "Sacred Emily" and resurfaces repeatedly in Stein's writings. Stein's device is both the perfect linguistic loop, an endless tautology which can be extended to infinity, and an ironic aphorism predicated on the law of identity: A is A. In a prose piece titled "Gertrude Stein," Loy refers to her encounter with the "austere verity" of Stein's experimentation, in which language is no longer a question of "meaning" but a question of "Being":

> Some years ago I left Gertrude Stein's Villino in Fiesole with a manuscript she had given me.
> "Each one is one. Each one is being the one each one is being. Each one is one is being one. Each one is being the one that one is being. Each one is being one each one is one.
> Each one is one. Each one is very well accustomed to be one. Each one is very well accustomed to be that one. Each one is one." (Galeries Lafayette) [...]
> This was when Bergson was in the air,[7] and his beads of Time strung on the continuous flux of Being, seemed to have found a literary conclusion in the austere verity of Gertrude Stein's theme — 'Being' as the absolute occupation. (*LaLB* 289)

21 Stein's experimentation seeks to capture "the very pulse of duration" (*LaLB* 289), wherein words become "beads of Time strung on the continuous flux of Being". Thus, Loy's idea that "[the] Modernist can live a thousand years in one poem [and] can compress every aesthetic principle in one line" echoes not only the Futurist idea of simultaneity but also Bergson's theory of *durée*, which posits a new relation between

time and consciousness. The need for innovative poetic forms which respond to new theories about the nature of time, consciousness, and being is reflected in Loy's "Aphorisms":

> CONSCIOUSNESS cannot spontaneously accept or reject new forms, as offered by creative genius; it is the new form, for however great a period of time it may remain a mere irritant—that molds consciousness to the necessary amplitude for holding it. CONSCIOUSNESS has no climax. (*LLB* 151)

22 As the above lines suggest, the relationship between consciousness and artistic form is twofold: on the one hand, what is at stake is a search for artistic forms which can contain the increasingly complex nature of modern experience; on the other, in the reverse process innovative forms also generate new "amplitudes" of experience and "mold" consciousness into new forms of understanding. This process of "molding" is described in very concrete, physical, quasi-scientific terms: "IN pressing the material to derive its essence, matter becomes deformed." (*LLB* 149). The idea of the poet as a scientist in a linguistic laboratory reappears in the poem "Gertrude Stein":[8]

> Curie
> of the laboratory
> of vocabulary
> she crushed
> the tonnage
> of consciousness
> congealed to phrases
> to extract
> a radium of the word (*LLB* 94)

23 In this experimental poetics of "compression," the poet must crush "the tonnage of consciousness / [...] to extract / a radium of the word." Yet, Loy also points out, perhaps with a certain irony, that this scientific "extraction" of the "radium of the word" leaves behind a litter of "incoherent debris": "Truly with this method of Gertrude Stein's a goodly amount of incoherent debris gets littered around the radium that she crushes out of phrased consciousness." (*LaLB*, 294).

"Dichten = Condensare."

24 This quasi-scientific poetics of condensation which emerges in Loy's "Aphorisms" also points to the extreme concision of Imagist aesthetics. Concision and density are essential to modernist poetry, as the second of the founding aesthetic principles of Imagism postulates: "To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation." (Pound 1954: 3). Pound later complained that the brevity he called for was not always followed: "[*V*]*ers libre* has become as prolix and as verbose as any of the flaccid varieties that preceded it." (Pound 1954: 3). Pound's turn to Oriental poetic models like the Japanese *haiku*, and his fascination with Lao Tzu and Confucius suggests that his search for brevity was on an altogether different path from Marinetti's. Like Eliot, he was also wary of an easy "liberation" of the word at the expense of depth of meaning: "No *vers* is *libre* for the man who wants to do a good job." (Eliot qtd. in Pound 1954: 12). Pound's seminal poem "In a Station of the Metro" appeared in the April 1913 edition of *Poetry*:

> The apparition of these faces in the crowd :
> Petals on a wet, black bough .

25 He famously referred to the poem not as a description but as an "equation," where the unstated relation between the first and the second line triggers a myriad of possible interpretations. The suggestive, impenetrable depth of Japanese *haiku* aims at achieving uncommunicable metaphysical essence through a single image concisely put. If Marinetti's "numeric sensibility" seeks to achieve "[t]he plunge of the essential word into the water of sensibility *minus the concentric circles that the word produces*" (*FM* 100; my emphasis), the Poundian mode seeks precisely to work with the concentric circles of potential meanings that hover around the word, wherein the word becomes impregnated or even oversaturated with a dense cloud of meanings. The principles of this poetics of condensation, essential for all modernist poetry, are outlined in *ABC of Reading*:

> Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree.
> Dichten = condensare. [...]
> I begin with poetry because it is the most concentrated form of verbal expression. [...] 'Dichten' is the German verb corresponding to the noun 'Dichtung' meaning poetry, and the lexicographer has rendered it by the Italian verb meaning 'to condense'. (Pound 1961: 36)

26 While both Marinetti and Pound call for extreme concision, Pound's idea of a concise linguistic form charged with an extreme density of substance is completely absent from Marinetti's equations: if Marinetti's linguistic experiments ultimately seek to liberate language from meaning, Pound's formula signals an attempt to save meaning through a maximum economy of words which allows the "charging" of language with a dense cloud of potential meanings.

27 Even in Loy's Futurist phase, her poetry is in fact much closer to the terse density of Imagism, and more broadly speaking to the Poundian mode of modernist poetry. This overcharging of language with a hovering cloud of potential meanings is already at work in *Songs to Joannes* (1915-1917), Loy's first major poetic breakthrough, a poem which is read by most Loy scholars as a response to her disappointing relationships with Marinetti and Papini, and more broadly as a riposte to Futurism's misogyny and "contempt for woman conceived as a reservoir of love" (*FA* 86). *Songs to Joannes* is a longer opus of significant complexity which cannot be fully addressed in the context of this paper, but it is useful to focus briefly on fragments which stand as individual poems. The poem is strewn with long series of dashes which render graphically the intrusion of silence, wherein language collapses into the unsaid:

> We sidle up
> To Nature
> — — — that irate pornographist (*LLB* 63)
> From archetypal pantomime
> Stringing emotions
> Looped aloft
> — — — — (*LLB* 66)
> The moon is cold
> Joannes
> Where the Mediterranean — — — — — (*LLB* 67)

28 The poem hinges on a kaleidoscopic juxtaposition of fragments, all of which converge in its last section, which is composed of a single line: "Love — — — the preeminent litterateur." (*LLB* 68). Even though they do not follow exactly the syllable pattern of *haiku*, these fragments resemble the suggestive, impenetrable depth of Japanese poetry.

At the same time, through her experiments with fractured syntax and punctuation, Loy achieves the "multilinear lyricism", "condensed metaphors" and "telegraphic images" advocated by Marinetti's manifesto much more effectively than Marinetti's own words-in-freedom.

29 Loy's later poems become increasingly condensed, increasingly cryptic and opaque. In his 1926 review of Loy's first poetic collection *Lunar Baedecker (sic)*, Yvor Winters praised the "ominous grandeur" of Loy's images "frozen into epigrams." (qtd. in Burke 323). Indeed, many of her stanzas (or even entire poems, such as "Gertrude Stein") read as aphorisms or epigrams, such as those two examples from the poem "Lunar Baedeker", permeated with decadent imagery and an ironic voice which hinges on alliteration:

> Peris in livery
> prepare
> Lethe
> for posthumous parvenues
> [...]
> Onyx-eyed Odalisques
> and ornithologies
> observe
> the flight
> of Eros obsolete (*LLB* 82)

30 Loy's appearances in print also become increasingly rare in her later years. In a 1924 interview with Eugène Jolas, who presented her as "a writer who works with almost Stoic slowness, Miss Mina Loy, author of that strangely cryptic *Lunar Baedecker*," she observed epigrammatically "One must have lived ten years to write a poem." (qtd. in Burke 337). This statement suggests a poetic strategy of withdrawal and silence, of condensing experience into the increasingly cryptic density of her aphoristic style, a strategy which echoes Pound's idea that "It is better to present one Image in a lifetime than to produce voluminous works." (Pound 1954: 4). This epigrammatic poetics which unfolds in Loy's later writing is already at work in "Aphorisms on Futurism," whose strategic generic indeterminacy is fundamental to understanding its ironic ambivalence.

The Crisis of Modernity: From Manifesto to Aphorism

31 While generic blurring is at the very heart of the Futurist endeavour, the aphorism's generic characteristics are radically at odds with the incendiary, dogmatic discourse of the Futurist manifesto. As Perloff explains, "[t]he Futurist manifesto marks the transformation of what had traditionally been a vehicle for political statement into a literary, one might say, a quasi-poetic construct." (81-2). In the context of "the manifesto fever that swept across Europe in the years preceding the First World War" (Perloff 81), the manifesto effectively becomes the poetic vehicle of the revolution that it calls for: it exemplifies the very revolutionary principles that it advocates, hinging on an aggression which is both verbal and visual, through experimental typography, and on a grandiloquence which is both theatrical and politicized. Presenting an inextricable fusion between theory and practice, the manifesto is the poetic form of the Futurist movement. It also provides an essential interpretative lens for the reader/spectator,

allowing him to decode experimental texts like *Zang Tumb Tuuum*, which are unintelligible in themselves.

32 Even though there was hardly a similar "aphorism fever" in the early 20th-century "paroxysm"[9] of "isms," the aphorism has been used by key thinkers of modernity as varied as Wilde, Nietzsche, Kafka, and Wittgenstein, to name but a few. While both the manifesto and the aphorism are extremely condensed, the dogmatic charge and revolutionary drive of the manifesto, where the artistic and the political are inextricably enmeshed, are at odds with the generic characteristics of the aphorism. Although telegraphic brevity is at the very heart of the Futurist poetics, it is obvious that what it seeks to achieve is a maximum velocity, as well as a verbal and visual aggression of the liberated word, rather than the irony and depth of meaning characteristic of the aphorism. In his article "The Aphorism: Fragments from the Breakdown of Reason," Gary Saul Morson introduces a key distinction between "aphorism" and "dictum": although by definition both are extremely concise, the dictum is a straightforward statement, whereas the aphorism is characterized by suggestive depth, irony, and a tendency to paradox, and only hints at something which is beyond language. There is a thorough-going connection between aphorism and silence: the aphorism is a fragment, which only obliquely points at something which remains unsaid, inviting a multiplicity of interpretations. Ironic or not, its essence remains in what is beyond words:

> As we read such fragments, their incompleteness seems a part of them, because they speak of the necessary incompleteness of our knowledge of what is most important. They gesture beyond themselves, and the white space that follows seems a part of them. They are [...] flashes that die out before we have quite made out what they reveal. (Morson 423)

33 Morson quotes the famous conclusion of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence," as the quintessential aphorism which illuminates the thorough-going connection between the terse, paradoxical nature of the aphorism and the silence that follows it. He concludes: "The dictum says Something. The aphorism shows Something Else." (Morson 428).

34 While "Aphorisms on Futurism" reads as a Futurist manifesto to the extent that it hinges on the acute opposition between Past and Future, Loy's title introduces a strategic generic ambiguity. Writing aphoristically is a way to undermine the prescriptive, dogmatic charge of Futurist rhetoric. It is important to note that "Aphorisms on Futurism" is much less formally aggressive than her contemporaneous "Feminist Manifesto," whose visual and verbal aggression is much closer to the one characteristic of the Futurist manifestoes:

> The feminist movement as at present is
> **Inadequate**
> [...]
> As conditions are at present constituted—you have the choice
> between **Parasitism, & Prostitu-**
> **tion —or Negation** (*LLB* 153-4)

35 Although "Aphorisms" introduces some experiments with typography, it deliberately remains more composed than the "Feminist Manifesto," which suggests that Loy wished it to read precisely as a series of *aphorisms* rather than as a manifesto, or at least to introduce a strategic tension between the two genres. On the one hand, the capitalized initial words of each aphorism echo Marinetti's *parole in libertà*, as in the use

of infinitive verbs, prescribed by Marinetti: "DIE", "LOVE", "OPEN", "LET", "UNSCREW", "ACCEPT", which charts a trajectory from the first proposition "DIE in the Past" to the last "ACCEPT the tremendous truth of Futurism", or in "TIME", "LIFE", "CONSCIOUSNESS", "TODAY", which seek to radically redefine Being, Time, and Consciousness, situating them in a moment of acute crisis. On the other hand, the fact that the first word, rather than the key word, is systematically capitalized creates a visual effect quite different from the one in "Feminist Manifesto," where the visual emphasis corresponds to the logical emphasis. In "Aphorisms" the capitalization of words rarely coincides with the logical emphasis, which is especially obvious in words like "IN", "AND", "FOR", "BUT" and "THE", and this discrepancy creates an ironic effect which undermines the dogmatic potential of the manifesto. While the context of its publication invites the reader to interpret "Aphorisms on Futurism" as a manifesto, its ironic depth begins to unfold precisely as through this distance it disintegrates into a series of semi-disconnected aphorisms. Pervaded with irony about the crisis of modernity, these aphorisms are united by the key formula "TODAY is the crisis in consciousness." (*LLB* 151).

36 Loy's use of the aphorism also points to an affiliation with the aphorisms of Oscar Wilde and engages with a *fin-de-siècle* tradition of wit and satire. Born in London, Loy came of age under the influence of Aestheticism and Decadence, and both her poetry and visual art show a tangible decadent influence. In Wilde's pithy epigrams, the paradoxical nature of the aphorism becomes a key strategy of ironically theorizing modernity, such as in "Nothing is so dangerous as being too modern; one is apt to grow old fashioned quite suddenly." (Wilde 25) While the cynical wit which pervades Wilde's aphorisms paved the way for the Futurist destruction of language and more broadly for the aesthetic crisis of Modernism, such cynical, pithy quips have little to do with the mathematical brevity advocated by Marinetti, and they wittily allude to a dialectical relation between experiment and tradition inherent even in the most revolutionary moments. The irony of Wilde's epigram illuminates the problem of the essential ephemerality of the avant-gardes, and of Futurism in particular, as a brief moment of utopian fervour, destroying literary and artistic language without proposing a lasting alternative, "without worrying if the new creations produced were on the whole superior to those destroyed." (Gramsci qtd. in Perloff 38). Similarly, Loy's revision which replaces "Futurism" with "Modernism," and her ironic remark that "[The Modernist] can compress *every* æsthetic principle in one line" (emphasis mine) foregrounds the problem of Modernism as a chain reaction of manifestoes and "isms", propelled by a pressing need for ever more radical innovation.

37 Through its strategic generic ambivalence Loy's text oscillates between the revolutionary drive of the manifesto and the ironic silence of the aphorism. While Loy's later work retained the impetus of the formal break brought about by Futurism, she quickly distanced herself from the movement's more dogmatic aspects. Her reaction not only against Futurism's misogyny but also against its polemic, violent rhetoric, and its glorification of war which foreshadows its later engagement with Fascism surfaces most poignantly in the 1920 poem "Lion's Jaws," which features a satiric portrait of "Raminetti", leader of the "flabbergast movement":

> Manifesto
> of the flabbergast movement
> hurled by the leader Raminetti

to crash upon the audacious lightning
[...]
Raminetti
cracked the whip of the circus-master
astride a prismatic locomotive
ramping the tottering platform
of the Arts (*LLB* 48)

38 The virulent irony against Marinetti's bombastic rhetoric which appears in "Lion's Jaws" and radically revises Loy's affiliation with Futurism can also be attributed to her involvement in iconoclastic activities of New York Dada in 1917,[10] and her encounter with Marcel Duchamp. In 1916-1917 she was a key agent in New York Dada's subversive anti-art practices, particularly the series of events in April and May 1917 which came to be known as "The Richard Mutt Case"[11] — the creation of the Society of Independent Artists with its democratic "no jury" policy, Duchamp's subsequent resignation from it following the scandal caused by his anonymous submission of *Fountain* and the short-lived Dada journal *The Blind Man*, which deliberately magnified the scandal and transformed it into an artistic act. Duchamp's radical attempts to do away with an art of painting become obsolete culminated in *Tu m'* (1918), a last painting marking the moment when he gave up painting altogether. In Duchamp's ironic strategies, the silence of the artist effectively becomes his artistic act: Art is replaced by an iconoclastic anti-art gesture.

"Colossal Absentee": Silence as the Paradoxical Language of the Modern

"Je préfère de beaucoup, par exemple, la boxe à la littérature."
Arthur Cravan

39 The other Dada figure who would leave a much more thorough imprint on Loy's writing was poet-boxer Arthur Cravan. His self-mythologizing[12] as a poet-pugilist and nephew of Oscar Wilde[13] hinged on a strategy of provocation and scandal repeatedly restaged in the little magazine *Maintenant* that Cravan published in Paris in 1912-1915, as in the hoax "Oscar Wilde is alive!", which appeared in the October 1913 issue. While Cravan was posthumously claimed as a proto-Dadaist and then transformed by Surrealism as a mythic precursor, he would have been skeptical of being reduced to another "ism". Loy and Cravan met at a gathering of the Arensberg salon in New York and fell in love while they were both involved in the activities of New York Dada. Upon America's entry in the war he escaped to Mexico to avoid conscription, and Loy followed him there in early 1918.[14] His mysterious disappearance off the coast of Mexico in 1918 is an enigma that would haunt Loy and her writing for the rest of her life. Cravan's "Notes" were published posthumously in 1942-1943 in the Surrealist magazine *VVV*, with an introduction by Breton:

> En lui sans compromis s'accomplit la volonté de Rimbaud : « Il faut être absolument moderne. ». [...] Nous devons à Mme Mina Loy la communication des très importantes NOTES inédites dont nous commençons ici la publication. [...] les connaisseurs respireront dans ces pages le climat pur du génie, du génie *à l'état brut*. Longtemps, les poètes reviendront y boire comme à une source." (Breton in Cravan 105)

40 Breton praises "Notes" as the posthumous legacy of a "génie *à l'état brut*", and it is hardly accidental that he quotes Rimbaud's famous formula in his introduction. Cravan's affiliation with Rimbaud was enacted through his pseudonym, the name "Arthur" chosen after Arthur Rimbaud, which is ironically referred to in "Notes": "J'ai pensé un instant à signer Arthur I" (Cravan 106). Cravan's telegraphic, disconnected "Notes" read as an ironic posthumous manifesto of the poet of the future, who is "absolutely modern" to the extent that he does away with poetry altogether:

> Car si j'avais su le latin à dix-huit ans je serais empereur — Quel est le plus néfaste : le climat du Congo ou le génie ? — les plants de (carottes) en forme de tombeau — la pensée sort du feu — [...] — J'ai pensé un instant à signer Arthur I — [...] je suivais le mouvement des brumes sur le théâtre des plaines et des vallées où les plants en rectangle de raves et de choux formaient comme de vastes tombeaux — électrosémaphore — [...] — les télégrammes — [...] — les coccinelles poudreuses des musées — [...] Je me lève londonien et me couche asiatique — [...] je suis un nerveux — J'ai remis ma ceinture de scrupuleux, je me destine à la vie, je suis musclé — [...] — j'ai été aussi le poète des destins — arcs voltaïques — [...] je traîne en mon âme des amas de locomotives, de colonnes brisées, de ferrailles — [...] l'éphémère en moi a des racines profondes — [...] haleine du printemps, je te respire comme une baleine — [...] double-cœur, quadruple cerveau, colosse rose et miroir du monde et machine à faire des vers — je suis brute à me donner un coup de poing et subtil jusqu'à la neurasthénie — [...] mélancolie athlétique — (Cravan 105-109)

41 Apart from *Maintenant*, which hinges on his poetic affiliation with Oscar Wilde, Cravan's only *œuvre* is this series of disconnected and paradoxical aphorisms written in the nonsensical language of Dada. The idea of the poet without an *œuvre*, cultivated by Cravan himself, was later endowed with a mythic status as it was interwoven into the strategies of negation of the Dadaists and Surrealists. In the paradoxical figure of Cravan, the poet-pugilist, converge several disparate strains of the "modern": Wilde's cynical wit, Marinetti's *parole in libertà* which render literary language, and literature itself, obsolete, the anti-art, *épater le bourgeois*, nonsensical spirit of Dada's *jeux de mots*, and the incandescent, meteoric gesture inherent in Rimbaud's formula "Il faut être absolument moderne." In their nonsensical Dada language, Cravan's aphorisms obliquely allude to the idea of the book as the tomb of the poet: "Quel est le plus néfaste : le climat du Congo ou le génie ? — les plants de (carottes) en forme de tombeau". In the wake of Marinetti's idea that the book is obsolete, that the language of the future must collapse the boundaries between Art and Life, World and Text, that the poem of the future must be a telegram sent from the war front, here the disconnected "télégrammes" of a poet-pugilist emerge as the poetic language of the future ("colosse rose et miroir du monde et machine à faire des vers"). Cravan's "mélancolie athlétique," his double identity of poet-pugilist, is the absolute paradox: it is both a "mélancolie poétique" and the absolute rejection of poetry as obsolete.

42 If, as Loy's "Aphorisms" suggest, "[the Modernist] can compress every æsthetic principle in one line," Cravan's "line" is his paradoxical formula "l'éphémère en moi a des racines profondes." In the wake of Rimbaud's famous formula "Il faut être absolument moderne," it posits an inextricable fusion between the meteoric brevity of his existence and his enigmatic final silence, which emerges as a poetic act, reenacting Rimbaud's. It suggests that the poetic language of the modern is ephemeral, that it flashes like a meteor, and then, as it spends itself, collapses into silence. Cravan also embodies the strategies of paradox and sarcasm that are at work in Wilde's aphorism: the irony is that the modern is short-lived, ephemeral, and the search for a new poetic

language which is "absolutely modern" ultimately leads to the destruction of poetry, to its collapse into silence. The subversive humor of Cravan's quips points to the fact that being "too modern" (Wilde 25) means that one no longer writes poetry at all, because literature itself is obsolete: "Je préfère de beaucoup, par exemple, la boxe à la littérature." (Cravan 35)

43 Cravan's strategies of negation left an indelible imprint on Loy's writing. In her memoir "Colossus", she refers to his writings: "the manuscripts he left behind set in motion a cerebral newsreel depicting his life as vivid as the terse remarks he had sown in my mind." (qtd. in Parmar 28). In Loy's writing, Cravan is endowed with the dimensions of a mythic figure: he emerges as "Colossus," the quintessential "modern," as the absolute embodiment of modernity. The figure of the poet who is "absolutely modern" to the extent that he does away with poetry altogether resurfaces through the paradoxical figure of a "colossal absentee," (*LLB* 96) echoing his "colosse rose et [...] machine à faire des vers." This figure of a "colossal absentee", at once mythic and spectral, becomes a central void that her writing revolves around, articulated most acutely in poems like "The Widow's Jazz" and "Letters of the Unliving". Loy's poetic self-casting as Cravan's widow "left to converse with an unanswering abyss" (Parmar 36) evolves into a poetics of silence, which culminates in the poem "Letters of the Unliving," ending with an image that reads like a final epigram of the poet who renounces poetry:

> O leave me
> my final illiteracy
> of memory's languour
> my preference
> to drift in lenient coma
> an older Ophelia
> on Lethe (*LLB* 132)

44 Casting herself as an "Ophelia" to her "colossal absentee", Loy reenacts Cravan's gesture of negation of poetry, and delineates a final plunge of the poet into the "unanswering hiatus" (*LLB* 130), a gesture which reflects the idea that only silence can convey what language no longer can.

"Time-Bomb": From 1914 to 1945

45 The nonsensical language of Dada, its radical doubt concerning language as a vehicle for meaning and the category of "meaning" in the first place is a negation whose dimensions are not only aesthetic but historical, and can be understood as a reaction to the horrors of World War I. Cravan's slogan "On ne me fait pas marcher, moi!" effectively sums up not only his own anti-war attitude[15] but Dada's position as a whole. If, on the one hand, the crisis of Modernism is located in a chain reaction of "isms", ever more radical and ever more ephemeral, triggered by the ever more pressing need to "make it new," on the other, it is framed historically by the crises of the two World Wars. The poetics of silence which is omnipresent in Loy's later work, both as a thematic motif in the poetry and as a refusal to write, is rooted not only in the haunting enigma of Cravan's disappearance, but also in a larger historical crisis, what she calls "the cataclysmic factor in human evolution WAR" (*LaLB* 277). Perloff refers to the catastrophe of World War I as "[t]he specter of [...] a future wholly unanticipated by the very artists who called themselves Futurists" (Perloff 38). By the time of the even

greater cataclysm of World War II, Futurism had aligned itself with Fascism, but the question of the poetic language of modernity remained as pressing as in 1914.

46 It is useful here to briefly look at Loy's poem "Time-Bomb," composed around 1945, which strikingly revisits some of her 1914 "Aphorisms," such as "TODAY is the crisis in consciousness," operating a radical reversal of the utopian fervor and incendiary rhetoric of the Futurist moment. While in "Aphorisms" she exclaims "Leap into [the Future]—and it EXPLODES with *Light*. / THE Future is limitless—the past a trail of insidious reactions." (*LLB* 149-150), "Time-Bomb" posits a radically different relation between Past and Future:

> The present moment
> is an explosion ,
> a scission
> of past and future
> [...]
> Only the momentary
> goggle of death
> fixes the fugitive
> momentum . (*LLB* 123)

47 "Time-Bomb" reads as an aphorism which radically revises her 1914 text: if in 1914 "scission" resonates with the Futurist project of a complete obliteration of the Past and a confident leap into the "radiant splendour" (*FM* 25) of the Future, in 1945 it reads as an unmistakable reference to the atom bomb. It points to a nuclear disintegration of language which, while it may be related to the idea of the "radium of the word" that appears in "Gertrude Stein," no longer conjures up the image of a poet-scientist in the laboratory of vocabulary, but that of a devastating nuclear "explosion," where the poem, no longer able to convey the unspeakable, becomes the "the momentary / goggle of death" which fixes "the fugitive / momentum" of language. Thus, "Time-Bomb" reads as the closing parenthesis of Loy's "Aphorisms on ~~Futurism~~ Modernism".

Conclusion

48 Through broadening the spatial and temporal context of Loy's "Aphorisms on Futurism", this paper has sought to demonstrate that the notion of a "language of the Future" remains pivotal in her later writing, both as a utopian horizon and as an ironic reflection on the collapse of language into unintelligibility, and accounts for the ironic sliding on the edge of the unreadable which characterizes her highly idiosyncratic poetic idiom. Loy's poetics defines the aphorism as a quintessentially modern genre, diametrically opposed to the manifesto. Developing aphoristic elements in her poetry allows Loy to explore ironically the radical innovation of language both as an absolute necessity and as an impossibility. Language's increasing failure to convey the aesthetic, historical and ontological crises of modernity results in a poetics which increasingly revolves around the notion of silence. As the shadow double of language, silence generates potent meanings which language can no longer contain.

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NOTES

1. See *Camera Work* 45 (January [June] 1914): 13-5.
2. A single leaf with the first page of "Aphorisms" from *Camera Work*, on which the word "Futurism" is replaced by "Modernism" and "Futurist" by "Modernist," is now among the Mina Loy papers at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University. It is unclear when exactly Loy made the change.
3. See Editor's Note, *LLB* 215-6.
4. For a more detailed biographical account of Loy's personal involvement with Marinetti and Papini, as well as her friendships with Mabel Dodge, Gertrude Stein, and other Anglophone expatriates, see Carolyn Burke's biography *Becoming Modern: The Life of Mina Loy* (1996: 119-194).
5. Letter from Mina Loy to Mabel Dodge dated February 1914, quoted in Burke (1996: 157).
6. The experimental typography of Marinetti's words-in-freedom makes them impossible to reproduce here. See Marinetti (1987: 83-4). See also "Bombardment" in *FA*, 431-3.
7. Papini was also a disciple of Bergson and had translated his texts into Italian.
8. The poem was originally published as an epigraph to Loy's prose essay about Stein quoted above.
9. The idea of a "paroxysm" of "isms" appears in Apollinaire's 1913 manifesto "The Futurist Anti-Tradition," which also appeared in *Lacerba*. See *FA* 152.
10. For a more detailed biographical account, see "Subversive Amusements (New York, 1916-17)" in Burke (1996: 211-233).
11. See "The Richard Mutt Case" in *The Blind Man*, reproduced in Naumann (1994: 185).
12. On the question of Cravan's self-mythologizing strategies, see Sandeep Parmar's "Mina Loy's 'Colossus' and the Myth of Arthur Cravan." Quotations from Parmar's article are followed by paragraph numbers rather than page numbers.
13. While taken by many to be a hoax, Cravan's claim to be Wilde's nephew was actually true. Cravan's real name was Fabian Avenarius Lloyd. His father's sister, Constance Lloyd, was married to Oscar Wilde.
14. For a more detailed biographical account, see "Colossus (New York, 1917)" and "Mexico (1917-18)" in Burke (1996: 234-265). See also "Mina Loy and Arthur Cravan" in Naumann (1994: 162-8).
15. Arguably, Cravan's death was obliquely caused by the war, since he had been obliged to flee from Europe to New York and then to Mexico in order to avoid conscription.

ABSTRACTS

This paper focuses on Mina Loy's "Aphorisms on Futurism," written in Florence while she was involved with Futurist leaders F.T. Marinetti and Giovanni Papini, and first published in 1914 in Alfred Stieglitz's *Camera Work*. In Loy's "Aphorisms" emerges the utopian idea of a poetic "language of the Future," which reflects the Futurist project to destroy language, replacing a traditional syntax that has become obsolete with a telegraphic language of modernity. On her own copy of "Aphorisms," Loy later replaced the word "Futurism" with the word "Modernism," suggesting, perhaps with a certain irony, that the project of a poetic "language of the Future" extends beyond the aesthetics of Italian Futurism to the Modernist movement as a whole, yet pinpointing the problem of Modernism as a chain reaction of "isms," each with its own agenda of

radical experimentation in search of a new poetic language of modernity. Taking this key later revision as its departure point, this paper reads Loy's text with a double focus: on the one hand, situating it in the context of its composition and reading it through the prism of Futurism's incendiary rhetoric, and on the other, within a broader definition of Modernism, tracing how this violent call for destruction of traditional discourse later collapses into a poetics of silence, whose dimensions are both aesthetic and historical. The ironic ambivalence of "Aphorisms" is already inherent in its strategic generic ambiguity: it reads both as a Futurist manifesto and as a series of aphorisms, oscillating between the revolutionary rhetoric of the manifesto and the ironic silence of the aphorism, which becomes a key vehicle for reflecting ambivalently on the crisis of modernity. Finally, this paper also suggests that the aesthetic principles outlined in Loy's "Aphorisms" can be used as an interpretative lens through which to examine her poetic strategies of extreme concision and density.

Cet article se focalise sur « Aphorisms on Futurism », le premier texte publié de Mina Loy, écrit à Florence lorsqu'elle côtoyait les futuristes F.T. Marinetti et Giovanni Papini, et paru en 1914 dans la revue *Camera Work* d'Alfred Stieglitz. Dans « Aphorisms » émerge l'idée utopique d'une « langue du Futur », qui reflète le projet futuriste de faire exploser la langue, en remplaçant la syntaxe traditionnelle devenue obsolète par une langue télégraphique de la modernité. Sur son propre exemplaire du texte, aujourd'hui parmi ses archives, Loy remplaça le mot « Futurism » par le mot « Modernism », suggérant ainsi, sans doute avec une certaine ironie, que le projet d'une langue poétique du Futur s'étend au-delà du futurisme et concerne tout le mouvement moderniste qui se définit alors comme une réaction en chaîne d'« ismes », chacun avec son projet de révolutionner la langue poétique. S'appuyant sur l'éclairage qu'apporte cette modification clé, cet article propose une double lecture d'« Aphorisms », à la fois « on Futurism » et « on Modernism » : d'une part, en le plaçant dans le contexte des manifestes futuristes, et de l'autre, dans l'optique d'une définition plus large du Modernisme, en démontrant comment cet appel violent à la destruction de la langue mène paradoxalement à une poétique du silence, dont les dimensions sont à la fois esthétiques et historiques. L'ambivalence ironique d'« Aphorisms on Futurism » s'explique entre autres par son ambiguïté générique : il peut être interprété à la fois comme un manifeste futuriste et comme une série d'aphorismes, oscillant ainsi entre la rhétorique incendiaire du manifeste et le silence ironique de l'aphorisme, ce qui devient une stratégie de réflexion ambivalente sur la crise de la modernité. Enfin, cet article propose que les principes esthétiques qui émergent dans ce premier texte de Loy apportent également un éclairage sur les stratégies d'extrême concision et la densité souvent énigmatique des poèmes de Loy, dont beaucoup ressemblent à des aphorismes ou épigrammes.

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Mots-clés: Loy Mina, futurisme, Modernisme, Marinetti Filippo Tommaso, Papini Giovanni, Stein Gertrude, Pound Ezra, Wilde Oscar, Cravan Arthur, aphorisme, manifeste
Keywords: Loy Mina, Futurism, Modernism, Marinetti Filippo Tommaso, Papini Giovanni, Stein Gertrude, Pound Ezra, Wilde Oscar, Cravan Arthur, aphorism, manifesto

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Condensation and Displacement in the Poetry of Lorine Niedecker

Axel Nesme

1 In his essay on *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud shows that "condensation, displacement, and indirect representation" (750) are the three features shared by dreams and the operations of wit. To the extent that condensation, like metaphor, brings together items located within the same paradigm while displacement, like metonymy, proceeds by lateral moves involving elements contiguous to one another, the operations of the unconscious and the workings of wit are structurally cognate to the poetic function which "projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination" (Jakobson 71). In other words, the vertical order of the paradigm, along which the unconscious phenomena of condensation take place, contaminates the metonymic linearity of the speech chain so that, regardless of syntax, metonymic connections are established on the sole basis of paradigmatic parallelisms. In this paper I wish to explore the work of an American poet which often hinges on those mechanisms. To Lorine Niedecker, compression was an aesthetic imperative that translated into witticisms analogous to those Freud studies in his essay, but also determined her preference for formal and thematic compactness: Niedecker's short lines, rarely exceeding four or five preferably mono- or disyllabic words, her syntactical ellipses, her distrust of "city talk" (*CW* 222),[1] consistent with her admiration for the late Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius, often match observations reduced to bare facts linked by the smallest possible number of connectives. We will see that by making the pleasure of the text contingent on such principles of strict poetic economy, Niedecker also positions herself vis-à-vis the immediate historical and political context of her day, and that the anti-essentialist stance implicit in her cultivation of conciseness also leads to a questioning of gender roles and of the *agon* that binary logic inevitably entails.

*

2 The best introduction to Niedecker's poetics of reticence may be found in her 1962 "Poet's work":

> Grandfather
> advised me:
> learn a trade
> I learned
> to sit at desk
> and condense
> No layoff
> from this
> condensery (*CW* 194)

3 As readers of *The Prelude* will probably agree, this text is as concise a poetic autobiography as they come. Determining how it enacts the aesthetic precept derived from the injunction of the speaker's grandfather may, however, require more space than it takes to formulate it in these three provocatively terse tercets. At first sight, the line "to sit at desk" located at the exact halfway point of the text, offers the most straightforward illustration of how Niedecker intends to practice her art with the omission of the superfluous definite article which has been removed like water from cow's milk in an ordinary condensery, thus showing how proficient the poet has become in her trade, doubtful as it may be that this was the kind of vocation that her grandfather had in mind.

4 It is, however, in the problematic connection between the verb "condense" and the noun "condensery" as mediated by the deictic that the poem's chief interest lies. Being laid off from a factory means that one will no longer have a job in that particular location and will have to seek employment elsewhere. A condensery, in other words, is a place. Learning to "sit at desk / and condense," on the other hand, is learning to perform an activity. One does not get laid off an activity *per se*: one gets laid off from the place where it is performed. The deictic "this," therefore, is a syntactical shortcut that imperceptibly shifts the focus of the poem toward the minute difference between verb and noun, a difference that is contingent on our reading of the suffix *-ery*. This suffix, according to *Webster's International Dictionary*, may designate 1) "qualities collectively," as in "snobbery;" 2) an "art, practice" or "trade," as in "mountebankery"; and 3) a "place of doing, keeping, growing, breeding, selling," as in "fishery," 4) a "collection," as in "greenery," and 5) a "state" or "condition," as in "slavery." By interposing "this" between verb and noun, Niedecker thus dislodges meaning 3) from its rightful place to the benefit of meanings 2) and 5), turning a common noun designating a place into one which now defines that activity and condition which is poetic "condensery." In other words, by means of this poetic intervention on the signifier combining displacement and condensation, the two mechanisms involved in the production of wit according to Freud, Niedecker has redefined a word which now uniquely identifies her aesthetic without subtracting it from common usage, let alone coining a new term. In the mere interval separating "condense" from "condensery," she has thus compressed a philosophy of linguistic commonality[2] which some of her lengthier prose writings reveal as a continuation of the belief that the same common materials circulate between all parts of the phenomenal world:

> The journey of the rock never ends. In every tiny part of any living thing are materials that once were rock that turned to soil. These minerals are drawn out of the soil by plant roots and the plant used them to build leaves, stems, flowers and fruits. Plants are eaten by animals. In our blood is iron from plants that draw it out

> of the soil. Your teeth and bones were once coral. The water you drink has been in the clouds over the mountains of Asia and waterfalls of Africa. The air you breathe has swirled through places of the earth that no one has ever seen. Every bit of you is a bit of the earth and has been on many strange and wonderful journeys over countless millions of years. (*Lake Superior* 7)

5 In a footnote about *North Central*, the collection derived from the travelogue from which this quote is taken, Jenny Pennberthy points out that Niedecker's "notes for the poem [...] include detailed research into the history and geology of the [Lake Superior] region" (*CW*, note p. 434). This is particularly relevant to *Lake Superior*, the first section of *North Central*, where Niedecker systematically conflates geological and historical time, interweaving personal anecdotes, fragments from the history of the early exploration of the Lake Superior region, and observations on the area's geology, repeatedly casting human time against the backdrop of the aeon-old permanence of rocks and of the mineral particles of which they are made up. The central analogy here is between the telluric forces that shaped rocks and mountain formations, and the poem's own specific energy which contains-condenses those various dimensions within the compressed limits of the book:

> Passed peaks of volcanic thrust
> Hornblende in massed granite
> Wave-cut Cambrian rock
> painted by soluble mineral oxides
> wave-washed and the rains
> did that work and a green
> running as from copper (*CW* 235)

6 The same phenomenon of compression, Niedecker suggests, may be discerned within the narrower confines of a single human life, as in "Radisson" (*CW* 232) where a short physical portrait of the explorer, a brief quote from his description of the region as a "laborinth of pleasure" and the episode of his torture by Mohawks are contained within six lines that do not even contain a single conjugated verb.

7 One of the most successful examples of Niedecker's condensery work is the autobiographical "My Life by Water" (*CW* 236-7) where the incoming spring is troped as a boat approaching the speaker's house on Blackhawk Island:

> One boat
> two—
> pointed toward
> my shore
> thru birdstart
> wingdrip
> weed-drift
> of the soft
> and serious—
> Water (*CW* 237-8)

8 The contents and the form of these lines are virtually indistinguishable. As the two boats point toward the speaker's shore, so, thanks to the artifice of lineation, each tercet points toward its final line and the poem as a whole is directed towards the unexpected noun of which the adjectives "soft" and "serious" are predicated, namely "Water," set apart from the rest of the syntax by the dash in the penultimate line. Similarly, in the compounds "wingdrip" and "weed-drift" phonemes themselves seem to have been set adrift: the repeated short [i] of "wingdrip" briefly expands into the long [ɪ:] of "weed," then once again contracts into the short [i] of "-drift." As for the

signifieds themselves, they are barely more than after-thoughts generated in the wake of the phonic transformations that occur at the surface of the poem and/or of the "water." Some kind of metonymic continuity may indeed be projected onto the "Birdstart / wingdrip / weed-drift" ternary: fragmentary as those notations seem, they follow the logic of cause and effect which contains seeds of—albeit minimal—narrativity: as the bird startled by the approaching boat takes off, a few drops drip off its wings, and the motion of the weeds ensues from what small ripples the bird causes at the surface of the lake as it flies away. Yet such narrativization of Niedecker's lines is not merely artificial, but also markedly at odds with the poetic project underlying her formal choices. The compound nouns under examination are precisely intended to bypass the requirements of narrative syntax, to offer an alternative to the prodigal economy of prose by condensing processes within the limits of coined substantives which do not negate them but reduce them to their bare perceptual rudiments, to a set of discontinuous sensory data which may or may not be woven into stories.

9 In his seminal book on *Literature and the Phonotext* Garrett Stewart has shown how seemingly fortuitous phenomena of phonemic adhesiveness between words are likely to generate poetic semiosis. Niedecker's "Weed-drift" is a case in point. Since adjacent terminal and initial consonants are not differentiated in ordinary pronunciation, the phonetic transcription of the word would read as [wɪ:drift]. The intermediary [d] thus drifts back and forth across the boundary between the two words that the hyphen makes clearly visible, since contrary to the two previous compounds, "birdstart / wingdrip," the stitches are still visible: condensery is a form of verbal surgery which does not erase all traces of its operations, thus clearly indicating that juxtaposing compound nouns and doing away with the linearity of syntactical relations does not rhyme with essentialization. As we have just seen, one may read cause-effect relations into Niedecker's compounds, but in doing so, one also misses the point that her poetry's main focus in on what Deleuze called "*effects* [which] are not bodies, but, properly speaking, 'incorporeal' entities. [...] not physical qualities and properties, but rather logical or dialectical attributes [...,] not things or facts, but events" (4-5). Leaving the stitches visible, as Niedecker does in "weed-drift," means emphasizing that, in Deleuze's quote of Emile Bréhier's "reconstruction of Stoic thought [...,] 'when the [poet's] "'scalpel cuts through the flesh' [of words,] the first body produces upon the second not a new property but a new attribute, that of being cut. [...] This way of being finds itself somehow at the limit, at the surface of being.'" Such "incorporeal events [...] play only on the surface, like a mist over the prairie," one might as well say: on the surface of a lake as of the poem entitled "My Life by Water." They occur at the juncture between experience and text. Indeed they pose such a challenge to essentialist thought that they make words and things no longer separate identities, but overlapping spaces where trochaic rhythms fall like water drops—five of the poem's last six lines end in trochees—and whispering sibilants ("soft / and serious") merge their sound with the murmur of the water set in contrast with the sonorous plosives and dentals that resonate in the very lines thematizing the phenomena which temporarily disrupt its surface.

10 We have seen earlier how Niedecker's choice of the word "condensery" to define her poetic practice involved a small morphological displacement while acknowledging that the word itself remained the shared property of a linguistic community. Consistently with the politics underlying this gesture, some of the noun combinations manufactured

in Niedecker's poetic condensery provide alternatives to what might be their counterparts in capitalist economy.[3] Thus, in "*TV*" (*CW* 239) compound interest and the "compound eye / of the insect" also define the poet's own interest in, and eye for, the subject she observes: "the wave-line / on shell, sand, wall / and forehead of the one who speaks" (*CW* 239), as it runs through separate identities, proclaims them to be continuous, compatible with seriality while preserving a degree of uniqueness reminiscent of the paradox of discrete series that George Oppen explored in *Of Being Numerous*. As the adjective "compound" may alternately describe the abstract self-perpetuating mechanism at the heart of the capitalist machine as well as that minute particular of the concrete world which is the multifaceted eye of a fly, the poem also defines itself as a compound of sorts. Within its confines (one of the meanings of "compound") words (the signifier, "compound") are brought together, and what interest the poem accrues involves a non-predatory way of capitalizing on polysemy as well as, in this particular instance, intertextuality.

11 In her biography of Niedecker, Margot Peters quotes Niedecker telling Zukofsky: "I've had two revolutions in my life, [...] one when I first laid eyes on your writing and two when I read Shakespeare's *Sonnets*" (loc. 1254). The Shakespearian echo is hard to miss in "*TV*" where, regardless of the exact contents of the documentary that may have inspired the poem, all we need to do to understand the second quatrain is to carry polysemy to its logical end. Since the same adjective, "compound," may refer to capital gain or the eye of an insect, and since the signifier "line" may just as well describe the pattern on "shell, sand, wall /" as the wrinkles on the "forehead of the one / who speaks," we need to ask ourselves if the line that connects the shell and the speaker's forehead does not reach beyond the limits of Niedecker's poem, referring also to the discrete series of lines of which a poem is *compounded*, and beyond that, pertaining to the poem's own line of ascent, one that reaches all the way back to the sonnets where Shakespeare puns on the multiple meanings of the word "line." The line on the forehead "of the one / who speaks" is thus also the line in the poem of the one who writes in the manner of Shakespeare implicitly contrasting the "eternal lines" of Sonnet 18 with those that will eventually grow on the young man's forehead. Niedecker's poem thus designates itself as a variety of compound interest generated by the laws, not of market, but of literary economy where securing intertextual profit requires acknowledging a proportionate degree of symbolic indebtedness.

*

12 In Freud's discussion of wit, some of condensation's most successful offshoots are coinages like the portmanteau words "famillionnaire" (639) and "alcoholidays" (642). As we saw earlier in "Poet's Work," Niedecker's version of condensery more frequently involves eliminating superfluous parts of speech and observing what poetic effects such ellipses may generate. Some of those turn out to be fairly witty, as can be judged by this quatrain:

> The boy tossed the news
> and missed
> They found it
> on the bush (*CW* 217)

13 Much as Niedecker may have disliked the comparison, not only does this poem, by truncating the word "newspaper," achieve a degree of compactness only matched by

Emily Dickinson[4], but it also brings to mind Dickinson's conflation of the eternal and the temporal in lines such as these:

> The Only News I know
> Is Bulletins all Day
> From Immortality (F 820)

14 The immediate effect of Niedecker's poem, however, is one of amused surprise at the absurd notion that news can be found on a bush. This logical impossibility is, of course, easily resolved by supplementing the missing half of the word on which meaning temporarily stumbles. The reader, in other words, goes through "confusion and clearness" ["*Verblüffung und Erleuchtung*"], the two stages involved in the reception of a witticism mentioned by Freud in his introduction to *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*. Where Niedecker's poem rises above the level of the witticisms listed in Freud's essay, however, is that it also names the origin of its own success as a fragment of poetic wit. What is a-miss—and therefore a proportional semiotic gain—in Niedecker's line is itself the mirror image of the newspaper boy's faulty gesture and its correction. The principle of economy by which wit always abides (Freud 653), as does the unconscious mechanism of condensation (Freud 752), thus impacts the *mise en abyme* of the boy's initial mistake now reflected in the poet's own *felix culpa*. Within the anecdote as within its poetic rendition, losses are counterbalanced by equal gains, an observation which also applies transversally to the way the contents of the anecdote and its witty retelling interrelate, since one boy's miss proves another (poet)'s hit.

15 Several of the puns that Freud describes in his discussion of wit by condensation revolve around the trope of syllepsis, in which the same word is used in two unrelated meanings as in the phrase Freud quotes in the original French: "*c'est le premier vol de l'aigle*" (650). In Freud's example, the immediate and the historical context are instantly accessible to the listener, whose enjoyment is a function of his being able to toggle back and forth between the signifieds "flight" and "theft." In the following poem by Niedecker, displacement and condensation are combined in such a way that the former creates a diversion from the latter. In other words, it is displacement to the second power, involving both the phonemic makeup of the signifier and the very dynamics of reading where attention itself shifts between the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes:

> The slip of a girl-announcer:
> Now we hear
> Baxtacota in D minor
> Played by a boy who's terrific.
> This saxy Age.
> Bach, you see, is in Dakota
> But don't belittle her,
> She'll take where you want to go ta. (*CW* 152)

16 We understand here what Freud meant when he described wit as double-sided or "double-dealing" (756), referring to how easily it maintains inhibition by preserving "sense in nonsense" (756). In Niedecker's poem, voice plays a central role in keeping wit within socially admissible limits by shifting the focus away from the poem's wording toward its specific music. The girl-announcer's slip is presumably rendered *verbatim* in the first quatrain, affords the speaker a chance to display her skills as a ventriloquist in the second quatrain, where she mocks the traces of Norwegian and Swedish influence that may still be detected in upper-Midwest American English. While Niedecker acknowledges that the woman's accent may be "saxy"—thus mitigating the

reference to sex with an allusion to the sound of the saxophone—, her primary interest clearly lies with the distortions that the somewhat unsophisticated girl-announcer inflicts on various vowels, beginning with her mispronunciation of Bach's *Toccata in D minor* which yields the comical neologism "Baxtacota." That this linguistic nugget does not deserve to be belittled anymore than its unwitting author is confirmed by the fact that, like the girl-announcer, it will "take where you want to go ta," as Niedecker demonstrates, by letting the coinage guide her rhyme choice toward the name of the state where the woman's accent is most likely to be encountered. Yet whatever pleasure one may derive from this fragment of linguistic local color verging on doggerel is only a thin veil covering what may have been, at the time (1952), the slightly less universally acceptable reality of sex.

17 In the second quatrain, Niedecker clearly implies that the announcer simultaneously distorted the title of a musical piece—notably by inverting vowel sounds—as well as the rules of genteel musical appreciation by showing herself also possibly interested in the musician's good looks, the all-encompassing adjective "terrific" being vague enough to suggest that her enthusiasm stretches beyond the quality of the artist's performance. This is why Niedecker marvels at a modern age when a musician's physical appearance seems to matter more than his actual talent, and mildly denounces this inappropriate change of focus by throwing a saxophone into the midst of baroque harmonies. Yet the girl-announcer's misplaced—if not displaced—sense of priorities only adds insult to injury, since even before her erroneously shifting the emphasis from the musical to the physical, a shift had already made itself visible, at least if one bears in mind that the word "shift" means a change—or a slip. In a "saxy Age," a girl-announcer's "slip" (of the tongue) betraying her attraction to the musician she is presenting temporarily reveals what the code of conventional discourse and the rules of fashion demand should remain hidden; and as it turns out, it did so, even before the contents of her mischaracterization were actually formulated. Indeed, once we understand that the announcer's slip consisted in an expression of desire, then the double meaning of the word "slip" as referring to a woman's undergarment is activated retroactively and makes us realize that the poem's first line contained a pun. Through the workings of Niedecker's witty condensery, and in keeping with the Deleuzian logic described earlier, the slip that is the object of exposure and the slip that exposes it, have thus become strictly identical.

*

18 Although the manifestations of wit analyzed by Freud are often humorous and equivalents of those that may occasionally be found in Niedecker's poetry, wit obviously does not limit itself to more or less tendentious *double-entendres*, nor do all products of Niedecker's "condensery" show the playfulness of "The Slip of a Girl Announcer." In what follows, I want to examine poems where Niedecker's wit is brought to bear on the historical context of the Cold War to which several of her poems refer quite explicitly, beginning with an early version of a 1964 text contained in the selection of poems Cid Corman edited under the title, *The Granite Pail*, where Niedecker attempts a modern equivalent of metaphysical conceit, as defined by Samuel Johnson and quoted by T.S. Eliot in "The Metaphysical Poets" (60). Indeed, the surprising juxtaposition around which Niedecker's short poem, "The Radio Talk," revolves is not

unlikely to convey the impression that "the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together":

> The radio talk this morning
> was of obliterating
> the world
> I notice fruit flies rise
> from the rind
> of the recommended
> melon (*GP* 106)

19 Here the vision of nuclear holocaust conjured up in the first three lines is translated and toned down in the form of the more familiar, hence more "cheerful" mention of the fruit flies rising "from the rind / of the recommended / melon." The placement of the words "world" and "melon" at the close of each of the poem's two short sections confirms the fairly obvious analogy between the round shape of the terrestrial globe and of the fruit the speaker has just purchased. The rising fruit flies, already suggestive of the narrow limit between ripeness and decay, become retroactively readable as small-scale equivalents of a nuclear bomb's mushroom cloud. Niedecker's poem, however, is equally preoccupied with the destiny of letters and the possibility of their utter erasure, since etymologically, the verb, "ob**literating** / the world" means removing it from existence as one strikes out letters or words. Less figuratively perhaps, detonating a nuclear device means unleashing a chain reaction whose destructive potential is the subject of the "radio talk" to which the poet responds by including the signifier of the end within the seemingly innocuous word "recomm**end**ed"; but also, more interestingly, by setting in motion another chain reaction of sorts, namely, in the second half of the text, the concatenation of sounds that connect the words "flies," "rise," "rind," "recommended," and "melon" as follows [fl**aiz**]-[r**aiz**] / [**rai**z]-[**rai**nd] / [rai**nd**]-[rekəme**nd**əd] / [rekə**me**ndəd]-[**me**lən]. Like many of the witticisms studied by Freud, the poem thus hinges on an implicit pun on the phrase "chain reaction." In "The Radio Talk," however, the trope is not actualized. It functions instead as the poem's semiotic *matrix* defined by Michael Riffaterre as merely "hypothetical, being only the grammatical and lexical actualization of a structure" so that "the text functions something like a neurosis: as the matrix is repressed, the displacement produces variants all through the text, just as suppressed symptoms break out somewhere else in the body" (19). Yet, by displacing this chain reaction towards the scene of writing, Niedecker does not reduce her poem to a mere symptom of its time and place, powerlessly mimetic of the physics of nuclear fission: she also suggests that the same mechanism may be turned against itself in order to serve the purposes of literary creation instead of literal destruction. As will be seen below, this is a recurrent device in Niedecker's art of condensery.

20 During a trip through Lake Superior country Niedecker took with her husband Al in 1966, she wrote a number of notes pertaining to the history and geology of the region, some of which I quoted earlier. Of particular interest to her was the work of Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, who, in Niedecker's own account, "was Indian Agent of the Territory, a geologist and something of a poet, a politician and an explorer" (*Lake Superior* 14). It was Schoolcraft who, in 1832, located the source of the Mississippi in a lake in north central Minnesota. Although the Indian name of the lake was "Elk Lake," Schoolcraft renamed it "Lake Itasca," and that is how this body of water has been known to this day. Although the name sounds native American, it actually has little in common with

Omashkoozo-zaaga'igan, its original Ojibwe name meaning "Elk Lake." Instead, Niedecker notes that Schoolcraft "took the letters of [the] word [Itasca] from the Latin *veritas caput*, meaning true source" (*Lake Superior* 23). As it turns out, Schoolcraft frequently coined such native-American sounding names.

21 Given Niedecker's portrayal of the explorer as "something of a poet," we may well wonder if the literary kinship she felt with Schoolcraft was not partially due to his somewhat idiosyncratic notion of what defines a true name. Indeed, there are many ironies involved in the anecdote Niedecker transcribed in her travel notes. First, there is the fact that *veritas caput* is a solecism, since *veritas* is a feminine noun, and the Latin word *caput*, being neutral, should be preceded by the adjective *verum*. The only way "*veritas caput*" could hold as a genuine Latin phrase would require analyzing it not as a noun phrase but as a complete sentence from which the verb has been omitted: *veritas caput (est), truth is the source*. In that case the paradoxical implication would be that truth is the source—of all false etymologies. There is also the odd observation that those Latin words mistakenly believed to mean "true source" by Schoolcraft himself, were both truncated and pasted together in order to produce the spurious Indian name *(ver-)Itasca(put)*. The signifier of the one true indivisible source (of the Mississippi) was thus obtained by cutting into the fabric of words whose signifiers designate that which cannot be divided from itself (truth-as-one) or from its body (the head). Finally, "Itasca" is an imitation substituted for the original, a deliberate linguistic sleight-of-hand whereby, at the very moment of his actual discovery of the source, Schoolcraft himself exposed origin *per se* to be an *ex-post-facto* mythical construct, inevitably caught in a process of its own erasure, and truth to be not a cause or source, but an effect entirely contingent, not on reality, but on the realism of an otherwise fictitiously original name. We understand, therefore, why Niedecker depicted the Lake Superior regions as the stage of a large-scale linguistic *vanitas* where the corruption which is structurally inherent in language becomes visible:

> I think our NW (Lake Superior region, Minn., Mich., Wis.) is not only for the geologist, a massive, grand corruption of nature. And of language (wonder if *Bosho* is still used in speech for *Bon jour!* Indian, French, British—. The Northwest passage to the Orient has its Bosho only like a ton of rock. And weak verse like Longfellow's *Hiawatha*. But some kind of poetry has been felt by several of the geologists in that region. (*Lake Superior* 51)

22 In *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud observes that wit requires the agency of a third party who, by acknowledging it as such, gives it currency: "only that is a witticism which I allow to count as a witticism" ["*nur das ein Witz ist, was ich als einen Witz gelten lasse*"]. The concept of the symbolic Other explored by Lacan, notably in his *Seminar* on *The Formations of the Unconscious*, expands on this insight by grouping under the same heading the Other of the linguistic code, whose law is breached or at the very least exposed in the production of a witticism, and the Other listener for whose benefit that witticism is uttered. In other words, wit is produced by a speaker playing with the rules of ordinary discourse at the expense of a third party, and for the enjoyment of a listener. Niedecker's "*Could you be right*" (*CW* 129) is a case in point I want to examine for two complementary reasons. First, because here again, the poet addresses the possibility of nuclear obliteration and answers that threat with her own strategy of verbal displacement. Secondly, because of the insight it yields in light of the above analysis of the poet's notes on the Lake Superior region where, as we have just seen, the symbolic code is repeatedly invoked and transgressed. What this poem shows is that it

is where language is held up as the repository of original truth—or, more precisely, of the truth about origins—that it proves to be at its most mendacious, so that what guarantees are sought from this symbolic Other, it not only fails to provide, but also exhibits instead the fault at its very core.

> *Could you be right?*
> He asked: Will man obsolesce
> When he sends the rays against himself?
> And she, sore-pressed: Absurd!—
> obsolesce is not a word.
> But think of Troy, it was a word
> Before we dug and found the world...
> yet ah, girl with Helen's light,
> Could you be right? (CW 129)

23 The biographical occasion behind this fictitious dialogue is a situation where the roles were actually reversed. In *Niedecker and the Correspondence with Zukofsky 1931-1970*, Jenny Penberthy writes that the poem stems from a discussion between Niedecker and Zukofsky in which Niedecker was the one who used the verb in a draft, and Zukofsky "had evidently questioned her use of 'obsolesce'" (9-10). The first quatrain is a good illustration of those witticisms that Freud placed under the rubric of "displacement wit" (661). Whereas the man contemplates the possibility that mankind might make itself obsolescent through nuclear self-destruction, the woman displaces the semantic stress of his query from the level of the signified to that of the signifier. Displacement thus occurs both in the interval between the poem and its occasion—since the genders have been reversed— and within the first quatrain. In light of Freud's hypothesis that "as we know that displacements in dream-work point to the influence of censorship of conscious thought, we will consequently be inclined to assume that an inhibiting force also plays a part in the formation of wit when we find the process of displacement among the techniques of wit" (754), one may reasonably assume that in the scenario that plays out in Niedecker's poem, Zukofsky's own superegoic censorship is being circumvented.

24 What pleasure may be derived from the female speaker's "faulty thinking" (Freud 666), however, extends beyond merely identifying the nature of her misprision. The absurdity of the woman's response is indeed compounded by the wording she adopts to dismiss the man's question: by calling his query absurd, she mostly draws attention to the preposterousness of her own reaction. Where the first speaker's question located the issue of self-destruction in the real, the second speaker twice displaces it onto the symbolic plane: first, by asking whether the word "obsolesce" actually exists in the English language, then, by using a word which causes her own statement to self-destruct. As in "The Radio Talk," these various displacements along the metonymic chain are a chain reaction that plays out within the enclosed space of the poem's first quatrain which, perhaps in the manner of the imploding detonating device used to trigger the first atomic bombs at the end of World War II, collapses upon itself, not simply because the exclamation "Absurd!" designates itself in the very act of targeting the utterance that precedes it, but also because the whole conversation is based on the erroneous premise that "obsolesce is not a word," even though the *OED* dates the first occurrence of the verb to the year 1873.

25 Staged as a verbal confrontation between a male and a female poet where Niedecker may conceivably have acted out her own ambivalent relationship to Zukofsky, the

poem is primarily at war with itself. Like mankind in possession of nuclear devices, it contains the seeds of its own obliteration, which may explain why the second quatrain shifts the conversation towards the subject of the Trojan war. From the male speaker's purely factual perspective, of course, the reference is suggested by the observation that entire nations may be erased from the surface of the earth as was Troy, which survived only as a name of legend until the archeological site of the city was finally located in 1871. The reference, nonetheless, may also offer a reflection—and tentative resolution—of the poem's inner *agon*. Indeed, not only does Niedecker's text have its own Trojan horse in the guise of the word "Absurd!" which, as I have tried to show, undermines its first quatrain from within: the enigmatic question heard in the last two lines suggests a parallel between the female speaker and Helen of Troy that challenges the binary oppositional logic out of which wars are born.

26 According to certain legends, Helen of Troy knew about the Trojan horse. She helped Odysseus enter Troy to steal the Palladion, a sacred statue of the Greek goddess Pallas Athene, and on the night when Troy was taken, she waved a light from the ramparts of the citadel in order to signal to the Greeks that they could enter the city. Niedecker's sibylline question to the "girl with Helen's light, / could you be right?", therefore, may be a prefiguration of the poet's focus, in *North Central* (1968), on those "minerals of the rock" which transcend all man-made distinctions, national borders included:

> Iron the common element of earth
> in rocks and freighters
> Sault Sainte Marie—big boats
> coal-black and iron-ore-red
> topped with what white castlework
> The waters working together
> internationally
> Gulls playing both sides (*CW* 232)

27 In light of "*Could You Be Right,*" it becomes clear that *girls* too may occasionally "[play] both sides" as the Trojan Helen did, waving her light to let the enemy in. The "girl with Helen's light" may thus be doubly "right," first, in exercising poetic wit so as to answer her male counterpart's question absurdly by translating into purely poetic terms; second, by making it virtually impossible for the poem to achieve any degree of finality or self-consistency, all the more so since the voice that takes over in the last two lines cannot unequivocally be traced to either protagonist of the verbal exchange, and in any event, falls short of adopting a position that would settle the debate, since it merely deflects it by giving the last word—to a question.

28 The conclusion that may be drawn from this joint analysis of "*Could You Be Right*" and "Radio Talk" is that, in both instances, Niedecker does not so much register the fear of "the grand blow-up— / the bomb" (*CW* 253-4) that haunted the generations of the Cold War era, as displace the fear inside the narrow frame of her poetic condensery where negotiations become possible with the law in its various avatars: first, the law that manifests itself through the linguistic rules that govern the formation of words, since one person's *hapax* is another's ordinary currency, and the limits of the sayable may always be pushed back, as witnessed, in the history of English, by the growing number of inceptive verbs derived from Latinate adjectives ending in –escent; secondly, the more stringent imperative of finiteness, which the threat of nuclear disaster materializes and which is indissociable from the limits set to desire by language itself, limits which are temporarily lifted during the brief interval where poetic wit is given

free rein, and during which the possibility of human demand being satisfied without any remainder is glimpsed. Lacan describes this effect of wit in the following terms:

> le mot d'esprit consiste en ceci qu'il se passe quelque chose dans l'Autre qui symbolise ce que l'on pourrait appeler la condition nécessaire à toute satisfaction. A savoir que vous êtes entendu au-delà de ce que vous dites. En aucun cas en effet, ce que vous dites ne peut vraiment vous faire entendre. [...]
> Ce qui, dans le trait d'esprit, supplée, au point de me donner une sorte de bonheur, à l'échec de la communication du désir par la voie du signifiant, se réalise de la façon suivante — l'Autre entérine un message comme achoppé, échoué, et dans cet achoppement même reconnaît la dimension au delà dans laquelle se situe le vrai désir, c'est-à-dire ce qui, en raison du signifiant, n'arrive pas à être signifié. (Lacan 150)

29 In the exercise of poetic wit, therefore, that which, of desire, fails to be signified appears, nonetheless, answerable *to* and, conversely, the enigma of the Other's answerability *for* the speaking subject, and the question of the Other's ability to guarantee the subject's utterance, is also held in abeyance, if not solved. All of which takes us back to Niedecker's notes on Schoolcraft. I pointed out earlier that the poet's account of the historical circumstances surrounding the discovery of the source of the Mississippi conveys the disturbing message that any 'true source' is spurious. In Lacan's theory, this problem is couched in terms of a void at the heart of the symbolic order, the lack of a signifier capable of adequately vouching for the subject's place in the Other of language: a signifier which, in the same way as identifying and naming the true source of a river is deemed to satisfactorily settle the question of its origin and allow the explorer to trace its complete trajectory from that point onward, would adequately name and locate in the signifying chain the subject's origin and thus contain the final word regarding his/her being and desire. That void, as we have seen, is what Niedecker's short poems briefly contain and conceal.

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NOTES

1. *CW: Collected Works*.
2. Niedecker was always eager not to dissociate her diction from the speech patterns of ordinary Americans, which occasionally set her apart from some of the Objectivists with whom she came into contact through friendship with the communist poet Louis Zukofsky. Peter Middleton emphasizes her "resistances to appropriation" (186), and points out that "placing everyday folk speech in poetry was something [...] that divided Niedecker from [George] Oppen. Her momentary impatience with Oppen may also have had roots in her awareness of his criticism of poets who attempted to 'reproduce common speech' in poetry. Such practices smacked of suspect 'populism' to Oppen" (Middleton 170).
3. Rachel Blau DuPlessis stresses that "anonymity for Niedecker may be construed in both gender and class terms. She always accepted herself as a populist, a member of the populace, the vox populi" (Blau DuPlessis 144).
4. According to Margot Peters, "fellow workers knew Lorine wrote poetry, said Edwin Honig, and 'kidded her about being another Emily Dickinson, but she brushed this aside.'" (loc. 802)

ABSTRACTS

In this essay I explore the manifestations of condensation and displacement, the two major mechanisms identified by Freud in his study on *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious,* throughout the poetry of Lorine Niedecker. I begin by examining the implications of Niedecker's definition of her poetics as an art of "condensery," starting with her idiosyncratic handling of the suffix, a mere distortion of common usage that remains compatible with language being a matter of joint ownership. Phenomena of condensation are also at work in the changes that Niedecker observes in the rock formations of the Lake Superior region and records in *North Central*, conflating

geological and human time, and translating those processes into compound nouns which, though they seemingly erase linear syntactical relations, do not serve essentializing purposes, reducing instead the distance between words and things in the manner of Deleuzian incorporeal events. Following the same logic, punning on the word "compound" allows Niedecker to draw the lineaments of a non-capitalist intertextual economy in which symbolic interest is generated by borrowing, notably from Shakespeare's own metapoetic puns. Such plays on words are where Niedecker's art of condensation comes closest to Freud's analysis of wit. Indeed, some of her poems involve semantic shortcuts or humorous double-entendres analogous to those described by Freud, while consistent with the above mentioned logic of the event. Niedecker's technique is most reminiscent of metaphysical conceit, however, when she tackles the immediate historical context of the Cold War. Poetic "condensery," in this particular instance, proves instrumental in displacing human conflict towards the scene of the textual *agon*. I suggest that the poet's handling of displacement in her poems on the threat of nuclear "obliteration" also allows her to settle gendered literary disputes between Niedecker and Zukokfsky, and thereby question the agency of the Lacanian symbolic Other who, as it is called upon to authorize or invalidate certain lexical choices, also exposes its own failure to guarantee the subject's utterances and being.

Il s'agit dans cette étude d'explorer, dans l'œuvre poétique de Lorine Niedecker, les manifestations des mécanismes de condensation et de déplacement que Freud place au centre de son étude sur *Le Trait d'esprit et sa relation à l'inconscient*. La poésie de Niedecker, placée sous le signe de la « condenserie », investit tout d'abord le traitement singulier du suffixe qui est partie intégrante de ce terme dont Niedecker modifie l'usage ordinaire tout en restant dans les limites d'une conception de la langue comme propriété partagée. La condensation est également à l'œuvre dans les transformations que Niedecker observe dans les roches de la région du Lac Supérieur et dont elle dresse le registre dans le recueil *North Central* confondant temporalités géologique et humaine, et traduisant ces processus sous forme de noms composés qui, quoiqu'ils semblent effacer les relations syntaxiques dans leur linéarité, ne sont pas pour autant subordonnés à une visée essentialiste, mais œuvrent à réduire l'écart entre les mots et les choses à la manière de l'événement incorporel évoqué par Deleuze. Dans la même logique, en jouant sur le double sens du mot « compound », Niedecker esquisse les contours d'une économie intertextuelle non capitaliste dans laquelle l'emprunt est générateur de gain symbolique, notamment lorsqu'il porte sur les jeux de mots métapoétiques shakespeariens. C'est dans ces dispositifs que l'art niedeckerien de la condensation s'approche au plus près du trait d'esprit analysé par Freud, certains poèmes opérant raccourcis sémantiques ou double-entendres semblables à ceux qu'évoque Freud, même s'ils relèvent en dernière analyse de la logique de l'événement déjà évoquée. Ce sont toutefois des ressources proches de celles du conceit métaphysique que Niedecker mobilise lorsqu'il s'agit pour elle d'aborder le contexte immédiat de la Guerre Froide, dans lequel la pratique de la « condenserie » permet de déplacer le conflit sur la scène de l'*agon* textuel. La stratégie de déplacement qui opère dans les poèmes consacrés à la menace d' « oblitération » nucléaire permet également à Niedecker de régler tel différend littéraire et genré qui l'oppose à Zukofsky, et par là, d'interroger l'instance de l'Autre symbolique conceptualisée par Lacan, Autre qui, en même temps qu'il est sommé d'autoriser ou d'invalider certains choix lexicaux, expose également sa propre incapacité à garantir les énoncés et l'être même du sujet.

INDEX

Keywords: condensation, displacement, Niedecker Lorine, condensery, Freud Sigmund, wit, syllepsis, economy
Mots-clés: condensation, déplacement, Niedecker Lorine, condenserie, Freud Sigmund, trait d'esprit, syllepse, économie

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John L. Brown's Epistolary Wit

The Difficult Art of Practicing Public Diplomacy

Raphaël Ricaud

1 In the East-West confrontation that characterized the second half of the twentieth century, given the impossibility of resorting to the atomic bomb to settle disputes, culture wore combat boots. In the previous decade, there has been a surge of interest in this *cultural* Cold War. Academics have highlighted general tendencies in the war's specificities (Saunders; Caute; Scott-Smith; Cull) whereas memoirs of insiders (Snyder; Esterline; Arndt) offer more personal perspectives.

2 In Arndt's *The First Resort of Kings* (2006), the name of one cultural *attaché* crops up regularly: that of John Lackey Brown (Arndt 126, 130, 194, 341, 354, 421, 565, 577, 584). Depicted as a "witty and fun-loving man of letters" and even a "legend" (130), Brown appears as an appealing figure deserving further study, for although the cultural Cold War has been extensively discussed, the relationship between wit and diplomacy during that era has gone virtually unexplored. Reading Arndt's take on Brown, one could sense that the "legend" might be a good case study, if a paradoxical one. Could one speak of wit as a diplomatic instrument in the midst of a Cold *War?*

3 Brown had written several articles in the *New York Times*. His mission as the literary correspondent in Paris in the late forties had been to take the pulse of the French artistic and literary scene. In these early works, one realizes Brown was well-read, but his articles contain very little humor. Similarly, Brown published another serious work, *Panorama de la littérature contemporaine aux États-Unis* (Brown 1954), an introduction to contemporary American literature entirely written in French for the benefit of French-speaking students. In this anthology, Brown not only introduced authors, he also compiled impeccably translated selected passages from their most significant works. Given this impressive anthology, Brown was obviously also a gifted bilingual academic.

4 Yet another piece by Brown belied the diplomat's apparently one-sided seriousness. In an open letter published in the *Foreign Service Journal* in 1964 entitled "But what do you DO?", Brown humorously described the role of a cultural *attaché* stationed in Europe during the Cold war (Brown 1964). In short, Brown admitted that even though he was originally a cultural *attaché*, he had "often been called upon to fulfill the function of an

agricultural attaché" (25). Brown's open letter was an eye-opener. His derisive take on his profession suggests that diplomatic wit is not necessarily an oxymoron. Was there more to be found in his *private* correspondence? After all, he was a man of letters, in both senses of the term.

5 His correspondence, stocked at the University of Georgetown, contains letters from, and to, individuals such as Josephine Baker, Albert Camus, Mark Chagall, Henry Kissinger, and others. The letters raise a number of questions: cultural diplomacy during the Cold War being serious business, why would Brown choose to resort to wit in the first place? What kind of wit could such a man use? Was wit just an integral part of his personality and could one distinguish the scholar's intelligence, on the one hand, and the humor of the diplomat, on the other? Was the kind of wit displayed by Brown tailored to his correspondents? Did his wit evolve over time, and was it linked to the cultural and political context?

6 To try to answer these questions, I have divided this study into two parts. First, I shall briefly recall the context in which public diplomats were being stationed in Europe during the cultural Cold War. I will argue that, given the impossibility of an open confrontation, East and West competed on the cultural front. To wage this cultural war, America needed to create a propaganda apparatus that would be compatible with its democratic values. Armed with books, knowledge, and literary know-how, men of letters such as Brown were sent out to wage this cultural Cold War by establishing the proper *rapport* between local and American culture and its many agents.

7 In a second part, I will analyze a sample of the letters Brown wrote as a literary agent and those that he wrote as a cultural *attaché* who set the standard for the profession. After discussing the corpus of letters selected for this study, I will analyze Brown's open letter and evaluate its impact before demonstrating how, and why, Brown used wit in the private and business letters I have had access to.

Context

The Cultural Cold War

8 The Cold War (1947-1991) was characterized by political and military tensions between East and West. Both sides retained large stocks of nuclear weapons, yet did not resort to them from fear of mutual destruction. This military stalemate resulted in battles taking on other—sometimes symbolic—forms (Darling 1). For instance, in Europe, war was being waged on the cultural as well as the political front. As soon as World War II ended, the Soviet Union and the US launched a struggle for cultural supremacy, the competition lasting for more than four decades. During this time, the two superpowers tried to "win the hearts and minds" of Europeans by using a wide array of activities, which included cultural exchanges (Caute; Scott-Smith) and advocacy through the cultivation of local elites.

9 Each side promoted its cultural life, hailing it as a reflection of its achievements and values. The US wanted the projection of its art and artists abroad to reflect quintessentially American values. Jazz was a case in point, because it does not apply the harmonic rules and restrictions usually found in Western music; lyrically and melodically, improvisation is key, and rhythmically, jazz borrows from African traditions. The resulting blend is inventive and uniquely American. Additionally, jazz

carries a sense of freedom, a value to be associated with America. But when the US Department of State started sending African-American jazz artists on State-sponsored tours, there was also a political agenda: America needed to dispel the idea that it was institutionally a racist state.

10 Showcasing American culture, underlining its European influences while featuring its distinctive character was one thing, but to win hearts and minds during the Cold War, the US also needed to express an interest in the cultural productions which emanated from the countries it was trying to influence. For example, in the aftermath of World War II, taking the pulse of the literary scene in countries such as France was deemed important. Special envoys reviewed and praised the works of luminaries such as Sartre, Camus and Picasso. To be sure, the cultural was also political: in Washington, the impact that such artists had was assessed in the light of the impact Communism might have on French society.

Creating an apparatus to explain America to the world

11 To organize the battles waged on the cultural Cold War front, America needed to create an official apparatus, as the Office of War Information had been all but dismantled after World War II (Cull 21). Construction of such of a mechanism to project an ideal vision of itself to the world sometimes relied on covert tactics. Scholars such as Saunders (1999) have shown that the CIA used fronts to fund journals. Additionally, we now know that Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty were, in fact, CIA-funded. So America *did* engage in black propaganda on the cultural front, but this was incidental. More systematically, the US aimed at influencing the world's public opinion in a more democratic manner, using legislative and institutional means. Exerting open influence—also known as white propaganda—on the international scene usually fell in one of two categories: the informational or the relational.

12 In 1948, the US Information and Educational Exchange Act of 1948 (Public Law 80-402) was passed in order to use every form of media to foster a favorable image of the United States abroad. This Act, also known as the Smith-Mundt Act, had informational implications. In 1961, the Mutual Education and Cultural Exchange Act (Public Law 87-256), was passed to better cultural understanding between US citizens and those of other countries. The reasoning behind that Act, also known as the Fulbright-Hays Act of 1961, was that such exchanges would expose participants to the characteristics of other cultures, all the while promoting their own. It was also believed that the Act would be the start of more amicable relationships between peoples.

13 On August 1, 1953, Eisenhower signed Executive Order 10477, which launched the United States Information Agency (USIA). This institution housed all programs and activities—informational and relational—which aimed at projecting a positive image of America abroad. Today, it is customary to refer to the practitioners who worked for USIA as "public diplomats". Those Americans stationed abroad were Foreign Service officers (FSOs). To that extent, they were *diplomats*, who participated in the extraterritorial projection of America's image to advance its foreign policy. Yet unlike regular diplomats, these FSO's were not conducting negotiations with other representatives behind closed doors; there was no secrecy involved in their advancing American culture. The kind of diplomacy they practiced was not private—in short, these Americans were the *public* face of the United States abroad.

14 In most American embassies in Europe during the Cold War, there were public diplomats in charge of press relations (usually called Information officers or IOs) and others in charge of culture (usually called Cultural Affairs officers or CAOs). CAOs (also known as cultural *attachés*) were responsible for setting up educational exchanges, arranging tours, shows, concerts, exhibitions and lectures, supervising the American library, attending ceremonies, etc. Officially, the job of the cultural *attaché* ended there. However, it was believed that the long-term relationships and influence exerted over the local *intelligentsia*—opinion leaders in their own country—would contribute to advancing the purposes of American foreign policy. In Cold War logic, there was supposed to be a culture/national security nexus.

15 Yet there is an inherent tension in assigning culture a direct, political objective. Admittedly, the cultural *is* political, but this does not necessarily mean American cultural outputs automatically matched the agenda of the US State Department. Additionally, cultural relations might best be understood in terms of *process*, whereas American Foreign policy during the Cold War was stated as an *output*. In short, culture needs *time* whereas foreign policy usually expects *immediate results*. Last but not least, in American embassies during the Cold War, culture was a very broad term. It encompassed anything that did not fit neatly into the other sections of the embassy. As a consequence, the Cultural Affairs officers often had to fix problems that were beyond their scope and men of letters were being assigned contradictory tasks. On the one hand, they were supposed to be Cold Warriors; the pen being mightier than the sword, they were expected to put to use the power of words and ideas to project a favourable image of America. On the other, fighting on the cultural battlefield often required undertaking tasks that had little to do with culture itself.

John Lackey Brown, public diplomat *par excellence*

16 One such man of letters was Dr. John Lackey Brown. Born on 29 April 1914 in Ilion, New York; his father was a businessman and his mother a housewife. He was educated at Hamilton College, from which he graduated in 1935. From 1936 to 1938, he pursued graduate work in medieval studies and comparative literature at the École des Chartes and the Sorbonne in Paris. In 1939, he received a Ph.D. from the Catholic University in America and taught there as an instructor of Romance languages for two years. During World War II, he worked for the Office of War Information as assistant chief of foreign publications, and from 1943 to 1945, he was a member of the staff of the Office of Strategic Services. As the war ended, he wrote a report on France for the Rockefeller Foundation and, after the war, he settled in Paris, where he was the European editor for Houghton-Mifflin Company and correspondent of the Sunday edition of the *New York Times*. From 1945 to 1949, he also contributed to numerous European and American journals.

17 In the 1950s Brown worked directly for the US government in a number of capacities. First, he was director of the Information Division of the Marshall Plan in France. Then, from 1950 to 1954, he worked as chief of regional services for the United States Information Service at the US Embassy in Paris. He was then posted as cultural *attaché* to the US Embassy in Brussels (1954-58), and later in Rome (1958-62). He also served as counsellor for cultural affairs in Mexico during the sixties (1964-68). Brown eventually resigned from the Foreign Service in 1968, returned to the US and lectured extensively

on American-European literary and intellectual relations at many American universities. He was also a creative writer in his own right and published 9 collections of poems. He died on 22 November 2002.

18 The jobs he held may seem varied, but they have a common core: all entailed managing the projection of America's image abroad. In other words, they all fell into the category of "public diplomacy". In recent literature, Brown has even been hailed as the incarnation of the perfect public diplomat (Arndt 130, 357; Gerits): he was close to the people he worked with, learned but not pedantic, and appreciative of other languages and cultures. All these qualities made him a well-liked American representative,[1] even to the literary luminaries who made a point of publicly criticizing US foreign policy.

19 Interestingly, those who knew him best point out that what set him apart from *other* Foreign Service officers was his well-attuned humor. He fully mastered the art of conversation, mixing cultural references with not-so-serious observations on the absurdities of life, which gave him a distinctive style. Friends and co-workers alike admired his use of subtle aphorisms, well-timed quips and repartee.

20 Due to the ephemeral and private nature of *apartés* (asides) and other closed-doors or intimate conversations, one can only speculate on this Cultural Affairs officer's use of wit and its efficacy. However, one can study his letters, stored at Georgetown University.

Analyzing Brown's correspondence

Designing a representative epistolary corpus

21 The entire John L. Brown Papers collection is stored in 80 boxes at Georgetown's Lauinger library and its off-campus reserve. These boxes are divided in four separate groups. At the time of my visit, in April 2013, the first and third acquisitions were off-campus, and the fourth had not been installed yet. I could therefore only study the second acquisition, which consists in 271 folders of alphabetically-arranged correspondence with well-known twentieth-century figures such as Hannah Arendt, Josephine Baker, Mark Chagall, Albert Camus, Henry Steele Commager, Henry Kissinger, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Carson McCullers, Richard Wright, *inter alia*. The collection also includes letters sent to, and received from, other professional acquaintances. Although the correspondence is not chronologically arranged, it appears that the oldest letter in this series dates from 1946, and the most recent from 1983. All the letters in the collection are unpublished.[2]

22 My interest in these letters arose from a previous study on the nuts and bolts of public diplomacy, during which I observed that public diplomats liked to recount humorous anecdotes from their careers, which contrasted with the gravity of the Cold War. Additionally, I took it that although diplomats praised wit (the utmost manifestation of intelligence), the Foreign Service was supposed to be humor-free (Schmiel). This is when, serendipitously, I realized that the link between American public diplomacy and wit had not been explored.

23 Given the size of the boxes and the limited time I could spend at Georgetown, I have not been able to exploit fully the potential of each letter, and this paper is therefore a

preliminary study on what could be a larger work of the relationship between wit and public diplomacy.

24 In order to select letters that would be a faithful reflection of Brown's entire career, and to constitute a representative epistolary corpus, I first avoided focusing on a single era. I then tried to identify a dozen letters from each decade (from the forties to the sixties), but the resulting sample turned out to be rather unbalanced: 27 letters are from the forties, 11 from the fifties and 16 from the sixties. The reason the late forties are overrepresented is due to Brown's frequent correspondence with Josephine Baker, but each letter can only be fully understood when compared with the entire correspondence.

25 I also endeavored to select both private and business letters. Since private letters are more intimate, they usually reveal more of the writer's self—this is why there are more of them in the final sample. However, in Brown's line of work, friends are often colleagues, and professional acquaintances become friends. When in possession of an entire correspondence, one thus realizes that if the first letter to a given individual is a business letter, the subsequent epistolary exchanges can become increasingly intimate and private.

26 Lastly, for the purposes of this study, I selected letters from a variety of correspondents. I was initially drawn by the identity of well-known writers, artists, anthropologists, etc. However, a more careful study of the content of the letters revealed that the exchanges between Brown and figures who have become twentieth-century household names were not necessarily the best material for exposing wit as diplomacy: Lévi-Strauss wrote to Brown as the French *conseiller culturel* in New York, and as a result, his tone is somewhat bland. Chagall's epistolary style is desperately factual and Wright is telegraphically brief—he just needed a place to stay in Paris. In short, cultural fame does not necessarily produce epistolary wit. As I was to find out later, the study of lesser-known figures would often be more revealing.

27 Brown's career evolved over time and so did the nature of his job. Representing a publishing company and representing a country via its culture require different skills. But the international context and the politics of culture were also prone to changes over time. The nature of transatlantic relations was not the same at the start of the Cold War under Truman and later under Nixon, during which a military conflict in South East Asia overshadowed cultural diplomacy.

28 All in all, I worked on a selection of 101 pages of correspondence. These include 32 letters by Brown and a telegram, plus a blank page with a French Information Centre heading. The remaining pages are letters sent to Brown. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on six letters, or series of letters, each of which is telling in terms of the use of wit *in* public diplomacy, and wit *as* diplomacy. Five were taken from the second acquisition of the John L. Brown Papers collection and one was taken from the *Foreign Service Journal*: the only "open" letter.

29 This study of a sample of letters is a discourse-based analysis: unlike linguists, I worked on these letters from the text down to the phrase and word level.

30 Occasional references to other letters from the sample are made when a factual point needs to be reinforced or explained. Of course, there were letters not included in the sample that would have been interesting to study too, but they did not make the

original cut. If given the opportunity to study at the Lauinger Library again, those could be material for future research.

Talking shop: an open letter

31 Let us begin with a letter in which Brown wittily describes the Foreign Service. Originally, this letter was a speech given by Brown at the Center for Advanced Studies at Wesleyan University on January 22, 1963.[3] The speech was then edited and made its way to the *Foreign Service Journal*, which published it in June 1964. Given the content of the text—explaining and justifying the role of a cultural *attaché*—and its intended recipients—Foreign Service professionals—it falls under the "open letter" category.

32 The letter starts with a factual description of what the job of the cultural *attaché* entails. In substance, Brown explains that a Cultural Affairs officer is in charge of educational exchanges, and of all things cultural. Yet an honest assessment of what the CAO had set out to do, when compared to what he has actually achieved, reveals that there is in fact very little regarding culture in his line of work. Too often, pressing business involves prioritizing trivial communication. Alas, he claims, the man of letters soon turns into a soulless machine, performing chores that no one else wants to do.

33 The same could have been said of many other jobs. But what catches the attention of the reader in this open letter is not the content but its form. Brown recurrently uses wit to depict a somewhat depressing picture of the profession without sounding pessimistic. First, the author resorts to using quips in lieu of proper answers. When asked what he does on the job, he retorts: "as little mischief as possible". When questioned about exchange programs, he deadpans that "our exchange apparatus is as complicated as a Dr. Seuss machine".[4] In this open letter, Brown is addressing other members—or would-be members—of his profession. Just like him, they are well-read and highly qualified. The reference to children's picture books is unexpected, unsettling and therefore amusing. This could be the first lesson in diplomatic wit: when faced with a difficult question, a humorous answer lowers tensions and quite often saves the diplomat from having to provide a real answer.

34 Regarding culture, Brown explains that the cultural *attaché* "should share everyone's tastes; nourishing coexisting passions for Grandma Moses and Jasper Johns, Zane Gray and William Burroughs, Leonard Bernstein and John Cage." Brown could have stated simply that a CAO should be open-minded enough to appreciate art in all its forms. But he provides his audience with a list of examples drawn from the fields of painting, literature and music. The humor stems from the combination of extreme opposites as pairs. These cultural references also have another function: they reinforce the cohesion of the group. Indeed, to fully appreciate the incongruity of the juxtaposition of the names dropped, one must be familiar with them. In the sixties, Brown's audience would have been sufficiently educated and up-to-date to appreciate this. However, as cultural references change from one generation to another, humor does not always age gracefully. Would FSOs recognize the names of these artists today? Brown's witty take on the diplomatic world can thus be said to include as much as it excludes.

35 Regarding the tasks no one else wants, Brown uses exaggeration to depict complicated situations. He mentions tourist groups who confront the CAO and "want arrangements made right away for them to take tea with the Queen, or lunch with the president of the Republic, or have a private audience with the Pope." Brown also had a knack for

juxtaposing things that do not belong together, thus poking fun at the absurd. In Brown's world, tourists' requests are hard to turn down, because they are "armed with official letters". In this case, the humor stems from the unexpected juxtaposition of a subject and a verb that belong to two different semantic fields. In an open letter, laughing at overwhelming experiences is certainly more entertaining than a minute description of how the cultural *attaché* actually dealt with them. And for the mental health of the CAO, recollecting problems and laughing them off is therapeutic. Brown ends the first part of the open letter with a metaphor, comparing the cultural *attaché* to a dispenser:

> No wonder that after a few years of this regime, the Cultural Officer, dispersed to the point of being schizoid, despoiled of his cultural baggage if he ever had any, becomes a kind of dispensing machine, spewing out cultural "packets" or "kits" that have been sent to the field for distribution. (Brown 1964)

36 In this case, humor is also an efficient way to bring out into the open the problems inherent in the profession. It is a clever way to voice a complaint without sounding like one is whining.

37 In short, this open letter shows how Brown humorously depicts the job of the public diplomat, and humor serves several functions. Firstly, when using a quip to define the job of the cultural *attaché*, wit is used as an attention-getter. Brown then sets out to depict a rather depressing picture. Wit used at this point provides tension relief (exchange programs compared to complicated machines found in children's books). Secondly, wit is a social identifier: to appreciate the humor, one needs to belong to a certain group—in this case the American Foreign Service. Thirdly, humor is an economical way of passing on a message (*viz*. the tasks required of the cultural *attaché* are hardly related to culture, and largely unfeasible). Given the brevity of the message (man becomes machine), ideas can be floated without having to be explicitly stated. This may explain why wit perfectly suits the world of diplomacy, in which enigmatic phrases trump explicit requests, and where less is more.

38 As evidenced in this open letter, Brown certainly had a talent for describing his professional world with wit. But to what extent did he resort to using wit on the job? As we shall see, Brown's wit depended on several factors: the nature of the jobs he held, the degree of intimacy he had reached with his correspondents, and the political climate of the time.

Private and business letters

39 It is not always easy to determine whether Brown's letters were professional or personal. Some cases are very clear-cut: when Brown was addressing Henry Kissinger, who was head of the International Seminar at Harvard at the time, it is strictly professional correspondence.[5] Consequently, the letters are very dry and administrative in tone.[6] Although they offer the reader much insight into how international exchanges were set up during the late fifties, wit is nowhere to be found, and it is likely that protocol and respect for hierarchy account for its absence. One might add that Brown appreciated neither Kissinger nor his political choices. Exchanging pleasantries with him was therefore neither possible (a hierarchic boundary separated the two men), nor wanted (Brown evinced no desire to become Kissinger's friend).

40 Conversely, given the degree of intimacy Brown reached with Josephine Baker, one might consider their correspondence to be personal. The use of commonplaces, *risqué* remarks, flattering comparisons... all point in the direction of greater intimacy. Nonetheless, their relationship started when Brown, who was representing Houghton-Mifflin at the time, was hoping to secure publishing rights on Baker's upcoming autobiography.

41 It is therefore best not to organize the letters strictly according to correspondents or even according to their content, but rather to study them chronologically, using context and acknowledgement of changing times to reveal the minutiae of Brown's use of wit.

A man of letters out to secure publishing rights

42 Let us start with a series of letters sent to Josephine Baker between 1946 and 1948. To understand the evolving relationship between Brown and Baker, one needs to take into account their entire correspondence.

43 When Brown first addressed Josephine Baker, the letter was perfectly neutral in its tone and very polite in its queries.[7] Most sentences are in fact open-ended questions, and there is not a trace of the good humor and teasing and even *risqué* remarks that would appear later on. The greetings used enable the reader to trace their evolving relationship. The first letter opens with "Dear Mme Baker," the second with "Dear Josephine Baker". Further letters open with "My dears, Jo[8] et Joe", "Dear Josephine", "Dear Joe and Jo" and last but not least "Joe darling".[9] Brown's choice of greetings bears testimony to the changing nature of the ties that bonded him to the Franco-American star. Yet one must keep in mind that, like all good public diplomats, Brown was astute enough never to take the lead in his choice of greetings: he merely repeated or echoed those used by Baker ("Dear Mr. Brown", "My dears",[10] "*Mes Chers, Chers, Chers*", "*Mes amours*"). In this case, Brown's wit stemmed from his ability to adapt.

44 As Brown and Baker learned to appreciate each other, humor made its way into their letters—or rather, good humor, at first. How did Brown set this more pleasant, relaxed atmosphere in the notes? How did he set out to make *la star de la revue nègre* laugh? And what was his objective in doing so?

45 At the start of this process, Brown was merely echoing Baker's writings: his letters grew less formal as time passed by because Baker's eccentric style was anything but formal. But Brown did not jump from being polite to being clown-like. The use of humor appeared gradually, in small doses.

46 One safe way to set a pleasant, friendly atmosphere is to use idiomatic phrases. That is precisely what Brown did to open the first paragraph of a letter dated 11 March 1947: "I had lunch yesterday with Jo Bouillon, and we talked of you—I am sure your ears were burning down there on the banks of the Dordogne." Commonplaces are the most adroit manner to get the conversation flowing, so to speak, and that is why Brown resorted to this device to start the letter. One could almost say that he went by the book. Once the pleasant atmosphere was set, Brown tried to win Baker to his side. He had been wanting her to sign a contract with the publishing company he was working for at the time.[11] To do so, he used humor to flatter her. Brown mentions that "the Charleston of Josephine Baker was the *Sacre du Printemps* of 1925." To the reader, this might appear to be an incongruous comparison, for a 1920s popular dance cannot be elevated to the

status of a ballet, just as a quick-paced jazz rhythm cannot be equated with the orchestral work accompanying *The Rite of Spring*. But both the African-American and the classical dances were immensely popular in France in the twenties. Thanks to the humor, which lies in a hyperbolic comparison, Brown's remark does not sound obsequious.

47 Having realized how original Baker could be, Brown decided he could end the letter with a bit of folly himself. Thus the last lines, written in French, read:

> J'espère que vous vous reposez bien, que vous êtes sage, que vous mangez votre viande. Sage mais pas trop, car « qui vit sans folie n'est pas si sage qu'il croit ! » Vive la folie ! (11 March 1947)

48 Translated in English, this could read as follows: "I hope that you are getting some rest, that you are eating red meat, and that you are behaving. Don't overdo it though, because 'those who live without folly are not as wise as they think.' Long live folly!"

49 Brown had now known Baker long enough, and he felt the time was right for his own display of madness to end the letter. The echoing greetings, the more relaxed tone and the quote on folly gave Brown a chameleon-like aspect. He took into account what his correspondent was saying and the way she was expressing herself, and re-injected shape and form into his own letters. This ingenious process is an essential ingredient to successful public diplomacy.

50 At first glance, it might seem strange that an American envoy[12] should play the fool. That said, the above-mentioned letter was a private piece, one not made for public consumption. Additionally, if read carefully, Brown's final lines do not depart from what is expected from a man of letters. Indeed, the original quotation on folly can be attributed to François VI, Duc de la Rochefoucauld, celebrated for his witty aphorisms. In other words, to decipher Brown's use of witty remarks requires the reader to distinguish several layers of meaning. Lastly, one can note that the timing of the pleasantries was not left to chance. One is used to open the letter, another to convince Baker to sign a contract, and a final one is used to close the letter. Humor always comes in the briefest forms and serves a purpose—as an editor, Brown understood the importance of tight editing.

Wit as a seasoned public diplomat's tool of choice

51 Let us now analyze a letter which reveals the importance of what sociologists call *entre-soi* (Tissot), that is to say, what constitutes the world of like-minded people. On 23 June 1968, Brown wrote a letter to Sim Copans. They both had much in common: both had francophone wives;[13] both had studied at the Sorbonne in the thirties and had written dissertations on French topics; both were stationed in London during the Second World War; both had worked for the United States Information Service for which they were expected to "win [the] hearts and minds" of French men and women (Poupon 2000); both taught American literature in French institutions; one wrote a *Panorama de la littérature contemporaine aux Etats-Unis* (Brown 1954), the other had his own radio show presenting a "*Panorama du jazz américain*"... The list of similarities is long. Copans was director of the American institute in Paris when Brown wrote him this letter. In it, Brown tried to convince him to schedule the poet Lloyd Frankenberg (yet another intimate acquaintance) for a series of lectures at the American institute. To do so, Brown ran through a list of the poet's recent achievements and awards, and assured

Copans that he himself had recently secured an Italian tour of lectures for Frankenberg.

52 This letter reads very much like a textbook example of the cultural diplomacy machinery during the Cold War. The protagonists were two like-minded ambassadors, as it were, of American culture. Professionally and personally, they had much in common. They were not only colleagues, but friends. One (Brown) wanted the other (Copans) to schedule a third party, also an American, for a talk in a lecture tour. Given the nature of Copans and Brown's relationship, the nature of the request was not exactly that of asking for a favor, nor was it purely a professional recommendation. It fell somewhere in between.

53 Brown opened the letter by calling Copans, in French, "*mon cher vieux*" ("my dear old pal"). Brown then stated that Frankenberg was a dear old friend too. Brown then reminded Copans that they literally liberated France together, as he mentions "my own best greetings and my memories of l'époque héroïque juste après la Libération." The switch to French halfway through the sentence is meant to make the memory of that epic era even more vivid: Brown and Copans were brothers-in-arms ("*époque héroïque*" could be translated as "epic era"). In short, when addressing Copans as a friend, Brown uses the time-tested logic of "a friend of a friend is a friend," or "he is one of us".

54 But Brown's request resorted to other devices too. Since he was hailed as a highly competent professional, he could recommend Frankenberg as a *connoisseur*. He summed up the poet's career and achievements chronologically, praising his value by making frequent use of hyperbole ("superbly", "such vogue in the past few years", "very successful", "numerous awards", etc.) Yet for fear of overdoing his recommendation, Brown used humor too. In fact, by the end of the third paragraph, the list of flattering phrases had become so lengthy that Brown tried to poke fun at the entire process in resorting to obvious exaggeration: Frankenberg's Italian tour of lectures was supposed to have produced "a lyric delirium the length of the peninsula, from Udine to Trapani." Mimicking Mediterranean overstatement, the joke lightened the mood of the letter which by this point was beginning to sound too serious. As if needing to convince his "dear old friend" that the poet was going to please the French, he added that Frankenberg's wife, painter Loren MacIver, "was recently honored with a one-man show in the Musée d'Art moderne in Paris."

55 By this point in the letter, the bond of friendship is firmly reaffirmed, and the professional aspect has been dealt with. Given the long list of credentials attributed to the poet, Copans is supposed to have swallowed the bait. The humor has somewhat toned down what is at stake: Brown is giving some slack before he can land the fish. He does so in using the following: "the thought has occurred to me that [Frankenberg] might be persuaded to lecture at your Institute. He would be a distinguished addition to your faculty." In a stroke of genius, the Cultural Affairs officer makes it sound as if Copans was going to be the one benefitting from the entire operation. Frankenberg is not presented as the one asking for a tour of lectures, but as the one to be asked.

56 In this letter, Brown acts as a go-between for two friends, who also happen to be professional acquaintances. He does one (Frankenberg) a favour by asking the other (Copans) to schedule him at his Institute. Additionally, in the first part of the letter, Brown almost disappears to the extent that he does not talk about himself. Tact and unobtrusiveness are qualities which all public diplomats must cultivate. Brown obviously had both but used humor when necessary. In this instance, it can be seen as a

lubricant, oiling the cogs and wheels of the machinery of public diplomacy. Bantering as reaffirmation of *entre-soi* enables Brown a witty reversal of roles in which he seems to be doing a favor rather than asking for one.

Acerbic humor: The disillusioned public diplomat quits

57 By 1968, Brown was the counsellor for cultural affairs in Mexico. However, he started to become somewhat cynical about his job. He was conscious that the golden era of USIS[14] was over. In a letter sent to the cultural *attaché* in Brussels, he remarked:

> The situation of USIS as I observed it in Paris and Rome (in Paris particularly) was not very encouraging. There was an atmosphere of gloom and doom, the morale was very low among the local people (they were all afraid of being liquidated), and the Americans just seemed to be marking time, going through the bureaucratic motions without any real sense of purpose or of conviction. No pschitt, so to speak. (Brown, "Letter to Edwin P. Kennedy Jr.," 15 December 1965)

58 The "gloom and doom" assonance rings like a tolling bell. One can sense that the lively spirit of culture in American-European exchanges was no longer there ("no pschitt,[15] so to speak"). It is almost as if it had passed away. As a result, embassy workers were ghost-like, present on the job without really being there.

59 Brown was also disillusioned with the budget cuts which undermined the long-term projects of the United States Information Agency. In the wake of newly-independent countries in sub-Saharan Africa, he talked to Washington's "new top brass" and tried to point out the foolishness of under-funding European posts, (rightly) claiming that African elites[16] were still being trained in Europe, but to no avail. He concluded, rather bitterly, that in spite of past services and sensible intuitions, his advice would have no impact on the course the funding of culture was taking: "what good my small voice will do is another question."[17]

60 Let us now end with one last letter which lets us in on Brown's resignation. On 23 June 1968, John Brown sent a letter to his friend, Lloyd Frankenberg, and his wife, Loren MacIver. Brown no longer felt he could represent the United States abroad, especially under Nixon. Additionally, his job at the office entailed more and more administrative tasks, and only rarely cultural ones, which bored him and stifled his creativity.

> Did I tell you I am resigning from the State Department? I weary of trying to be a "civil" servant and go to the office every morning. (And more seriously, to "represent" even very modestly, a regime with which I have no sympathy). (Brown, "Letter to Lloyd Frankenberg and Loren MacIver," 23 June 1968)

61 Factually speaking, Brown was providing Frankenberg and MacIver with breaking news. He was considered to be one of the best at what he did, and yet he had decided to resign. But here, instead of dramatizing the situation, Brown played with words, as if to lighten the blow. In this, the puns are revealing. First, there is the pun on him no longer wanting to be a "civil" servant. Brown felt that being urban and polite made no sense when he no longer believed in the task. In 1968, Brown was in his mid-forties and felt it high time he made a stand and spoke his mind on American foreign policy. He disagreed with the choices made by the Nixon administration, and felt he no longer wanted to be a part of a Department whose aim was to represent the United States abroad. In short, the messenger disagreed with the overall message. It is no accident that Brown should refer to Nixon's administration as a "regime", a term borrowed from the French which often has negative connotations in English.[18] Brown not only felt that

his political views were in conflict with those of his employer, he also believed that America's cultural enterprise was being sabotaged from the inside (he mentions a 60 percent budget cut in educational exchange and in cultural activities generally). Brown sensed it was time to jump ship—it was sinking.

Conclusion

62 John Lackey Brown's correspondence was witty in many ways. A brilliant student of literature, he had an excellent mind and memory which he put to professional use. Studying the letters he sent and received, one realizes that he was astute in his judgment of persons (letters to Kissinger) and situations (letter to Kennedy, letter to the Frankenbergs), and had the intelligence to adapt. Sometimes, such intelligence relied on mere common sense (letters to Baker); at others, it took more ingenuity to get recipients to want what he had planned (letter to Copans, letter to the Frankenbergs). Yet most of Brown's epistolary wit was in fact humor (aphorisms, quips, self-deprecating remarks, irony, etc.) which seems to be perfectly woven into the fabric of each letter and custom-tailored to suit the rank and the personality of his addressees. Humor always comes in these letters in the briefest forms and serves a purpose: for Brown, as a human being, it was an act of catharsis; as a former editor, he understood the importance of timing and tight editing; as a diplomat, he was expected to establish lasting relationships in host countries while advancing national interests. Humor helped in this fascinating, albeit sometimes contradictory, mission (as shown in his open letter).

63 The early years of the Cold War, during which Brown worked for Houghton-Mifflin can be seen as "formative years", as if he was learning the tricks of a trade which formally did not yet exist. These activities indirectly prepared him for what he was involved in when he became a "real" diplomat. Additionally, the humor, irony and wit that characterized him at the time reflected how he would put these to use in subsequent activities as a cultural *attaché*. In both capacities, Brown always used humor to ease the negotiating process—in the end, his jobs entailed having his correspondents wish what his employer wanted them to wish. As long as Brown the messenger agreed with the message, all he had to do was be himself, for as he put it: "I'd really like to explain that my purpose in life, if you want to get down to that, is being, not doing" (Brown 1964).

64 When the international context changed, the Cold War front moved from culture in Europe to conflict in South-East Asia; *Realpolitik* replaced containment and its associated war of ideas and ideals. The messenger no longer felt at ease with the message. This carried repercussions that go well beyond the realm of ethics. In fact, it meant Brown had lost all desire of wittily putting culture to use to advance his country's interest. Again, Brown himself stated this best in the form of a quip:

> [The cultural *attaché*] must understand (and if possible, love) before he can convince. [He] soon comes to realize that his job is really a form of love-making and that making love is never really successful unless both partners are participating. (Brown 1964)

65 In the end, wit was not an addition to Brown's diplomatic endeavor, but an integral part of it: quips were tension relievers, strengthening trans-national bonds that united him to his peers; they fostered a sense of belonging to a community of *literati* and noted actors on the cultural scene. But they were also a way to word things that could not be

otherwise expressed. As such, Brown was not the epitome of the cultural *attaché* because he used wit *and* diplomacy, he stood out because he used wit *as* diplomacy.

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NOTES

1. Brown's academic view on cultural diplomacy was not always welcomed by others in the United States Information Agency, however (Gerits 42).

2. There are exceptions, however. A 1963 letter makes an explicit reference to a talk Brown gave to an assembly of American Foreign Service officers. The talk bore on what the profession of the cultural *attaché* entails. At the request of John P.C. Matthews, Director of the Foreign Policy Association programs, the original text of the talk was then edited and made its way to the *Foreign Service Journal* in 1964.

3. University of Georgetown, Lauinger Library, Special Collections, John L. Brown Papers II, Box 2.0, Folder 79.0, John P.C. Matthews to John Brown, 23 January 1963. For all subsequent correspondence from this collection, only the author, recipient and date of the letter will be noted. Full references appear in the bibliography.

4. Dr. Seuss invented several machines. Since Brown does not expand on the issue, there is no way to know whether he is referring to the ones in *The Sneetches and Other Stories* (Dr. Seuss 1961), or to the "Audio-Telly-O-Tally-O-Count" (Dr. Seuss 1962). Both machines are complicated.
5. Henry Kissinger, "Letter to John L. Brown", 2 November 1966.
6. Henry Kissinger, "Letter to John L. Brown", 11 March 1959, 6 April 1959, 31 January 1963, 2 November 1966. John L. Brown, "Letter to Henry Kissinger", 7 August 1958, 17 March 1959, 14 April 1959.
7. John L. Brown, "Letter to Josephine Baker", 2 December 1946.
8. Josephine's then husband was French composer Joseph "Jo" Bouillon.
9. John L. Brown, "Letter to Josephine Baker", 9 December 1947.
10. At this point, Baker had met the Brown family.
11. "At any rate, may I ask that you give Houghton Mifflin a priority chance to read the manuscript that you are preparing?" John L. Brown, "Letter to Josephine Baker", 2 December 1946. "I am very anxious that Houghton Mifflin have an option for publication rights in America." John L. Brown, "Letter to Josephine Baker", 7 December 1946.
12. Although Brown was representing Houghton-Mifflin at the time, one could argue that he was also indirectly representing America itself. For more details on this and the Informational Media Guaranty, see Parry-Giles (2002, 10).
13. John Lackey Brown was married to Simone-Yvette Levesque, originally a French-Canadian citizen, and Sim Copans was married to a Frenchwoman, Lucienne Godiard.
14. Technically speaking, the Department of State had "lent" Brown to USIS (USIA's designation overseas). As such, he belonged to the rare breed of super CAOs.
15. Pschitt was a popular soft-drink brand at the time, especially in France and Belgium. In French, the onomatopoeia "pschitt" is also an allusion to something which is running out of steam.
16. In his letter, Brown specifically mentions Senghor, whom he believes to be essentially European in his culture.
17. John L. Brown, "Letter to Edwin P. Kennedy Jr.", 15 December 1965.
18. The term is generally used to designate a government headed by a single, powerful individual who is not a democratically-elected leader, and who maintains power by force rather than by free elections.

ABSTRACTS

John Lackey Brown was a literary correspondent in Paris in the aftermath of World War II. He was later posted as cultural *attaché* in Brussels, Rome and Mexico City during the first two decades of the Cold War. Those who knew him best say he was appreciated for his good humor, wit and love of culture. He is even said to have set the standard for the profession. *Verba volant, scripta manent* (spoken words fly away, written ones remain). Due to the ephemeral and private nature of asides, one can only speculate on this Cultural Affairs officer's use of wit and its efficacy. However, there is a host of archival material at the Lauinger Library (Georgetown University) which can be mined for answers. Based on a sample of these letters, this paper sets out to classify and analyze the use of wit Brown made in his varied correspondence, and to study the extent to which it served a diplomatic purpose. In the end, I show wit was not an addition to

Dr. Brown's diplomatic endeavor; it was an integral part of it. Quips were tension relievers, strengthening trans-national bonds that united him to his peers. But they were also a way to word what could not otherwise be said. John Lackey Brown was not the epitome of the cultural *attaché* because he used wit *and* diplomacy. He stood out because he used wit *as* diplomacy.

John Lackey Brown était le correspondant littéraire du *New York Times* en poste à Paris au lendemain de la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Lors des deux premières décennies de la Guerre froide, il fut attaché culturel dans les ambassades américaines de Bruxelles, Rome et Mexico. Ceux qui le connaissaient le mieux disaient de lui qu'il était apprécié pour sa bonne humeur, son esprit et son amour pour la culture. Au sein de sa profession, il faisait figure de modèle. *Les paroles s'envolent, les écrits restent*. En raison de la nature éphémère et privée des apartés, on ne peut que spéculer sur l'utilisation de l'esprit dont faisait preuve cet attaché culturel dans ses démarches diplomatiques. Les archives de sa correspondance, en revanche, demeurent et méritent être étudiées (elles reposent à la bibliothèque Lauinger de l'université de Georgetown, à Washington D.C.). Cette étude, fondée sur un corpus représentatif de cette correspondance, vise à classer et analyser l'esprit épistolaire de Brown, et à dégager le bon usage de l'humour en matière de diplomatie. Les échanges épistolaires de Brown témoignent du fait que l'esprit n'est pas un « plus » diplomatique, mais qu'au contraire, faire preuve d'esprit entre pleinement dans le cadre du processus diplomatique. En effet, les traits d'esprits permettaient à Brown de détendre l'atmosphère et de resserrer les liens transatlantiques qui l'unissaient à ses pairs. Par ailleurs, les bons mots permettaient d'exprimer ce qui ne pouvait être formulé autrement. Ce n'est donc pas parce qu'il faisait preuve d'esprit *et* de diplomatie que Brown était considéré comme le modèle même de l'attaché culturel, mais bien parce qu'il se servait de l'esprit *en tant qu'outil* diplomatique.

INDEX

Keywords: USA, foreign policy, Cold War, public diplomacy, wit, Brown John L.
Mots-clés: politique étrangère, États-Unis, Guerre froide, public diplomacy, trait d'esprit, Brown John L.

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Graphic Interlude

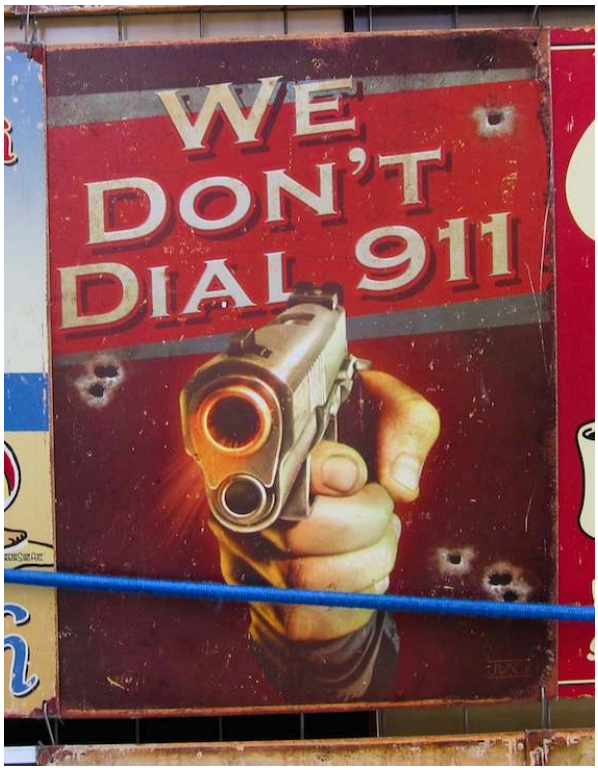
"Brevity is the soul of wit"

Jay Hide, Melanie Friend and James McLaren

Melanie Friend, *Southport* (2009-2012)

This picture features on the cover of her book: *The Home Front* (2013). For more on this project, see: https://melaniefriend.com/new-page

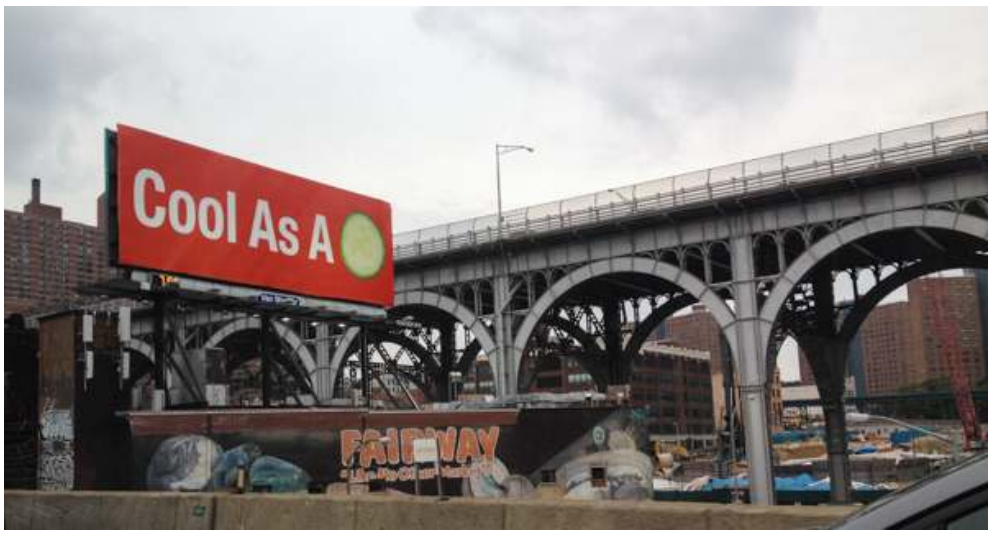
Jay Hide, *We don't dial 911*. September 2012, Broadway, NY



Jay Hide, *No parking*. Austin, TX, 2013

Jay Hide, *KISS MY ICE*. Austin, TX, 2014

Jay Hide, *Cool as a cucumber*. Riverside Drive, NY, 2014



Jay Hide, *Bury*. Highway 71, between Austin and Houston, 2014

Jay Hide, *OOF*. MoMA, NY, 2012

Jay Hide, *Your Speed*. Brooklyn, NY, 2013

James McLaren, *Madrid 2015.* January 11, 2015

Source: https://exileongranvia.tumblr.com/image/107798970815

James McLaren, [*Untitled*]. August 5, 2013

Source: https://exileongranvia.tumblr.com/post/57412341272

ABSTRACTS

This graphic interlude features a selection of photographs which can illustrate the adage 'Brevity is the soul of wit'. True to the spirit of the adage, the viewer is invited to interpret the pictures which are presented without commentary.

Cet interlude iconographique comporte une sélection de photographies illustrant à leur manière l'aphorisme: 'Brevity is the soul of wit'. Pour rester dans l'esprit de cet aphorisme, les images sont livrées telles quelles à l'appréciation du spectateur, sans commentaire.

INDEX

Keywords: brevity, humour, wit, photography
Mots-clés: brièveté, humour, photographie

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JAY HIDE

Jay Hide is a US-based travelling photographer. The pictures are taken from the series 'American Shorts'.

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JAMES MCLAREN

James McLaren is a Scotland-born photographer residing in Madrid (Spain). His street photography, including pictures taken in the streets of Spain, Japan and the USA, can be viewed online: https://exileongranvia.tumblr.com/

“Language is worth a thousand pounds a word”

Jean-Jacques Lecercle

1 **Axiom** (kindly provided by the editors): *Brevity is the soul of wit*.

2 **Thesis 1**. The following text will not simply develop the axiom, it will embody it. As a consequence, it will be composed of (empirical) **propositions**, which will help formulate a **problem**, and of (theoretical) **theses** that will sketch a **solution**, excluding all forms of digression, development or explanation.

3 **Proposition 1.** Here is a text:

> Harris is a fellar who likes to play ladeda, and he like English customs and things, he does be polite and say thank you and he does get up on the bus and the tube to let woman sit down, which is a thing even them Englishmen don’t do. And when he dress, you think is some Englishman going to work in the city, bowler and umbrella, and briefcase tuck under the arm, with *The Times* fold up in the pocket so the name would show, and he walking upright like if he is alone who alive in the world. Only thing, Harris face black. (Selvon 103)

4 **Proposition 2.** This is a passage from *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), a novel by Sam Selvon, an early example of a diasporic novel—one of the earliest, but also undoubtedly one of the best.

5 **Proposition 3**. The novel tells the story of the difficult integration, in the mid-fifties, of the first wave of West Indian immigrants, in a not so welcoming London (hence the title). Among a host of characters, Harris takes this need to integrate to its extreme consequences: even if he never acknowledges it, he is the only one who votes conservative (these immigrants, unlike their equivalents today, are British citizens—they have a passport and political rights).

6 **Proposition 4**. The last sentence in the passage quoted is a perfect embodiment of the axiom, in that it illustrates two of its terms, *brevity* and *wit*. This is an (empirical) **proposition** rather than a (theoretical) **thesis,** in so far as the merest reading of the text will induce readers to grant me this point.

7 **Problem**. How can we account for the force of the last sentence of this passage? Or again, how can we show that this force has something to do with its *brevity* and *wit*?

8 **Proposition 5**. Classical rhetoric tells me that the last sentence of the passage is what is known in French as a *chute*—or 'punchline' in English—, and more specifically that this *chute* is a form of conceit. At this point, were not my text structurally laconic, I might risk a play on words, as Harris, being rather pleased with himself, in other words conceited, is exposed and mocked by way of a rhetorical conceit.

9 **Thesis 1**. The *chute* of the passage owes its force to its *brevity*. You will note that we have gone from an (empirical) **proposition**, which merely describes a coincidence (between the *brevity* of the sentence and its force) to a (theoretical) **thesis**, which causally links force and *brevity*.

10 **Thesis 2**. Such *brevity* has no *soul* but a material body—a body of language. It may be measured (by the number of syllables), it may be contrasted (the last sentence is deliberately laconic, in strong contrast, in both rhythm and length, with the preceding sentences). In short, this last sentence is meant, not merely to be read, but to be uttered, or even shouted, *au gueuloir* as Flaubert used to say. In the case of this passage, reading is always also reading aloud.

11 **Thesis 3**. This material body has one striking characteristic: it is the product of a subversion of Standard English. I do not know whether this is a (theoretical) **thesis** or an (empirical) **proposition**, but I know that if I found such a sentence in a student's prose, I would underline it in petulant red. The following **propositions** are a description of this subversion (which consists in the literal breaching of a few elementary rules of grammar).

12 **Proposition 6**. In the last sentence of the passage, there are no articles. This, of course, contributes to the *brevity* of the text, through ellipsis.

13 **Proposition 7**. In the last sentence of the passage, there is no copula, with the same consequent *brevity*.

14 **Proposition 8**. In the last sentence of the text, meaning has been integrally preserved. Grammatical dereliction does not produce semantic uncertainty. This is an interesting conclusion, well deserving its own **thesis**.

15 **Thesis 4**. Not all forms of agrammaticality ruin a text (as is the case in etymological delirium, when the text leaves the straight furrow of the construction of meaning). Some actually contribute to its construction: this we call style, at least in the definition of Gilles Deleuze (1993), who claims that style stutters language, through rolling and pitching.

16 **Thesis 5**. In such positive agrammaticality does *brevity* meet *wit*, but not in the sense of Sigmund Freud, the celebrated humorist—not through *double entendre*, allusion and play on words (see his *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, 1960). *Wit* in this case is not the product of semantic short-circuiting, but of the very laconicism of the expression. By *soul* in the axiom we mean essence: *brevity* is the essence of *wit*.

17 **Proposition 8**. Actually, the passage is not an instance of agrammaticality. It is written in the West Indian English of Trinidad, one of the New Englishes. Sam Selvon started writing his novel in Standard English, but he soon desisted since, as he says, "it did not work". The passage quoted (there is a **thesis** implicit in this) justifies his decision.

18 **Proposition 9**. Nevertheless, Standard English is present in the passage, albeit implicitly. The vast majority of Selvon's potential readers are not familiar with Trinidad English, but all of them understand Standard English, even if their mother tongue is another dialect or another language. At this point, we may specify our problem.

19 **Problem (now specified)**. If the decision to write in Trinidadian English (which is not the same dialect as the local creole) gives the *chute* its *brevity* and force, which amount to a form of *wit*, how can the clash of dialects (overt West Indian English and covert Standard English) be the *cause* of such *brevity* and *wit*?

20 **Thesis 5**. Trinidadian English allows the last sentence of our passage to convey not merely a semantic content but also an illocutionary force, which Standard English could not convey.

21 **Proposition 10**. In order to establish this, we need a translation of the sentence into Standard English: *the only problem is that Harris's face is black*.

22 **Proposition 11**. Were the text written in Standard English, this last sentence would be a good instance of a *chute*, deserving praise for its *wit*, and even for its *brevity*. However, it is obvious that the actual sentence, as we read it in the quoted passage, deserves the same praise, only to a much higher degree, just as it is obvious that, according to **Thesis 1**, the increase in *wit* is due to the increase in *brevity*, if I may say so. This, however, needs further justification.

23 **Thesis 6**. The West Indian dialect does not only convey an illocutionary force, it also produces a perlocutionary effect on the reader.

24 **Thesis 7**. The illocutionary force captures the reader (the reader experiences a language event, in the strongest sense of the term) and the perlocutionary effect is one of exhilaration (this is the typical effect of *wit*). The combination of force and effect interpellates both the character (whose conceit is exposed) and the reader (who feels exhilarated).

25 **Thesis 8**. If the West Indian dialect conveys a force and produces an effect, it is because this dialect of English illustrates, although in a distorted fashion, what Jakobson (1960) calls the "poetic function" of language.

26 **Proposition 12**. We remember that, among the six functions of language distinguished by Jakobson, there is a "poetic function", the effect of which is to project the paradigmatic onto the syntagmatic axis. We also remember that his canonical example is the slogan for the Eisenhower campaign, "I like Ike", which is more notable for the obsessive repetition of its phonemes than for its political brilliance.

27 **Thesis 8 (extended)**. In the last sentence of Selvon's text, we would be hard put to state that the paradigmatic is projected onto the syntagmatic, as is the case in the Eisenhower slogan, where the paradigm of vowels and consonants is deployed, through repetition, on the syntagmatic axis. In fact, the opposite is true: the markers of syntagmatic linking have vanished—what traditional grammar used to call the "tool words" (*les mots outils*): article, copula and genitive affix. The only marker of syntagmatic order left is the order of words, which is enough to preserve meaning. It is not so much a case of the disappearance of syntagmatic linking as of its maximal abbreviation, which of course is a fine instance of our **axiom** (kindly provided by the editors). We are still within the scope of the poetic function which appears not to be relevant, as its main characteristic is that *form* dominates *meaning* (both the projection

of the paradigmatic axis onto the syntagmatic and the dissolution of the syntagmatic axis prevent me from forgetting the *form* of the utterance when I seek access to its *meaning*).

28 **Thesis 9**. The West Indian dialect has a *poetic* effect on the Standard dialect. This thesis suggest a solution to my **problem (now specified)**: the clash of dialects is a form of poetic subversion of the Standard dialect by a dialect that is socially and politically dominated by other dialects. This is a case of what Deleuze and Guattari (1975) call a process of minoration (of the major dialect by the multiplicity of minor dialects). In the case of our text, such minoration takes the form of an abbreviation of the syntagmatic linkage (*brevity*), which animates the text (it gives it its *soul*) by conveying an illocutionary force and a perlocutionary effect of exhilaration (*wit*). With the last sentence of our quoted passage, we come as close as we possibly can to the **solution** of our initial **problem**.

29 **Proposition 13**. Thesis 9 may be illustrated by a host of texts in contemporary literature in English: from Dylan's *Under Milk Wood* (1954) to Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) and Ken Saro Wiwa's *Sozaboy* (1985).

30 **Proposition 14**. Were not this text structurally laconic, I could provide numerous other instances of this poetic subversion through minoration in Selvon's novel. It would show that abbreviation, as might be expected, is not the only form of poetic subversion of Standard English.

31 **Thesis 10**. I would submit (such generalization must be taken as a provocation) that postcolonial Englishes (what goes by the name of *New Englishes*) keep the English language alive. It follows from this that postcolonial novels are the future of the English novel, even as Aragon said that woman is the future of man.

32 **Thesis 11**. I may add that if *brevity* is the source of *wit* through an operation of interpellation (see **Thesis 7**), this opens the way to a philosophy of language other than the usual or mainstream one—a philosophy of language centering on the linguistic *agon*, in which the primary function of language is not to communicate information but to exert a force that interpellates subjects in the respective positions in which they find themselves. But it would need a whole book to establish this.

33 I am afraid my text has not kept its promise of homology between content and form, as stated in **Thesis 1**. Rather than adding supplementary **theses**, what I need at this point is another text, which will, spectacularly and definitively, illustrate the **axiom**.

34 **Proposition 15**. Here is another text:

w w w w.

35 **Proposition 16**. This French poem by Georges Perec is composed of a single alexandrine.

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ABSTRACTS

This paper studies the following axiom: 'brevity is the soul of wit' through a series of 11 theses and 16 propositions. It takes as proof an extract from Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956). The author suggests that if brevity is the source of wit thanks to a process of interpellation, this opens the way to a novel philosophy of language, one which centers on the linguistic *agon*, in which the primary function of language is not to communicate information but to exert a force that interpellates subjects in the respective positions in which they find themselves.

Cette contribution examine l'axiome suivant : « *brevity is the soul of wit* », au travers de 11 thèses et 16 propositions qui s'appuient sur une analyse d'un extrait du roman de Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (1956). L'auteur montre que si *brevity* entraîne *wit* par une opération d'interpellation, cela engage une autre philosophie du langage que l'habituelle ou la dominante — une philosophie du langage centrée sur l'agonistique, dans laquelle la première fonction du langage n'est pas de communiquer de l'information mais d'impulser une force pour interpeller des sujets à leurs places respectives.

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Mots-clés: pragmatique, philosophie du langage, agon, interpellation, Selvon Sam, brièveté, langage, Trinidad
Keywords: pragmatics, philosophy of language, agon, interpellation, Selvon Sam, brevity, language, Trinidad

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Language (2002), *The Force of Language* (2004), *A Marxist Philosophy of Language* (2006), *Badiou and Deleuze Read Literature* (2010).

Short and sweet? Structuring Humor and Morality in American Sitcoms

Shannon Wells-Lassagne

1 The situation comedy is perhaps the most successful of television's short forms, particularly in the United States. It was among the first formats to appear on the small screen, adapted directly from radio sitcoms of the period, and its popularity has never since waned in the American television landscape. This article hopes to examine how the characteristic brevity of the form, and the rapid-fire nature of its humor, is in fact coupled with a slower-paced desire for moral lessons—a soul to accompany its wit. The tension between fast and slow, between humor and morality, will be shown as both a staple of the sitcom, and an ever-evolving relationship within the genre.

Sitcoms, triviality and moral conformity

2 The sitcom has always been characterized by its limited scope: beyond its traditional 30-minute length—today the equivalent of 22 minutes to accommodate commercials—, beyond its limited stage sets used repeatedly for both financial and traditionally aesthetic reasons, the sitcom has always concerned itself with the trivial. Perhaps the most popular sitcom of recent years, *Seinfeld* (NBC, 1989-1998), famously insisted it was a show about nothing, about the pettiest details of everyday life, from preferred brands of food to the ethics of using handicapped parking. Though *Seinfeld* remains most outspoken about its obsession with trivia, the series in fact simply exaggerated one of the founding principles of the situation comedy: its humor is rooted in the mundane nature of the everyday. In blatant contrast to that other successful product of the late twentieth century, the science fiction extravaganza, there is no epic scale, no death-defying incidents, no saving the world.[1]

3 However, sitcoms have also often had a tendency to conformity, to seemingly enforcing a *status quo*. Once television became widespread,[2] sitcom aesthetic traditions, for

example, remained fairly similar throughout the first 50-odd years of its history, with the half-hour format, the flat lighting that allows for both close-ups and wider shots without changing lighting cues, and the requisite studio audience and recorded laugh track before multiple cameras. Likewise, the conformity of the sitcom is often social, apparent in the world presented to the viewer, which was long an idealized one, especially in terms of gender roles and middle-class social expectations.[3] Exceptions existed, of course; aesthetically, we can mention the single-camera sitcoms of the 60s such as *The Andy Griffith Show, I Dream of Jeannie* or *Hogan's Heroes*, though these shows still functioned within the half-hour format and with a recorded laugh track.[4] Another exception to the rule of conformity from a social standpoint was *The Honeymooners* (CBS, 1955-1956), an early example of working-class characters living without the traditional connubial bliss. These examples are rare, however, and whatever these sitcoms' impact on television history today,[5] they met with limited success at the time. It is only with the turn of the century that these traditions started to be subverted again, notably with the absence of a laugh track and a single-camera format which has been associated with increased realism in series such as *Malcolm in the Middle, Curb Your Enthusiasm,* or *Scrubs,* a fashion that continues to be common today.

4 In a recent work on the sitcom, Saul Austerlitz gives social justifications for conformity of early productions:

> The sitcom, emerging at the tail end of the 1940s alongside the television itself, bore witness to the conformism borne of the horrors of the Second World War. A generation forged in the fire of the war sought placidity and sameness on the homefront: stable nuclear families, a nation of identically constructed Levittowns. Television was a product of the same enforced consensus. It would mirror America, not necessarily as it was, but as it should be: peaceable, middle-class, eternally unchanging. (Austerlitz 8)

5 Though clearly this ideal America was essentially only to be found onscreen, whatever the justification for orthodoxy, it manifested itself not only in the characters represented in the popular sitcoms of yore, but also in the moralities offered by these shows. Adepts of the genre are well aware of the tendency of TV parents to lecture their fictional children on the lessons to be learned from today's episode, whether it is *The Brady Bunch* learning the lesson (ABC, 1969-1974), or that little rascal the Beav' from *Leave it to Beaver* (CBS, 1957-1958; ABC, 1958-1963). A characteristic example from *The Brady Bunch* shows wide-eyed, innocent Cindy get her weekly dressing-down:

> [Father Mike Brady puts his hand on daughter Cindy's shoulder, leads her over to a chair.]
> MIKE: I think the time has come for a little one-sided discussion, here. Hop up there. [Cindy sits on the chair.] I want you to listen to me very carefully. [Slow tinkling music begins in the background as he speaks, close-up on Cindy's face as she listens solemnly, then on Mike as he resumes talking.] Cindy, you know, you've done a very bad thing with your tattling.
> CINDY: Yes, Daddy.
> MIKE: I know it's difficult for a little girl to know what to say, and what not to say. Grown-ups have that same problem. But you have to learn when to keep quiet.
> CINDY: But what if someone asks me where Mommy is? Can't I tell them?
> MIKE: Yes of course you can.
> CINDY: Even if she's hugging the postman? [slight laughter in background]
> MIKE: Cindy, the point is that you are not to tattle about other people's business any more. [switch from shot-reverse shot of two actors to medium shot where they both appear] Now I mean never. 'Cause if you do, you're going to be punished. Is that clear? [back to close-up of Cindy]

CINDY: Yes, Daddy. [medium shot of both actors]
MIKE: Good, I hope so. (*The Brady Bunch*, "Tattle tale," Season 2, Episode 10, 1970, 12'38"-14'30". See video below)

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6 The show takes this minor indiscretion very seriously, complete with musical cues that systematically signal the impending weekly lesson, close-ups of the father and daughter as he lectures, and a lack of jokes in what is nonetheless considered a situation comedy. If this was all there was to the sitcom, a rigid enforcement of aesthetic and societal norms with a morality solemnly attached, one might reasonably wonder at their popularity. The situation comedy is a genre, however, where the idea of paradox is implicit in almost every aspect. Thus, though the idea of conformity to the sitcom aesthetic was almost uniformly upheld, it was accompanied by a constant questioning of its own status as televised entertainment, both through its content—be it *The Dick Van Dyke Show*'s protagonist (CBS, 1961-1966), a writer for a television variety show, or Lucy's constant attempts to become a famous TV star in *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951-1957)—, or through those very traditions within which it is confined, as we can see even in the somewhat limiting definition that Laurence E. Mintz gives of the genre:

> Sitcoms are generally performed before live audiences, whether broadcast live (in the old days) or filmed or taped, and they usually have an element that might almost be metadrama in the sense that since the laughter is recorded (sometimes even augmented), the audience is aware of watching a play, a performance, a comedy incorporating comic activity. (Mintz 114)

7 The canned laughter that has come to be seen as the hallmark of traditional situation comedy is also a constant reminder that these aesthetics are just that, traditional artifices used by these comedies to induce laughter.

8 Likewise, the social norms that are seemingly consistently propagated by the sitcom are quickly undercut by the vast array of progressive values they suggest. One immediately thinks of the sitcoms of the 1970s, be it the many political sitcoms of producer Norman Lear—*All in the Family* (CBS, 1971-1979), *Maude* (CBS, 1972-1978), *The Jeffersons* (CBS, 1975-1985)—; or shows like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970-1977) or *Alice* (CBS 1976-1985), which depicted strong working women who didn't need a man's support; *MASH* (CBS, 1972-1983), demonstrating the horrors and absurdities of war and the successful mixture of the comic and the tragic; or the working class and minority concerns in *Sanford and Son* (NBC, 1972-1977) or *Good Times* (CBS, 1974-1979). However, even before the 1970s, this desire to subvert the norm was implicitly present in the rash of supernatural sitcoms like *The Munsters* (CBS, 1964-1966), *The Addams Family* (ABC, 1964-1966), *My Favorite Martian* (CBS, 1963-1966), *I Dream of Jeannie* (NBC, 1965-1970) in the 60s, depicting characters who did not conform to a norm, a visible minority. Such characters were depicted even farther back with the many immigrant comedies like *The Goldbergs* (CBS, 1949-1951) staging Jewish characters or in *Beulah* (ABC, 1950-1952), the first show with an African-American lead, which made it clear that conformity could exist according to different models, and was often only an overlay of normality with underlying weirdness.

Quick humor and moral soliloquies: a paradoxical dichotomy

9 From a structural standpoint, the moral conformity that is both characteristic of the genre and somewhat undermined within it seems in fact at odds with the very idea of the situation comedy. From *The Honeymooners* (CBS, 1955-1978) to *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009-present), show writers have relied on quick repartee and clever one-liners to keep the audience laughing. Unlike stand-up comedy, for example, which depends on extended riffing to set up a single punchline, the sitcom has traditionally demanded a much quicker output of humor, grounded in familiar situations and characters (both in the series itself and in relation to the experience of the audience).[6]

10 The rapid-fire nature of this fundamentally domestic comedy[7] is in marked contrast to the very serious aspects of the morally motivated soliloquies that intend to teach a lesson to characters facing situations the audience itself might be faced with, be it an overbearing mother-in-law (*Bewitched*, ABC, 1964-1972) or unemployment (*Roseanne*, ABC, 1988-1997)—or telling tales, of course. The disparity of extended principled soliloquies and bursts of humor, of soul and wit, constitute the crux of the paradoxical art form, whose unity stems from its relatability, whether it be in terms of inside jokes about the American *Zeitgeist* or the familiarity of its characters and setting. I would like to examine this structural dichotomy, both as it was established by classic sitcoms of the 50s and 60s, and as it has been redefined and subverted by more contemporary versions in shows like *Community* (NBC, 2009-present), *The Office* (NBC, 2005-2013), or *Parks and Recreation* (NBC, 2009-present).

11 One might almost say that this tension, both in mood and rhythm, can be personified by the dichotomy of characters in the sitcom. The lead characters, from solemn father Mike Brady, or any of his kin (from *Father Knows Best, Ozzy and Harriet, The Andy Griffith Show* and so on), or the strong but understanding women putting up with largely male hijinks (from Harriet of *Ozzy and Harriet*, or Laura in *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, to the long-suffering Jill in *Home Improvement*), are often straight men that act as foils to the zany sidekicks:

> sidekicks were the collective *deus ex machina* of the sitcom, setting into action the inevitable oil slick of chaos, and the hasty cleanup crews scrubbing the floors and wiping down the counters before the onset of the next disaster. The sitcom was devoted to a certain kind of star—one whose familiarity and affability encouraged viewers to return, week after week, for our scheduled time with them. But even the most appealing sitcom stars [...] required someone off whom they could bounce their comic ideas (Austerlitz 150)

12 The zaniness of the sidekick made the show funny, while the leading characters were the characters with whom we were meant to identify, the characters who provided the life lessons, the emotional content that may have slowed the pace, but provided shows with their moral center. Indeed, one of the classic sitcoms, *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, largely separated the two aspects of the sitcom by both character and place: Rob's job as a television writer on a variety show made his workplace the locus for comedy (literally), and his colleagues the zaniest of sidekicks, while his home life, his relationship with wife Laura and son Richie, were often the focus of the lesson to be learned that week, a slower-paced and more emotional story. The antithetical nature of comedy and emotion, of quips and extended monologues, was both confirmed and

subverted by a recurring story of Rob's fellow comedy writer Sally, who is incapable of domestic bliss largely because of her inability to stop cracking jokes:

> [Laura and Rob are seated on their couch at home with Sally's blind date, Laura's cousin Thomas, who is a lab assistant.]
> THOMAS: I'm afraid I'm a little nervous about this meeting.
> LAURA: Well Thomas, there's nothing to be nervous about, is there, Rob?
> ROB: [Grimacing, then shaking his head excessively; laughter heard in the background] No, no. I mean... [uneasily] Why be nervous? [laughter. The doorbell rings, and both Rob and Laura spring up anxiously. Laughter]
> LAURA: [loudly] There she is! [Laughter. They run to the door, then each turns away from it and pushes the other towards it, neither being willing to open the door and begin the blind date. Laura inhales deeply to calm herself, and opens the door. Laughter throughout. Laura speaks with excessive (and thus clearly feigned) enthusiasm] Hi, Sally!
> SALLY: Hi. [speaking very rapidly, all in one breath] Here's a plastic spaceship for Richie, and a 5 lb. box of candy for you, and let's not waste any more time, where is he? [Raucous laughter. She marches from the door to the couch where Thomas is waiting. Exaggeratedly polite] How do you do, I'm Sally Rogers. Are you still single? [Laughter]
> THOMAS: Am I still what?
> LAURA: Sally, this is my cousin, Thomas Edson.
> SALLY: [takes a beat, looks consideringly over at Thomas] Thomas... Edson? [camera on Rob, who abruptly stops smiling, realizing the joke that is coming]
> ROB: Oh, no!
> SALLY: Well, you did a great job on that light bulb, Tom! [laughter. Camera cuts to Rob, who closes his eyes in consternation.] I wanna talk [she pulls Thomas closer so that she can speak directly into his ear] I said I wanna talk about [end of line indecipherable underneath laughter from audience. Applause]
> ROB: Not Edison. Edson.
> SALLY: Oh, Edson. I thought he looked a little young for an old inventor. [she pokes him in the stomach and laughs (as does the audience)]
> THOMAS: [reaching behind him, pulling out his hat] I brought you these.
> SALLY: [looks at it, then dons the hat, shrugging] It's a bit small... [laughter]
> THOMAS: I meant these. [He picks up a bouquet of flowers and offers them to her.]
> SALLY: Oh. [She takes the flowers, and Thomas removes his hat from her head. Laughter] Oh, yes. Oh, of course! [She puts the flowers on her head in lieu of the hat] Oh, that's a much better fit. [Laughter]
> ROB: Sally, wouldn't you like to sit down?
> SALLY: Thank you.
> LAURA: How about an hors d'œuvre?
> SALLY: No, thank you, this [slapping Thomas's knee affectionately] is my little hors d'œuvre. [laughter. Camera cuts to Rob, biting his finger in anxiety]
> ROB: Wouldn't you like a piece of herring?
> SALLY: No thanks, it gives me hives.
> THOMAS: Herring gives you hives? Did your doctor ever tell you to try Chlorachlosine hydrochloride?
> SALLY: No, does it taste like herring? [laughter]
> THOMAS: No, it's a pill.
> SALLY: Oh, wonderful—I'll have a plate of herring pills! [laughter. Camera cuts to Rob, then Laura, both laughing uncomfortably]
> THOMAS: Actually it's a pill designed to relieve an allergic symptom. You see, Miss Rogers, your body—
> SALLY: Well if you're going to talk about my body, you'd better call me Sally! [laughter]
> THOMAS: I didn't mean your body, Miss Rogers, I was talking about the human body.

SALLY: *Human* body—what am I, a kangaroo!?! [laughter]
THOMAS: No, I didn't mean that at all! I hope you don't think I'd presume—
ROB: [abruptly standing up] Well, it's getting late [making a point of checking his watch] You see, it's—Time flies when you're having fun, doesn't it? [laughter] Come on, Sal, I'll drive you home. [he starts to pull Sally up, only to have Laura pull him back]
LAURA: You comedy writers! I'll just... uh... see to dinner! [she walks away, towards the kitchen]
ROB: [laughing] Excuse me, I'll see it with her. [he runs backwards, still facing Sally and Thomas, following Laura to the kitchen. Laughter. Cut to kitchen, Laura and Rob entering]
LAURA: All right, don't say it, don't say it.
ROB: It's not fair. 95% of the time you're right—when you're wrong will you please give me a chance to say so?
LAURA: All right, say so—but I may not be wrong.
ROB: Aww, honey, did you see what she's doing to that poor guy out there?
LAURA: I know, it's pretty awful, but maybe she'll calm down during dinner.
ROB: Gosh, I hope so. Any other guy would have punched her in the nose! (*The Dick Van Dyke Show*, "Sally and the Lab Technician," Season 1, Episode 3, 1961, 11'30"-14'43". See video below.)[8]

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13 When Laura sets Sally up with her cousin, the intrusion of the comic into the home setting is a source of stress for everyone (except the unsuspecting date). You can notice that the pace changes dramatically between Sally's incessant wisecracking and the quiet moment between the lead characters as they discuss the situation and comment on its impropriety afterwards, changing both characters and location to signal a change in tone (from pure comedy to a more serious bent).

14 When Sally later recognizes her inability to stop wisecracking—an inability that is both personal to the character, and of course structurally necessary to the very way the show functions—, emotion intrudes into the workplace, subverting the established dichotomy between the workplace, and Sally's association with pure comedy, and the home, with Laura, the wife, a locus for emotion and more subdued comedy.

SALLY: Hey, I sure had a wonderful time at your house last night, Rob.
ROB: Aw, I'm glad, Sal.
BUDDY: Hey, Rob told me you were in delightful form last night!
ROB: I told him you were the life of the party.
SALLY: Oh, boy, that's me... old life-of-the-party Sal. Jokes for any occasion. [Cut to Rob, looking concerned]
BUDDY: So tell me, how'd you like Laura's cousin?
SALLY: [looking down solemnly, then briefly up] I don't know.
BUDDY: Whaddya mean, you don't know?
SALLY: Well, he and I didn't get to talk very much. [laughter]
BUDDY: Come on, there were only the four of you!
SALLY: Well, I don't—
ROB: I think Sally means that Thomas didn't say much. [Sally nods, still looking down.]
SALLY: I didn't give him much chance to. Rob, are you sure there were no phone calls for me? [...] [musical cue, serious music] Well, fellas, whaddya say, get to work?
ROB: No, Sal, no use jumping right into it, if you'd like to wait for coffee, and take a look at the newspaper...

BUDDY: Yeah, why don't we have one of those breakfast breaks, say two, three hours? [laughter]
SALLY: What's the matter with you two?
BUDDY: We're just trying to pep you up. You look like a cheerleader for an accident. [laughter]
ROB: We just thought maybe you didn't feel like making any jokes today.
SALLY: Jokes? Oh, I wanna make jokes. Gotta make jokes. There's nothing I love more than making jokes. Didn't I make a bunch of great jokes last night, Rob? Oh boy, Buddy, you should have seen me. I was a small riot. I was so funny... I was so funny, Cousin Thomas laughed so hard, he almost smiled. [looks down, fighting back tears] I was so doggone funny... [she slams palms on desk] I couldn't stand myself! [she flees the room, serious music continuing throughout] (*The Dick Van Dyke Show*, "Sally and the Lab Technician," Season 1, Episode 3, 1961, 17'35''-19'47''. See video below.)

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15 Again we can notice a change of pace as Sally acknowledges her failings and makes explicit the idea that comedy is contrary to emotion: as we get to the moral of the story, the pace slackens considerably, the character speaks more and more slowly, the musical cue reinforces the seriousness of the moment, and the clip has only one clear joke (signaled as such by the laugh track). Though we may be surprised by the unexpected locale and character, both of which have previously been associated with pure comedy, to represent this emotional realization, the change of rhythm is invariable, underlining the dichotomy between slow-paced emotion with longer dialogue versus fast-paced quips and short repartee. In an interview by Dick Van Dyke (1998), the actor even suggested that this dichotomy was incarnated behind the scenes as well: Carl Reiner was the "master of comedy", while Sheldon Leonard was the "master of storytelling", and they would often be at odds.

Picking up the pace and lightening the tone

16 However, as the sitcom evolved, writers sought to pick up the pace and increase the comic output of their shows. One of the ways they chose to do that is by increasingly featuring outrageous secondary characters who could always reliably garner a laugh. Whether it be *Taxi* (ABC 1978-1982, NBC 1982-1983), whose straight man Alex (Judd Hirsch) was slowly pushed into the wings by secondary characters like Latka (Andy Kaufman) and Iggy (Christopher Lloyd), or *Happy Days* (ABC 1974-1984), where the family fun of the Cunningham family gave way to the increasing importance of Henry Winkler's "The Fonze", the sidekicks slowly took over the screens.

17 As such, one of the results of this attempt to increase pacing was the creation of ensemble shows where there is no clear-cut lead, no straight man with whom the viewer is supposed to sympathize, but rather a group of quirky individuals. One could argue that no one character acts as straight man to the others in *Friends* (NBC, 1994-2004), for instance, especially in its later seasons, and Seinfeld definitely eschewed any sane character, preferring to demonstrate the neuroses of each member of the crazy quartet. This trend perhaps culminated with *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS, 2007-present), where the ensemble is a cast of misfits—those who argue Penny is "normal"

have forgotten that the aspiring actress-cum-waitress is played for laughs both in her lack of career prospects and her inability to understand geek culture.

18 The importance of the lesson drawn from the events of the sitcom was also affected by this desire to pick up the pace: increasingly sitcoms came to attempt to inject the morality with some form of humor, to limit the change of pace and tone that we've seen in the examples of both *The Brady Bunch* and *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. Thus, the 80s and 90s featured shows whose morality was not undermined in content, but whose tone could be lightened through context or characterization. In *Home Improvement* (ABC, 1991-1999), for example, neighbor Wilson is a fount of knowledge for Tim, the clueless lead—to the extent that the miscommunication between the two is a source of comedy even as the moral itself remains intact:

> [Wilson is hidden behind a telescope, where he is admiring the night sky; on the other side of the fence, Tim is putting away a garden hose.]
> TIM: I don't know what gets into me. I had a simple project, I had to replace a sink. Then I rip out the wall, boom, bam, I got pipes everywhere, water flowing out, I got water mains shut off—I can't stop this.
> WILSON: Well, Tim, you're probably just responding to the visceral male urge to create. [laughter]
> TIM: Visceral... vis-vis... visceral?
> WILSON: Let's just say, gut need.
> TIM: Yeah, that's exactly what it feels like, it's a visceral gut thing. [laughter] I like to create, Wilson—everything I do, I want to make bigger and better.
> WILSON: [now facing Tim, but hidden behind fence] Well, Tim, this obsessive desire to create partly happens because men feel inferior to women.
> TIM: [in utter bewilderment] Huh?
> WILSON: It's because we can't bear children.
> TIM: Nah, I don't mind the boys that much. [laughter]
> WILSON: No no no, Tim. What I mean is... women can give birth and we can't. [...] Perhaps one of the reasons you get so involved with your projects is that you want to create something as wondrous as human life.
> TIM: That's a neat thought, Wilson. But the way this project is going, I think giving birth would have been easier. [...] [Tim explains Wilson's reasoning to his wife Jill]
> JILL: I'm sorry I got mad and left.
> TIM: It's OK [...] I can't give birth. [laughter] It's a problem in my gut with a viscral [sic] thing [laughter]. It's really, really, hard to explain.
> JILL: Don't try. (*Home Improvement*, "Bubble, Bubble, Toil and Trouble", Season 1, Episode 9, 1991, 18'-20'50". See video below.)

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19 journals.openedition.org/angles/2096

20 The neighbor-philosopher Wilson is a figure of abstraction—his face is always hidden in the series—and his very conceptual reasoning for Tim going overboard on his remodel of their bathroom provides humor, first through its excess, and then through its garbled reinterpretation by Tim. The show retains the moral center of the series, the long speech, but mines that speech for laughter to increase the pacing of the episode.

21 Another show from the 1980s and 90s, *Designing Women* (CBS, 1986-1993), also makes an individual character the mouthpiece for the majority of the series' moral lessons: the cast features four women working at an interior design company in Atlanta, Georgia, but it is Julia Sugarbaker (Dixie Carter) whose fiery speeches provide the moral center:

RAY DON: Excuse me, but you ladies look like you're in need of a little male companionship.
JULIA: Trust me when I tell you that you have completely misassessed the situation at this table.
RAY DON: Aaah... sense of humor, I like that. [...] Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Ray Don Simpson.
JULIA: There's no need for introductions, Ray Don, we know who you are.
RAY DON: You do?
JULIA: Of course. You're the guy who's always where women gather or try to be alone. You want to eat with us when we're dining in hotels, you want to know if the book we're reading is any good, or if you can keep us company on the plane. [Ray Don attempts to respond, and Julia continues, undaunted] And I want to thank you, Ray Don [laughter], on behalf of all those women in the world for your unfailing attention and concern. But read my lips, and remember, as hard as it is to believe, sometimes, we like talking just to each other, and sometimes, we like just being alone. [applause]
RAY DON: OK, I can take a hint. [he rises from the table] You want a little girl talk. I'll just make a couple of phone calls, be right back. (*Designing Women*, Pilot, Season 1, Episode 1, 1986. 13'00"-15'16". See video below.)[9]

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22 This monologue was from the pilot episode of the series, and established both the form and content of the series to come: the idea of women speaking amongst themselves without the need for a man was a recurrent one in the show, given that the focus was always on the friendship of the four women and not their male love interests, and Julia delivered at least one sermon per episode. As in *Home Improvement*, there are obvious efforts made to keep the moral lesson from slowing the pacing of the show. Indeed, Dixie Carter's dramatic and rapid-fire delivery does not really deaden the pace; the desultory conversation that precedes it means that the moral does not cause delivery to flag, but arguably actually increases the tempo, while her feigned civility and veiled mockery induce laughter at the expense of her hapless victim (who has been carefully depicted as a misogynist villain entirely worthy of such scorn). Clearly, the tension between humor and emotion, between monologue and one-liner, was identified and problematized by these late twentieth-century sitcoms.

23 Other aspects of the traditional structure of the sitcom have also had an effect on the quick pacing of contemporary shows. The new popularity of single-camera sitcoms may not appear to necessarily impact their pacing, but an article in *The Atlantic* demonstrates the sharp contrast in the number of jokes per minute between the shows with multiple cameras and the new, single-camera fictions:

- 1. *30 Rock* 7.44
- 2. *New Girl* 7.11
- 3. *Parks and Recreation* 6.97
- 4. *The Office* 6.65
- 5. *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* 6.59
- 6. *Friends* 6.06
- 7. *The Big Bang Theory* 5.80
- 8. *Modern Family* 5.68
- 9. *Family Guy* 5.20
- 10. *South Park* 5.03

- 11. *Frasier* 4.09
- 12. *Curb Your Enthusiasm* 3.41 (Visram 2014)

24 It is significant that the top five with the rapid-fire delivery of jokes are all single-camera sitcoms, while more traditional sitcoms with laugh tracks, like *Friends, The Big Bang Theory,* or *Frasier,* all score somewhat lower. The author suggests that pacing differs significantly according to the type of humor attempted, but from a more mechanical standpoint, one could simply say that a laugh track automatically slows down the pace.[10] Even in more recent series such as *Friends* which actually speed up the action by having a third plot each episode,[11] an excerpt of an episode without the laugh track shows how the actors must delay their reactions to insert the studio audience and pre-recorded laughs, making these moments of "dead air" sound stilted, and revealing the slower pace of the traditional laugh-track sitcom ("The One after Vegas", Season 6, episode 1, 1999, see video below).

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Undermining the idea of a moral

25 Beyond this, there has been a tendency to not only *mine* the moral lesson for humor, as in the attempts of the 80s and 90s to inject the moral with comedy, but to slowly *under*mine it, questioning its very basis. As the leading characters have become less prevalent in the current landscape of comic television and the antics of characters who would formerly be sidekicks take center stage, the very idea of a moral, a life lesson, has begun to be questioned. When Penny becomes addicted to video games in *The Big Bang Theory*, for instance, Leonard's efforts to teach Penny a life lesson simply make him the butt of the joke, not the moral authority:

> LEONARD: Okay, um, here's the thing, um, sometimes people, good people, you know, they start playing these games and they find themselves through no fault of their own, you know, kind of, addicted.
> PENNY: Yeah, get to the point, I'm about to level up here.
> LEONARD: Well, i-i-i-it's just if a person doesn't have a sense of achievement in their real life it's easy to lose themselves in a virtual world where they get a false sense of accomplishment.
> PENNY: Yeah, jabber jabber jabber, okay boys, Queen Penelope's back online. (*Big Bang Theory*, "The Barbarian Sublime", Season 2, Episode 3, 2008)

26 As is its wont, *The Simpsons* goes even further in questioning the very idea of a didactic lesson to be gleaned from the family's antics. In an episode entitled "Blood Feud", the characters attempt vainly to find a moral to their adventures:

> MARGE: The moral is, a good deed is its own reward.
> BART: We got a reward. The head is cool.
> MARGE: Well, then. I guess the moral is, no good deed goes unrewarded.
> HOMER: Wait a minute. If I hadn't written that letter—we would've gotten nothing.
> MARGE: Well. The moral is, the squeaky wheel gets the grease.
> LISA: Perhaps there is no moral.
> HOMER: Exactly! Just stuff that happened. (*The Simpsons*, "Blood Feud", Season 2, Episode 22, 1991)

27 Likewise, *The Office* is remarkable in that its lead character, the self-appointed "World's Greatest Boss," Michael Scott, offers the traditional moral speeches expected in that role, but is so morally ambiguous as to undercut his point—which of course makes it funny, but also less moral. In the episode entitled "Diversity Day" (Season 1, Episode 2, 2005), Michael's attempt at conducting a seminar on racial sensitivity is doubly undermined, first because it turns out to be a management initiative ordered in reaction to his own actions (offending the office staff with an ill-conceived rendition of Chris Rock's stand-up comedy), and then because his suggested activity actually fosters racial stereotypes (asking his workers to treat each other as if they were members of a given race). Whatever his intentions, Michael Scott fails as a moral authority, and it is that very failure that inspires laughter.

28 Another recent sitcom, *Community*, also bucks the trend of an ensemble of quirky characters. It has a clear lead character who might provide moral leadership: Jeff Winger is handsome, cool, and intelligent—but he's also largely amoral, returning to the titular community college to get the Bachelor's degree he lied about having in his previous life as a lawyer. The pilot episode features Jeff explaining "I discovered at a very early age that if I talk long enough, I can make anything right or wrong. So either I'm God, or truth is relative. And either way, Boohyah!" (*Community*, "Pilot", Season 1, Episode 1, 2009) In other words, though Jeff may be the speaker of monologues in the show, he is clearly not the moral center. Another episode thematizes the idea that these moral life lessons, complete with rousing soundtrack, are essentially empty, interchangeable, and they become a source of laughter rather than a source of reflection:

> JEFF: [Cue inspirational music] Look, we've known each other for almost two years now. And in that time, I've given a lot of motivational speeches.
> [cut to group in haunted house, cobwebs all over them]
> But they all have one thing in common. They're all
> [cut to group with Pierce on his knees, a man with a gun to his temple]
> different. These drug runners aren't going to execute Pierce because he's racist.
> [cut to group in front of a steam engine]
> It's a locomotive that runs on us.
> [cut to group in front of a wooden fence and lake, carrying rifles]
> And the only sharks in that water
> [cut to haunted house]
> are the emotional ghosts that I like to call fear
> [cut to Caesar Salad day at the cafeteria]
> anchovies
> [cut to camping trip]
> fear
> [cut to group in an asylum, all in strait jackets]
> the dangers of ingesting mercury.
> [cut to group in their underwear in front of a rundown motel]
> Because the real bugs aren't the ones in those beds.
> [cut to Caesar Salad Day in the cafeteria]
> There's no such thing as a free Caesar salad, and even if there were
> [cut to the group in Abed's dorm room, all wearing capes]
> *The Cape* still might find a second life on cable, and I'll tell you why:
> [cut to the group with drugrunners, in Spanish]
> el corazon del agua es verdad/the heart of water is truth
> [cut to group with shotguns in front of lake]
> that water is a lie!
> [cut to group in asylum]

> Harrison Ford is irradiating our testicles with microwave satellite transmissions!
> [back to study room]
> So maybe we are caught in an endless cycle of screw-ups and hurt feelings. But I choose to believe it's just the universe's way of molding us into some kind of supergroup.
> TROY: Like the Travelling Wilbury's.
> JEFF: Yes, Troy, like the Travelling Wilbury's of pain. Prepared for any insane adventure life throws our way. And I don't know about you, but I'm looking forward to every one of them."
> [The different members of the group murmur "that's nice", "Aww, Jeff", and all move back to hug Jeff.] (*Community*, "Paradigms of Human Memory", Season 2, Episode 21, 2011. 16'30''-18')

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29 The tension between quick repartee and long monologues is but one aspect of the many revolutions taking place in sitcoms in particular and in television in general, but it exemplifies the fine line that comedy walks—it must be familiar enough in content and form to allow the audience to identify with the characters or the situations, and it must provoke and innovate enough to surprise and delight the same audience to laughter. An episode of *Scrubs*, another single-camera fiction that eschews the laugh track in favor of more rapid-fire jokes, seems particularly relevant here. In one episode, lead character J.D., ER doctor and sitcom fanatic, meets a writer from the sitcom *Cheers*—and discovers the man has cancer. His commentary suggests that whatever the changes, the sitcom acknowledges its roots, and its need, above all, to entertain:

> J.D.: There are moments when we all wish life was more like a sitcom [...] unfortunately, around here things don't always end as neat and tidy as they do in sitcoms [...] at times like that, it's comforting to know there's something to pick your spirits up. (*Scrubs*, "My Life in Four Cameras", Season 4, Episode 17, 2005)

Short and sweet?

30 Whether it is classic or contemporary comedy, with a laugh track and a studio audience or without, the sitcom exists to make us feel good for the next half hour. And ultimately, the situation comedy does so by making us care for the characters who make us laugh. If the certainty of the all-knowing monologue is being questioned in a postmodern world, if it is revealed to be hollow and self-contradictory, as in *Community*, the emotion it engenders is no less necessary to bring the group and the audience back together. Whether there is a formal monologue or not, the push and pull between joke and emotion, between banter and confidences, between short and long, remains a structural force in TV sitcoms.

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NOTES

1. This association was borrowed from Ken Sanes (2014): "Sitcoms, on the other hand, draw us into a more modest world, descended not from mythology, and day and night dreams, as is science fiction, but from comedy of manners, vaudeville and our tacit perceptions of everyday life. Their theme is our inability to conquer our petty desires as we go about the minor tasks of the day."

2. The very early days of television were largely broadcast only to the Northeast of the United States (primarily New York City), and included experimentation in both form and content (breaking the fourth wall, questioning the domestic *status quo*, blurring boundaries between the sitcom and the variety show, etc.) that would only reappear in the 1990s and 2000s. See Dennis Tredy's talk on the subject (2015).

3. No doubt the normative nature of these representations and their tendency towards moral lessons is due to pressure from the Federal Communications Commission, which began debating the possible immorality of television and its need for strict monitoring and control in 1952. A copy of the FCC report is available online: https://apps.fcc.gov/edocs_public/attachmatch/DOC-308672A1.pdf.

4. This ended in the 1970s with the success of *All in the Family* until the turn of the century saw a return of the single-camera.

5. Though *The Honeymooners* and its brethren, like *The Goldbergs*, with working-class Jewish protagonists, insist on forgoing a certain number of what will later become sitcom traditions (a live audience for *The Goldbergs*, and a working-class setting for both), these sitcoms basically performed for a largely urban audience, and met with severe difficulties in terms of longevity and audience (and studio) reception. *The Honeymooners* only ran for one year as an independent show, while *The Goldbergs* ran for two before being dropped for political reasons and only being taken back on as a shorter sketch (15 minutes) under a different name and with less troublesome actors (Dalton & Linder 19).

6. See for example Mike Corke's analysis of the phenomenon in "The British Comedy Guide": "What should become clear is that what we are not laughing at are 'jokes' in the way we normally recognise and understand them. [...] A joke lasting one to two minutes comprises of a lead up and a punch line. The lead up is usually listened to in silence and the punch line triggers the laughter. A good stand-up comedian may evoke a few titters on the way (he might pull faces, speak in a funny voice, fall over, etc.) but the really worthwhile laugh always comes at the end. He does quite well if he can bring about, on average, just over one significant laugh per minute or tell four, maybe five, good jokes in a six-minute spot. For successful situation comedy the laughter frequency needs to be much higher, at between three or four per minute. Analysis of a 30-minute episode of a well-known series revealed 90 points of humour comprising 56 chuckles and 34 extended laughs."

7. Whether the sitcom takes place in the home or the workplace, it always involves a cast of characters that become a tight-knit group, a family by blood or by circumstance, and their concerns are largely everyday concerns, from *Happy Days* (ABC, 1974-1984), where the entire group of young characters comes to consider Mrs. Cunningham as their erstwhile mother, to *Brooklyn 99* (Fox, 2013-present), which parodies cop dramas but limits itself to very ordinary crimes, and where lead character Jake Peralta clearly sees his chief as a father figure.

8. Given that the focus will be on dialogue and pacing, I encourage readers to watch the excerpt for themselves.

9. As delivery of the lines is crucial to understanding the effect on pacing, I recommend viewing the excerpt directly.

10. Though this does not necessarily mean that it is less successful—the highest audience numbers belong to the shows that are dead center, i.e. *The Big Bang Theory* and *Friends.*

11. "The producers of *Friends* prefer that each episode has three storylines, which differs from most sitcoms that feature just two stories. Because of this decision, there are more scenes, but they're shorter, just like *E.R., Friends*'s Thursday night companion." (Owen 113)

ABSTRACTS

Seinfeld (NBC, 1989-1998), perhaps the most popular sitcom of recent years, famously insisted it was a show about nothing, about the pettiest details of everyday life. Though *Seinfeld* remains most outspoken about its obsession with trivia, the series in fact simply exaggerated one of the founding principles of the situation comedy: its humor is rooted in the mundane nature of the everyday. This focus on minutiae extends to the very nature of its humor; from *The Honeymooners* (CBS, 1955-1978) to *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009-present), show writers have relied on quick repartee and clever one-liners to keep the audience laughing. Interestingly, the rapid-fire nature of this fundamentally domestic comedy is in marked contrast to the very serious aspects of the sitcom, the morally motivated soliloquies that intend to teach characters a lesson. The disparity of bursts of humor and extended principled soliloquies constitute the crux of this paradoxical art form, whose unity stems from its relatability (whether it be in terms of inside jokes about the American *Zeitgeist* or the familiarity of its characters and setting). I would like to examine this structural dichotomy, both as it was established by classic sitcoms, and as it has been redefined and subverted by more contemporary versions.

Seinfeld (NBC, 1989-1998), dont le *sitcom* éponyme est sans doute l'un des plus populaires de ces dernières décennies, avait l'habitude de dire que c'était une émission sur rien, sur les détails insignifiants de la vie quotidienne. *Senfield* se manifeste avant tout par cette obsession pour ce qui est futile, mais en réalité, cette série ne fait qu'exacerber l'un des principes fondateurs du comique de situation, et son humour est ancré dans la banalité du quotidien. On retrouve ces aspects dans l'humour de ces émissions, et depuis *The Honeymooners* (CBS, 1955-1978) jusqu'à *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009-présent), les scénaristes se sont appuyés sur le sens de la répartie pour faire rire les spectateurs. De fait, il existe un écart entre les répliques comiques débitées à toute allure et les aspects plus sérieux du *sitcom,* à savoir les soliloques à teneur morale qui ont pour objet de donner une leçon aux personnages. La disparité entre l'humour et les principes moraux des longs soliloques constitue le cœur de cette forme artistique paradoxale, dont l'unité provient de sa « relatabilité » (qu'il s'agisse de blagues de connivence sur le *Zeitgeist* américain ou de la connaissance des personnages et du contexte). Cet article analyse cette dichotomie structurelle, s'intéressant à la fois à la manière dont les *sitcoms* classiques l'ont établie et à la manière dont elle a été redéfinie et subvertie par ses avatars contemporains.

INDEX

Keywords: sitcom, television, comedy, one-liners, moral, rhythm, humour
Mots-clés: sitcom, télévision, comédie, réplique, morale, rythme, humor

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Three Little Words and the Critical Argument of *The Best Show on WFMU*

Thomas Britt

1 Brevity is not the first word that comes to mind when thinking of comedian Tom Scharpling's *The Best Show on WFMU*.[1] A listener-supported show on an independent, free form radio station, *The Best Show* was on the air from 2000 to 2013 for three hours weekly. In a media age saturated with podcasts hoping to keep a listener engaged for twenty minutes, *The Best Show* defined long-form radio comedy for more than a decade as its popularity grew internationally through physical releases, streams and downloads.

2 Scharpling often summarized the content of his show as "three hours of Mirth, Music, and Mayhem".[2] The most memorable moments of *The Best Show* combined all three qualities at once, featuring madcap humor about music. "Rock, Rot & Rule"[3], the sketch that inaugurated the show years before its official launch, contained the key ingredients for the show's identity. The routine, performed over the phone like most of *The Best Show*'s interactions, was a preview or rough draft of the form and content that would come to define the comedy of Scharpling and his collaborator, musician/ comedian Jon Wurster.

3 On 19 November 1997, Scharpling interviewed Ronald Thomas Clontle, author of a book titled *Rock, Rot & Rule*. Clontle calls *Rock, Rot & Rule* "the ultimate argument settler," whose function is to categorize popular music into acts that rock, acts that rot, and acts that rule. His critical acumen, gleaned by talking to friends in Florida and Kansas, consists entirely of putting musicians into one of these three columns. The irony of Clontle's claim to settle arguments is that his interview has the opposite effect. It infuriates listeners. Impassioned music enthusiasts call in to criticize his methodology, but he cannot be bothered.

4 Unbeknownst to listeners, Clontle is a character played by Wurster. He and Scharpling have intricately scripted their interaction, creating a comedy of outrage among people who take music seriously. And therein lies the value of "Rock, Rot & Rule" as an influential instance of brevity in humor. Clontle's attention span is short. His method is

preposterously undercooked. His defense of that method is inarticulate. He denies individualism, defending his conclusions by citing public opinion. His overstatements are both comically to-the-point and incisive in exposing the potential for eternal argument—a hell of the critic's own making, but one in which only *his* critics simmer and suffer.

*

5 Clontle is a character that appeared in the relatively early years of the Internet's democratization of production, consumption, and reception. Yet his characterization is highly prescient with regard to the way in which the Internet has transformed the means and meanings of criticism. In Clontle, Scharpling and Wurster predict and anthropomorphize the deadlocking rhetoric of criticism that arises when information and opinion proliferate outside of traditional measures and loci of proficiency and perception. In this essay I explore the ways in which Clontle's reductive criticism humorously engages with the dilemma of assigning value to art, the behaviors and biases of the critic and the listener, and the circularity of criticism in the Internet age.

6 Within the double act of *The Best Show*, Scharpling was the more consistent straight man to Wurster's revolving series of outlandish characters. The host/caller relationship was an ideal platform for Scharpling and Wurster's style of comedy. As the host, Scharpling pretended to be in control, encouraging good taste and restraint. As the caller, Wurster exhibited a darkly comic defiance of that taste and restraint. Over the years, several of the phone calls between the two included (or concluded with) threats of violence directed at Scharpling from a Wurster character. That none of this was visible to the audience allowed the absurd interactions to grow limitlessly within the imaginations of listeners.

7 The fundamental joke at the center of the satirical "Rock, Rot & Rule" is to torpedo the tendency of contemporary music criticism to force hard categories of judgment for content that demands larger contexts and provokes strong expressions of subjectivity and personal taste. "Rock, Rot & Rule" preceded the ascendancy of *Pitchfork Media, Rotten Tomatoes* and *Metacritic*. Yet those publications' elevation of the numerical score or percentage rating above the textual bases for the numbers has ushered in the kind of critical landscape "Rock, Rot & Rule" sought to ridicule.

8 "Rock, Rot & Rule" is an influential instance of brevity in humor because Clontle's terse system and manner settle nothing. There is an enormous incongruity between his claim to have finished the conversation about music and the effects of that claim. In "The Nature of Critical Argument" from *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, Monroe Beardsley address the "problem" of interpreting "'good' and 'bad' in [...] aesthetic contexts," asserting that one way to understand the meaning of valuation is to examine "what critics actually mean when they use their value-terms, what definitions they would give if pressed, what rules of usage they tacitly follow" (471).

9 Thus to arrive at the meaning of any individual critic's assessment, one could work backward from the evaluation and into the means and methods that produced it.[4] Three minutes into the phone call, Scharpling attempts to interpret Clontle's argument with the following question: "So the book is basically you taking into account the musical scene out there, the whole spectrum of groups and whatnot?" It's a wide-open question, but Clontle responds with a terse "No." He then goes on to describe his

method, which was to question various friends and acquaintances in Lawrence, Kansas and Gainesville, Florida.

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10 Clontle repeatedly cites other homegrown sources of opinions in order to shift the burden of defining or defending his argument onto others, as if the critical evaluation/categorization in his book occurred independently of him. Yet even his most straightforward denial of responsibility for the results, "I'm not a critic, I'm more a compiler of opinions," involves his instrumental part in gathering those opinions toward a specific ranking that communicates a meaning. His deflection cannot erase his essential role.

11 That Clontle's essential role is one that sits outside of traditional sources of opinion or information further complicates his endeavor and its reception by Scharpling and listeners. In "The Authority of Music Criticism," Edward T. Cone identifies and defines these conventional, official authorities: "Just as the reviewer is basically a layman writing for other laymen, and the teacher a practicing musician training other musicians, so the critic is an informed music lover writing for other music lovers" (98). By design, the character Clontle is none of these. He is a layman who doesn't write. Nor is he a teacher or practicing musician. And never once does he seem to love music with any degree of emotional attachment. Additionally, despite publishing a book about popular music for mass cultural consumption, Clontle's endeavor fails to adhere to an inclusive methodology John Richardson has described as "almost an anti-methodology [...] amenable to a large number of theoretical impulses and disciplinary influences" (140).

12 Nevertheless, in addition to addressing Clontle as a critic responsible for the evaluation, Scharpling does try to parse the "definitions" and "rules of usage" involved in his criticism. Again Clontle fails to fully deal with the context of the question and his own culpability, citing "the opinion of the people". He lists acts from each category and justifies the categorization with distinctions that are arbitrary or nonsensical.

13 His list of acts that rock includes Ratt, L7, Nirvana, and Blue Oyster Cult. His list of acts that rule includes the Ramones, Everclear, and Puff Daddy. He concludes that the Beatles merely rock because they "had a lot of bad songs." Scharpling questioningly attempts to comprehend and confirm a framework that appears to collapse on itself — one in which a band "can rule without rocking" but "cannot rock without ruling." When asked to distinguish ruling from rocking, Clontle offers circular reasoning that begins and ends with the titular category: "A group that rules just has that extra oomph to push it into the echelon of ruling, of ruler-hood."

14 And at the moment in which this discussion of definitions becomes contentious, Clontle reiterates his description of the book as "the ultimate argument settler". Ten minutes into the call, what was at first a humorously incongruous phrase to promote the book becomes an oppositional phrase, opposite in meaning to the book's effect and antagonistic in its function within the phone call. In light of this disparity, Scharpling asks, "How is it that we're now having an argument over it?" Clontle responds, "That's up to you. The ball's in your court." His prior disavowal of the mechanisms of his critical evaluation is now joined by a denial of his active role in its effects.

15 Therefore the first quarter of the phone call's running time establishes Clontle's duplicity in owning critical evaluation. On one hand, he wants ownership over the book being published by Penguin, printed in large quantities and sold to the public. On the other hand, he refuses to own up to its content.

16 Daniel Mendelsohn of *The New Yorker*, while reflecting on critics who inspired him in his youth, observes that "the drama of how [critics] arrived at their judgments [...] involved two crucial elements" of "expertise" and "taste, or sensibility," which he defines as "the reagent that got you from the knowledge to the judgment". The second quarter of "Rock, Rot & Rule" penetrates more deeply into Clontle's lack of these characteristics.

17 A couple of throwaway comments earlier in the phone call were inaccurate but uncontested. For example, Clontle called Nirvana's generation-defining hit single "Smells Like Teen Spirit," "It Smells Like Team Spirit." But it is his erroneous assertion that the band Madness "started ska" that provokes the ire of a number of callers who begin to join the conversation. As this is the second act or middle section of the drama Scharpling & Wurster are creating, the pace of the complications quickens, and Clontle's heedlessness becomes more obvious in his responses to these respondents. His chronic brevity now plays like a symptom of his self-satisfaction and critical detachment.[5]

18 When a caller points out that ska originated in the 1950s (many years before Madness formed in 1976), Clontle says, "I don't think so." Another caller remarks that Clontle's approach to criticism is causing arguments. Clontle responds, "I disagree one hundred per cent," expertly and humorously conveying Beardsley's "Performatory Theory of critical argument" — "it is not a statement, but an act, it is not true or false, and therefore it cannot be the conclusion of an argument; in other words, it makes no sense to speak of giving reasons to establish its truth" (473).

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19 The layers of satirical meaning are numerous in Wurster's performance of a critic who is only interested in the act of concluding arguments, never constructing them. By declaring, "I disagree one hundred per cent," he is performing a response that would undo his own argument if he bothered to acknowledge the validity of the evaluation by others of his act of evaluation. The routine starts to resemble an ouroboros that repeats but never progresses. As one might imagine, this enrages unsuspecting listeners.

20 A particularly well-informed caller, whose expertise on the subject of ska would befit a critic (though she never refers to herself as one), urges Clontle to study the history of music. She recommends writers, such as Ira A. Robbins of the *Trouser Press Record Guide*, as thorough researchers from whom Clontle could learn. She gives an impassioned monologue on the importance of research, to which Clontle responds, "It's too late. It's already coming out. And I stand by every sentence in this book."

21 Clontle baits her in many other ways, but it is his refusal to learn or be informed, and his performance of that refusal, that characterizes him as antithetical to experts. Though he admits that a little of his own personal taste informs the rankings, he never expands on these tastes, beyond a blunt preference for acts with guitars and a low

opinion of pianos. And his defense of the book's "sentences" is itself baseless as the book consists of lists, not sentences and paragraphs.

22 What emerge in the third quarter of the call are listeners whose comparative expertise and well-honed tastes highlight the failures of this caricature of an everyman / establishment critic. By treating the existence and impending publication of his book as the destination for any conversation about music, Clontle acts as if he were free to ignore facts, to ignore history, and to ignore the role that taste plays in acquainting listeners with music and informing their judgments. In contrast, these callers are like Sir Donald Tovey's "ideal listener [...] not necessarily trained in music, but endowed with a willing ear to accept a musical experience and examine the results" (Rich 221-2).

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23 The culmination or cumulative meaning of a *Best Show* call is often a partial or full redefinition of the caller. Scharpling and Wurster are masters of the comic reversal and employ it as a dramatist would, to permanent effect within the narrative. One of the other highlights of their repertoire is "The Springsteen Book" from 2010. In this call, Wurster plays a Bruce Springsteen biographer who shares previously undisclosed details about the career of the rock star. Though a slight amount of the musical commentary is plausible, the call is, for the most part, an increasingly ridiculous portrait of Springsteen as a man obsessed with earning a living and preserving his blue-collar credibility.

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24 The reversal near the end of the call reveals the scholar to be a plumber who happened to pick up the phone and make up nonsense about Springsteen for nearly an hour. Afterwards, the "real" author joins the line for a few minutes, but he bores Scharpling so much that the host asks him to put the plumber back on the phone. When interviewed about the call for *The Best of the Best Show*, a retrospective box set issued in 2015 by Numero Group, Scharpling commented, "while trashy gossip-based rock books aren't my favorite, they are a million times better than an egghead book about rock" (90).

25 A call like "The Springsteen Book" allows us to understand another significant satirical thread of "Rock, Rot & Rule." It's easy to diagnose the problems of Clontle's approach to music criticism, which is woefully uniformed on most counts when judged by professional standards. And in its ordinariness, his criticism typifies a common man's way of responding to art. This is a quality that places "Rock, Rot & Rule" ahead of its time relative to the ubiquity of ordinary, unchecked critics online. The contemporary everyday critic is defined by his lack of expertise. To demand his credentials is ultimately pointless. Social media's encouragement of instinctive, commentary-free votes and likes and other affirmations has operationalized the cultivation of taste that requires little knowledge beyond the object being reacted to in the moment.

26 The plumber/expert of "The Springsteen Book" could be compared and contrasted to Clontle in this respect. His yarns about Springsteen are pure fiction, bereft of knowledge, and he uses words like "absolutely," "yeah," and "sure" to react to

Scharpling's questions about these stories. The brevity at the center of "The Springsteen Book" is that of an imaginative alternative history that could include anything and go anywhere. It is accommodating and thus avoids argument.

27 The agreeable plumber's brevity is positive and affirmative, which differs in value from Clontle's readiness to say no and disagree. Both present information as fact. Neither feels a responsibility to support those facts with reliable contexts. Clontle's assertions of impartiality are particularly ironic, as his conclusions are predicated on subjectivities so ingrained that they are thoroughly unexamined. We could consider Roger Parker's connection of official history to fact in order to better understand this fundamental contradiction within Clontle.

> Our musicologist past over the last fifty or so years has been punctuated by exhortations that present themselves as unproblematic, as a 'common-sense' view: 'just' attend to the facts; 'just' listen to the music. Perhaps the covert ideology nesting in that small word 'just' has by now been sufficiently exposed. (Parker 9)

28 Many of the professional class of critics that Scharpling describes as "egghead[s]" hold to neither the plumber's positivity nor Clontle's negativity but to the ideal of justness. While the publications that result from a commitment to justness are more accurate by some measures, "that small word" provides cover for any number of accusations one could make about the publications. In this way, Clontle is evocative of the establishment critic. He just happens to be a lot more fun than they are because he exists *within* a send-up of music criticism.

*

29 The turn within the final section of "Rock, Rot & Rule" is not as sharp as that of "The Springsteen Book." That is to say, Clontle is not revealed to be an impersonator. Consistent with all of the calls that will follow in the Scharpling and Wurster phonography, Wurster doesn't break character and reveal himself. However, the contentious conversations with callers that take place in the third quarter of the call transition into an implicit defense or validation of Clontle's place within the culture of commentary.

30 They may be "ideal listeners," but many of these callers reveal biases or weaknesses that undo their own arguments against this "argument settler." Several of them criticize Clontle's research locations, as if Kansas and Florida couldn't possibly be representative of tastes in popular music. This assumption of insufficiency or provinciality, which holds that New York City is *necessarily* better than Lawrence, Kansas for assessing public tastes, is as fallacious as anything Clontle asserts. That Clontle is a fiction and the callers are real indicts the callers, whose true colors emerge in reaction to an act.

31 Callers also react with curiosity, providing their own lists of groups not yet mentioned and soliciting Clontle's ratings for those groups. The impetus for these solicitations might be to have a laugh or to test the critic's audacity. Nevertheless the callers are seeking his opinion, and by doing so substantiate his status as an authority. In fact, the call ends with an outright declaration of vindication. A caller corrects Clontle's claim that Stereolab didn't use guitars, and the critic counters that "Time will vindicate me." Logically speaking, short of a remix or rerecording, time could not remove guitars from songs that contained them and somehow retroactively vindicate Clontle's erroneous

claim. But he never once builds his arguments on logic, so why start now? As he has already stated, "It's too late." The book deal is done. That much is true.

32 Clontle's willful ignorance of historical circumstances *and* simultaneous belief in time as a vindicator add yet another subtle strand to the routine's playfulness concerning arguments in aesthetic studies. Musician David Byrne, pushing back against the "absolute nonsense" advocated by critics and thinkers like Clive Bell and David Hume, summarizes their belief in the timelessness of "great" works of art in the following manner: "The implication is that great work should, if it is truly great, *not* be of its time or place. We should not be aware of how, why, or when it was conceived, received, marketed or sold. It floats free of this mundane world, transcendent and ethereal" (Byrne 277). Byrne asserts that, as with the writings of Shakespeare, time often makes a difference in the way art is evaluated. Clontle is no great critic or thinker or practitioner, but his contradictory positions on temporality convey the whole spectrum of its importance to cultural and critical reception. By both rejecting and embracing time as a key factor in reception, Clontle synthesizes Bell and Byrne.

33 Scharpling comes to Clontle's defense when an agitated caller joins the conversation to question the critic's role as an arbiter of taste. The host compares those who disagree with Clontle to disgruntled listeners of the radio station: "We get this argument with WFMU a lot [...] if you don't like it, you could just turn it off, go off the dial and see if there's something else you're interested in. If you're not interested in this, I guess you could buy another rock book."

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34 The natural extension of Scharpling's argument is that those moved to anger over the critical space Clontle occupies could not only buy another book, but could become critics themselves. Perhaps the most prescient aspect of "Rock, Rot & Rule" is its performative foreshadowing of the relationship between individuality and universality in the Internet age. Clontle embodies this relationship because he is in the act of making universal claims universally available, but steadfastly denies the subjective undercurrents of those claims.

35 This conflict is pertinent to the history of music because "in the earlier periods of the history of music, universality was something demanded of the musician. He had no right to follow his inclinations or his impulses" and yet "new music" threatens to "[appear] [...] without predetermined concepts, divorced from contact with the past" (Einstein 328-331). The dilemma Einstein describes as being true for the modern musician is shared by anyone attempting to respond to modern music, especially those who use the Internet to publish their responses.

36 So the contemporary question is not whether universality is possible. In terms of dissemination of musical content and critical thought pertaining to it, universality has been achieved (or as Clontle might say, "settled.") Virtually anyone, anywhere, could participate in the acts of creation and criticism. Yet this vast global connection does not necessarily encourage a universal culture of art appreciation. The proliferation of blogs and other individual forms of criticism is the fulfillment of Einstein's identified/prophesied "period of negation, of tangential music" (331). Scharpling's advice to "buy

another rock book" (find another source) is infinitely sustainable, but the sheer number of options creates more tangents and fewer consensuses.

37 Hence the Internet has not proven to be an ultimate argument settler. Mendelsohn writes with concern about "the unprecedented explosion of personal writing (and inaccuracy and falsehood) online, in Web sites and blogs and anonymous commentary —forums where there are no editors and fact-checkers and publishers to point an accusing finger at". Nearly twenty years after the call that spoke him into being, Ronald Thomas Clontle is an avatar of the sort of anxiety Mendelsohn describes. By bridging the pretense of the establishment critic with the irresponsible disengagement of the rank amateur, Clontle exposes problems of universality and individuality.

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38 "Rock, Rot & Rule" are the three little words that Scharpling and Wurster chose to use for their own satirical argument about judgment in popular culture. From a comic standpoint, their brevity is endlessly rewarding, because these small words prompt longwinded responses that in turn receive only these small words. To contextualize Clontle within a contemporary Internet meme, he was an Obvious Troll before the language and sensibilities existed to identify him as such (i.e. Obvious Troll is Obvious, a verbally representational ouroboros). It's telling that the Internet has caught up with Clontle by proving and certainly not "settling" the problem of circular reasoning he embodies. Time has indeed vindicated Ronald Thomas Clontle.

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NOTES

1. Archives of the show are available at https://wfmu.org/playlists/BS.
2. Scharpling continues to use this promotional phrase at the revived version of his show at http://thebestshow.net.
3. This recording and others referenced and quoted in this essay are collected in Numero Group's 2015 box set *The Best of the Best Show*.
4. Beardsley also asks a "second question" about what can possibly be known or meant through reason and objectivity within the activity of "critical evaluation," though that philosophical framework is not as pertinent as the first question to the content of the present essay.
5. As if to exaggerate this detachment to the extreme, Wurster adds distractedness to Clontle's comportment within the action of the phone call. He loses track of the conversation because he's preoccupied with a basketball game which is on in the background.

ABSTRACTS

Tom Scharpling was the longtime host (October 2000 - December 2013) of *The Best Show on WFMU*, a music/comedy program that originated on listener-supported New Jersey radio station WFMU and became internationally popular through Internet streaming and podcasting. My paper examines the ways in which "Rock, Rot & Rule," the sketch that inspired the program, utilizes brevity to satirize the dilemma of criticism. Scharpling interviewed Ronald Thomas Clontle, author of a book titled *Rock, Rot & Rule,* "the ultimate argument settler," whose function is to categorize popular music into acts that rock, acts that rot, and acts that rule. The premise of Clontle's book involves comedic devices like overstatement and simplification. The irony of Clontle's claim to settle arguments is that his interview has the opposite effect. It infuriates listeners. Impassioned music enthusiasts call in to criticize his methodology, but he cannot be bothered. Unbeknownst to listeners, Clontle is a character played by musician Jon Wurster. He and Scharpling have intricately scripted their interaction, creating a comedy of outrage among people who take music seriously. And therein lies the value of "Rock, Rot & Rule" as an influential instance of brevity in humor. *For the unsuspecting listeners of "Rock, Rot & Rule," Clontle arouses anxiety because he is indicative of the future of criticism.*

Tom Scharpling a longtemps animé *The Best Show on WFMU* (entre octobre 2000 et décembre 2013), émission musicale/humoristique qui a débuté sur la chaîne de radio WFMU du New Jersey, avant de devenir célèbre dans le monde entier grâce au streaming et aux podcasts. Cette contribution étudie comment « Rock, Rot and Rule », le sketch qui a inspiré l'émission, exploite la forme courte pour proposer une satire de la critique musicale. Dans l'émission, Scharpling interviewe Ronald Thomas Clontle, auteur d'un libre intitulé *Rock, Rot and Rule, The ultimate argument settler*, dont l'objet est de classer la musique populaire en morceaux qui « déchirent » (*rock*), qui sont « pourris » (*rot*) ou qui « en imposent » (*rule*). Le livre exploite des techniques de la comédie comme l'exagération et la simplification. Clontle prétend résoudre les conflits mais son interview a l'effet inverse. Elle rend les auditeurs furieux. Les amateurs passionnés de

musique appellent la radio pour critiquer sa méthodologie mais Clontle n'en a cure. Ce qu'ignorent les auditeurs, c'est que Clontle est en réalité un personnage joué par le musicien Jon Wurster. Scharpling et lui ont préparé leur échange soi-disant impromptu, provoquant un faux scandale pour tous ceux qui prennent la musique au sérieux. C'est là que réside l'intérêt de « Rock, Rot and Rule », exemple célèbre de l'humour sous sa forme brève. Clontle provoque l'angoisse chez les auditeurs qui ne se doutent de rien, et il anticipe ainsi l'avenir de la critique.

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Keywords: podcasting, radio, internet, Scharpling Tom, Wurster Jon, Best Show on WFMU (The), humour, interaction, interview, music
Mots-clés: podcasting, radio, internet, Scharpling Tom, Wurster Jon, Best Show on WFMU (The), humour, interaction, interview, musique

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One-liners and Linguistics: (Re)Interpretation, Context and Meaning

Catherine Chauvin

1 Whether they stand on their own, or are part of a longer routine[1], one-liners, or "short jokes", have a self-contained quality: they can be considered as a unit, and they are supposed to produce an immediate comic effect. They could be considered to be the condensed version of a joke, but a difference can be made between one-liners and (longer) jokes: because of their very brevity, there is little or no room for elaboration in one-liners, whereas jokes could be thought to constitute short comic narratives. In this paper, we would like to discuss one-liners from the perspective of linguistics, focusing on one approach in particular: we would like to examine the kind of insight one-liners can provide on how meaning emerges contextually. If an interpretation, arguably the same for every listener, is thought to have to be computed very quickly and then perhaps changed, they may allow one to discuss the reality and nature of potential "default" interpretations. As one-liners are short and (apparently) self-contained, the input of the context may also seem to be limited, so that the way in which a given interpretation is supposed to emerge has to be clarified. Their comedic value should not entirely be ignored either, since, as we will see, the connection between interpretative problems and comedic value may not be entirely straightforward.

2 In order to discuss these questions, we will first propose a typology of one-liners in which we will describe some of the recurrent devices used in this comic form, and discuss some aspects of their classification; then we will come back synthetically on what the examples can reveal about "interpretation" processes. Finally, we will briefly discuss the question of one-liners as a comedic genre, and initiate a discussion of how form and function interact.

1. A typology of one-liners

> Attempts at compiling lists of logical mechanisms or devices underpinning jokes (e.g. Hetzron 1991, Attardo 2001, Attardo et al. 2002) may be correct but cannot be said to be exhaustive beyond a shadow of a doubt, given language users' creativity in constructing jokes. (Dynel 2009: 10)

3 We will first try to write a commented typology of one-liners, which, although it will be several pages long, attempts to be short and synthetic. We will, for the time being, make few references to pre-existing typologies, which do exist[2], but tend to concern jokes rather than one-liners as such—Dynel (2012) being an exception, since she started with one-liners and later extended her approach to jokes. In other terms, we will also try to keep in mind what makes one-liners specific.[3]

4 One-liners are of varied nature and the only common points they seem to have is that they are short and are supposed to be funny. They can be found in a series of possible forms and formats, and can be linked to different comedic traditions. Even though one-liners (particularly, perhaps, the pun-based ones) tend to be associated with traditional formats, a number contemporary comedians also make use of one-liners, sometimes specializing in dirty or offensive uses of them (cf. Tim Vine or Jimmy Carr in the U.K.; some of their lines are mentioned in the examples below). While one-liners seem to share one common point, i.e. their length, here too there may be some variation.

5 In this study, we have compiled approximately 15,000 one-liners taken mostly from two books (Tibball 2012, Tucker 2012), as well as from a few other individual sources (see references below). They can be strictly speaking one-line-long if we take "line" in the typographic sense, but they tend to be at least two lines long, and sometimes slightly longer; in grammatical terms, they may be one sentence, but they can be made of up to four sentences[4]. When they are uttered orally, one could think that the Conversation Analysis unit "turn" could form an interesting describing tool for one-liners—except that a number of one-liners are to be found in monological routines, where there is no, or very little, turn-taking at work. This can, in turn, lead us to take "line" in the theatrical sense of the word, but (as was just said) if one-liners can contitute one short (theatrical) line, they can also be part of a larger monologue. What could make them independent units is their environment: there is little, or no, continuity with what precedes or follows them. But there may be recurrent themes in a show, and further reference can be made to a given one-liner in the course of a routine. This said, the brevity of one-liners does seem to be linked to a form of *self-containment*, which has to be taken into account, but which we will also try to challenge in this paper.

6 Another problem lies in the fact that other recognized genres or sub-genres can be characterized by their linking of brevity and humour: riddles, pick-up lines and retorts to such lines ("comebacks"); not all of them are funny, but some of them are supposed to be, so that there may be partial overlap between the categories. Puns are frequently found in jokes, but although one-liners are very often based on puns (as we shall see), puns are not used solely in one-liners. Certain codified comedic forms may also be found and some of them may be found in longer form, such as *stupid blonde* jokes or *my wife/ girlfriend...* jokes (again, see below for more details). Outside of the English-speaking world, the French *bon mot*, or even the notorious *blagues Carambar*[5] could be classified as one-liners too. Finally, one-liners based on observational humour may also, in turn, come to resemble proverbs, or wisdom writings.

7 A one-liner is, therefore, short and funny. One-liners do seem to have a number of characteristics in common and can (often) be recognized intuitively, but the boundaries of the genre may be hard to establish. Despite the differences, a number of recurring patterns and devices can be found, and a rough classification proposed. There may be a number of borderline or complex cases, but in the vast majority of examples, one-liners can fall under at least one of the following broad categories.

8 For the purposes of this paper, we will propose a typology that is partly connected with the main *linguistic* device they are based upon, since one-liners are often—but not always—made possible by some property of language that is played upon/with. But not all one-liners are strictly speaking based on a given device, as we will see; nevertheless, they are always at least partly linguistic inasmuch as they rely on language (they are verbal games). To speak of a *main* device does not mean, of course, that it is the only device that is to be found in a given one-liner. The classification will provide us with a general backdrop to analyse some examples more specifically as we go beyond this initial typology.

1.1. Pun-based one-liners

9 A large number of one-liners rely on puns.[6] Puns have been extensively discussed in the literature—if one humorous device is discussed, it tends to be puns, which are sometimes treated as the "simplest" cases (Ritchie 2004), which we will argue they are not. They may not be the funniest of one-liners, although this can be cultural thing or a question of taste; Ritchie in fact says that puns can be met with groans, rather than laughter. This partly goes beyond the limits of this paper, although (as was said before) a few elements having to do with the connection between form and comedic value will be examined below in our last section.

10 Puns may be assumed to function at the lexical level only, i.e. revolve around the interpretation of "one word"; two of the word's meanings, or uses, are activated at the same time, or alternatively. This needs clarification. What the writer and/or the comedian seems to be taking advantage of is polysemy, or, rather, the multiple uses of a word (in bold, below):[7]

(1)

a. I entered a swimming contest at the weekend. I won the 100m **butterfly**. What am I going to do with an insect that big?
b. The judge has got a stutter, so it doesn't look like I'm getting a **sentence**.
c. I told a volcano joke down the pub last night. The whole place **erupted**.
d. My friend is sick to death of people always taking the piss out of him for having brittle bone disease. One day he's going to **snap**.
e. My doctor told me that I had to give up **drinking**. It's been three days now and I feel really dehydrated.
f. Windmills: big **fan**; big, big **fan**.
g. Every time I hear a joke, I throw up. It must be my **gag** reflex.
h. I've reached the age where I can't function without **glasses**. Especially if they're empty.
i. I ordered a whole duck at a Chinese restaurant last night. It was great until I got to the **bill**.
j. Menstrual jokes are not funny. **Period**.
k. Two soldiers are in a **tank**. One looks at the other and goes, 'Blublublub!'
l. There are two fish in a **tank**. One turns to the other and says, 'Do you know how to drive this thing?'

m. My girlfriend said she wanted me to **tease** her, so I said "Alright, fatty." (Jimmy Carr)
n. When you eat a lot of spicy food, you can lose your **taste**. When I was in India last summer, I was listening to a lot of Michael Bolton. (Jimmy Carr)

11 Although lexical puns always seem to be involved, all these examples do not function in the same way. The way in which *drinking* in (1e) is first made to bring to mind the idea that someone is drinking alcohol may not be a specific use but a common pragmatic inference when the verb is used intransitively; the fact that *tease* can be interpreted in (1m) as being "nice" or "rough" teasing (the spectrum of *teasing* can go from gentle bantering to near-insult) may also have to do with pragmatics, not semantics; the same could perhaps be said to what *taste* applies to in (1n). Others may just be cases of homophony, with the usual complications encountered when a tight distinction is supposed to be made between homophony and polysemy: *bill (beak/cheque)* or *tank* in examples (1i, k, l), could be cases at hand. The tests that can be used to make a distinction between homonymy and polysemy—for instance, Cruse (2004)'s use of anaphora—would suggest that *tank* has uses that are too different for a simultaneous or very close activation of both senses to be possible; yet, the opposition between the two meanings has been used (more or less) successfully in the preceding examples. The way in which lexical forms are used in such cases could show that the types of differences may not entirely matter, as long as two interpretations can be made to emerge; it might at least be important to note that they may not all be of the same form.

12 Other types of wordplay are of course possible: two words are just homonymous when they just sound the same, and two words are at least supposed to be distinct when they are spelt differently:

(2)
a. I just saw a beautiful girl with a massive gut. What a **waist**.

13 This may not operate at word-level only:

(2)
b. I'm about to have a cup of dangerous coffee. **Safe tea** first.
c. There's no need for women to behave the way they do on their period. It's an **ovary action**.

14 One speaks of paronomasia, or paronymy, when the words do not quite sound the same, but almost do:

(3)
a. **Avalanche**: what Italians do every day at about half past twelve. (*have a lunch*)[8]
b. My granddad doesn't like fried chicken, but my **Nandos**.
c. 11:59:59 a.m. is my favourite time of the day. It's *second* to **noon**.
e. So this lorry full of tortoises collided with a van full of terrapins. It was a **turtle** disaster. (Tim Vine)
b. Programmers do it **beta**.[9]

15 The word game may be based on the form of the word(s) itself, and different types of such formal puns are possible. Visual puns based on spelling could be assumed to have to be used in written form only, but, as is shown by (4), it is not necessarily the case:

(4)
a. Why oh why don't people **poof** read stuff before they post it?
b. I have a friend who's half **Ind*ian***. **Ian**.
c. You can't spell 'pro**sti**tution' without '**STI**'.

16 The following two examples probably need to be seen in the written form, however, for two meanings to emerge:

(4)

d. I was in a spelling bee once. But I lost because the other students **cheeted**.

e. The spell **czech** on my computer has never failed me yet.

17 In the case of (4c), the visual pun is also a lexical pun ('STI'). The processes can be used together, which again shows that they should not be thought of as exclusive.

1.2. Set phrases

18 Another large number of one-liners are based on set phrases. This is interesting *per se:* set phrases have been considered to be non-transparent forms in which the relationship between form and meaning is (somewhat) fixed, but it has also been shown that it is not necessarily the case (Mejri 2005): although they are supposed to be frozen, they, in fact, can often be modified.[10] Here are a few examples:

(5)

a. The easiest way to **add insult to injury** is when you're signing somebody's plaster cast.

b. There's a race war going on in my kitchen. It all started when **the pot called the kettle black**.

c. I've got a friend who has got a butler whose left arm is missing—**serves him right**! (Tim Vine)

d. Crystal balls: **I don't know what people see in them**.

e. **It pains me to say it, but** I have a sore throat.

f. I love my satnav. **I don't know where I'd be without it.**

g. Some people say it's hard being a hostage. Pfff... **I could do it with my hands tied behind my back.**

h. I'm so good at sleep, **I can do it with my eyes closed.**

19 The whole phrase tends to receive a double interpretation, and the "literal", which, in this case, is also rather strikingly the *less* salient[11], meaning is (also?) "activated". An opposition could be made with the preceding cases in which simple words seemed to be concerned, but as we will see below, thinking that interpretation only operates at the word-level even for the preceding examples might be a mistake. The structure of the next two examples is complex: the whole one-liner comes to be read as a retake on a proverb that is not stated in full:

(6)

a. I've just finished building Rome with my nephew's Lego. **Took me a day**.

b. **I eat an apple every day**. The wife's **a doctor**.

1.3. Structural, or syntactic, ambiguity

20 Another linguistic phenomenon that can be made use of is ambiguous syntax. It does seem rarer than word- or fixed-expression-based puns—the rarity is also noted in Dynel (2012)—, but examples can be found:

(7)

a. Reincarnation **is making a comeback**.

b. I'm not worried about the **Third World War**. That's the Third World's Problem. (Jimmy Carr)

c. Throwing acid is wrong**, in some people's eyes**. (Jimmy Carr)

d. I live near a remedial school. There is a sign that says, **slow… children**. That can't be good for their self-esteem. (Jimmy Carr)
e. My wife is fed up of my wordplay jokes. I asked, 'What can I do to stop my addiction?' She said, '**Whatever means necessary**.' 'No it doesn't,' I said.
f. I saw a sign in a shop: '**Mosquito nets £10**.' I didn't even know bugs could play the lottery.
g. I **made a chicken salad** last night. Apparently they prefer to eat grain.
h. I went to the game and **saw a Mexican wave**, so I waved back at him.

21 In such cases, the problem may still be, first and foremost, one of interpretation. Dynel (2012) goes a step further, suggesting that:

> if [syntactic ambiguity] does occur, *it can usually be explained in terms of lexical ambiguity*, for the shift in the grammatical category entails also a shift in the lexical meaning (Dynel 2012: 11; emphasis added)

22 This seems slightly radical as (7a, b, g), for instance, which include *making a comeback, Third World War, make a chicken salad*, are not truly speaking lexically ambiguous. The fact that the ambiguity is (also) structural can in fact also account for the rarity of examples, as they can be more difficult to come up with. (7c) only barely makes it; if it is to be used in a spoken routine, saying it out loud might even create further difficulties, since stress and intonation—nucleus placement, in particular, cf. also (7e), (7g)—might need to be different according to the chosen meaning.

1.4. Implicatures, (in)direct speech acts, reference

23 In 1.1., we mentioned the fact that some of the apparently "lexical" puns could in fact also be taken to be pragmatic in nature; certain examples may be more openly based on problems traditionally ascribed to pragmatics, not semantics. The type of commonness to be found in the next two examples could be linked to the presence of conventional implicatures:

(8)
a. **You know that** look you get from women when they want you**?** Nah, me neither.

24 And the famous Groucho Marx line can also be mentioned here:

b. **A child of 5 would know this**. Bring me a child of 5! (Groucho Marx)

25 *You know…* is used when you are suggesting something that you, as the speaker, know, and the hearer is expected to share; *a child of five…* normally implies that anyone over five should be able to know it too, and this is what is denied in both cases.

26 Indirect speech acts may also be made to be interpreted literally, which brings this case close to that of certain set expressions, although the way in which they have come to be fixed may be different. The illocutionary level is ignored:

(9)
a. I saw a sign in a car park saying: "**Thieves want your satnav.**" I thought, "Well, they can get lost!"
b. **So *I rang up a local building firm, I said* "I want a skip outside my house."** He said "I'm not stopping you." (Tim Vine)

27 Certain discursive or conversational clichés (rather than idioms / collocations), may also be used, as in:

(10)
My girlfriend bought a cookbook the other day called "Cheap and easy vegetarian cooking". Which is perfect for her**,** because **not only is she** vegetarian… (Jimmy Carr)

28 As this is the first part of a common discursive phrase, the missing half can probably be expected and reintroduced by the hearer(s). Some interpretations are also based on reference problems, rather than meaning. The following example may seem to be another instance of lexical ambiguity, but in fact, the word is taken to *refer* to distinct realities. What is at stake is reference rather than meaning, and the possibility of referring to different things in turn creates a form of interpretative ambiguity:

(11)
A Chinese couple are in bed. The husband says "I want **a sixty-nine**." His wife says, "You want beef and broccoli now?"

29 This is also linked to world knowledge or culture,[12] as one needs to know how meals are referred to in Chinese restaurants in order to understand it.

30 The following cases could still be linked to a form of reference taken in a broader sense, but they are of a more specific kind: they rely on cultural knowledge, rather than linguistic devices (see discussion below). They include hints, quotations or fragments of quotations (12c), reference to known social practices (12i), to a person's or a brand name (12a), a book, a commercial (12d), etc.

(12)
a. Maybe it's **Maybelline**... and maybe it's **Photoshop**.
b. **Fox** is so **twentieth century**.
c. My wife has just left me for **Arnold Schwarzenegger**. **She'll be back**.
d. **African child dies**? I watched those, and couldn't help thinking, "Well, stop **clicking your fingers**!" (Jimmy Carr)
e. I'm officially changing my remote's name to **Wally**.
f. And that, **Romeo**, is why we usually try to take a pulse first.
g. Chaos: what erupts when **he-who-lives-in-a-glass-house** invites **he-who-is-without-a-sin** for dinner.
h. So **Batman** came up to me & he hit me over the head with a vase & he went **T'PAU**! I said "Don't you mean KAPOW??" He said "No, I've got **china in my hand**." (Tim Vine, referring to an 80s pop song by T'Pau, *'China in Your Hand'*, 1987)
i. Some guy just gave me **half of a peace sign**.

31 The fact that these examples suppose cultural knowledge is incidentally revealed by the presence of *those* in example (12d); its use shows that what is referred to is supposed to belong to the speaker and hearer's shared knowledge. Such one-liners may rely on the pleasure of recognizing a reference (see Section 3); they also make it necessary to 'get' the reference if they are to be understood at all. They may also lead to a reinterpretation of a *situation* rather than a word or phrase; the link that is made between remote controls and *Where's Wally?* books in (12e) casts in a new light the fact that people tend to leave their remote controls in hidden places. This makes some of them close(r) to the next types of examples.

1.5. Logical fallacies, observational and absurdist humour

32 The next series of examples are also language-based (they have to be), but no longer use language self-referentially: they involve an analysis, or a striking representation of a situation, a specific take on the world.

33 One recurrent type is based on logical fallacies: non sequiturs, tautologies, logical reinforcement of a contradiction... Mental diseases seem to form a frequent topic in one-liners based on self-contradiction: a type of behaviour is described, and what is described proves that the fictional speaker and patient has the disease that s/he is

claiming not to have. This creates a "discrepancy" between what is said and what is implied to be the case.

(13)

a. All we ever do is ask questions: why?

b. I'm a very good ventriloquist, even though I say so myself. *(combined to a conversational cliché)*

c. There are two types of people: those with Alzheimer's.

d. I was thinking of writing a book, *A Guide to Better Shoplifting*—but who the hell is going to buy it?

e. If you quit rehab, does that mean it worked?

f. Statistically, three in one people have schizophrenia.

g. My mate told me I just don't understand irony. Which was ironic because we were at the bus stop at the time.

h. My friends say I'll believe anything. Damn, I suppose they're right.

i. People call me Mr Compromise. It wasn't my first choice for a nickname, but I can live with it.

j. My friends say I'm too easy to please. I was delighted when they told me.

k. I'm not paranoid, but I'm sure people think I am.

l. I parked my car sideways over two disabled spaces. "What's wrong? You look in perfect health to me," said the guard. "Schizophrenia," we replied.

m. My girlfriend just left me because I'm so lazy. Insert your own punchline here. *(combined with the "my girlfriend..." pattern,* see 1.6. *below)*

34 Another way of pointing out the absurdity of something is to propose a matter-of-fact combination of data that reveals an oddity. This form of observational humour is typically found in stand-up comedy routines, although for practical reasons we have also drawn these examples from our book collections:

(14)

a. If you're trying to improve your memory, lend someone money.

b. Breaking news: "Man lucky to be alive after being hit by a train." I think I'm luckier: I've never been hit by a train.

c. For just £10 a month you can reduce your annual salary by £120.

d. I saved loads of cash on the new iPhone yesterday. I didn't buy one.

e. Hey Timex, if I end up 660ft under water, I'm pretty sure I won't need a watch. *(combined with cultural reference to an advertisement)*

f. Regular naps prevent ageing. Especially if you take them while driving.

g. Liven up your local library by hiding all the books on anger management.

35 In these cases, a whole (often, common) situation is cast in a new light, and the audience / reader is invited to think differently about it. The strangeness of a situation can just be emphasized; some silly one-liners may remain surprising, or absurd:

(15)

a. Snakes: they're like bits of rope, only angrier.

b. Apparently, 1 in 5 people in the world are Chinese. And there are 5 people in my family, so it must be one of them. It's either my mum or my dad. Or my older brother Colin. Or my younger brother Ho-Chan-Chu. But I think it's Colin. (Tim Vine)

1.6. One-liner versions of joke templates

36 Finally (for the purposes of this typology), there are types of one-liners that can be considered to form templates, some of which are common to longer jokes (cf. *stupid blonde* jokes), others which are perhaps more specifically short because of their very characteristics (*yo-mamma* jokes). They could be considered to constitute sub-genres

because of their recurrent characteristics and they form patterns writers have to embrace and play with. Here are a few examples.

- *Yo-mamma* jokes: generally in the form *Your mum is so X that Y*, they are a form of ritualized insult originally linked to the African-American community in the U.S., but they can now be found elsewhere. The speaker insults someone else's mother and shows their own superiority by coming up with something clever and inventive:

(16)

a. Your mum's so stupid she went to DFS and bought a full-prize sofa.

37 The pattern can be extended to other types of hyperbolic one-liners of the *Your X is so Y that Z* types; the speaker is supposed to be clever and inventive in his/her exaggeration again:

(16)

b. Your head is so big that your ears are in different time zones.

- *My wife/girlfriend* jokes: usually in the first person (and with a supposed male speaker), they describe something that the wife or girlfriend blames a man for. This is followed by a comeback, or by something that, as in the mental disease examples, confirms the presence of what the girlfriend reproached the man with in the first place.

(17)

a. My wife says I'm full of my own importance. Anyway that's enough about her...
b. My wife's leaving me because she's apparently fed up of me "quoting her all the time".

- Definitions. They emulate dictionary definitions but are either silly (cf. observational humour and/or absurdist humour), or may involve a pun; they are a specific pattern, but some of the forms mentioned earlier may be found again— (12g) was already of this type—:

(18)

a. Exaggeration: without it the world would end.
b. Anti-gravity: it never lets you down.

- *... walks into a bar* jokes. This is a famous template for jokes in the English-speaking world which may sometimes also be used in one-liners:

(19)

Two dragons walk into a bar. One dragon says, "It's warm in here." The other says, "Shut your mouth."

- Another well-known type of jokes is the *stupid blonde* joke, which may also be found in one-liners, although they also tend to be longer jokes. Here is just one example amongst many:

(20)

I cheated on my blonde girlfriend and she found out. Which made her unsure if the baby was hers.

38 Other cases could also be mentioned, such as *light bulb* jokes *(How many X does it take to change a light bulb?)*, but they tend to be riddles, i.e. a specific kind of form that may or may not (truly) count as a one-liner, and *nationality-based* jokes (as in: *A Frenchman, a Scotsman and an Englishman walk into a bar...)*, which also tend to be longer jokes because they usually need some minimal space for elaboration. Although examples (16)-(20) form recurrent templates, the characteristics found in these one-liners can still be linked to other cases, as shown earlier, but the fact that they constitute (semi-)*fixed* forms can be included in the forthcoming discussion (in Section 3, in particular).

39 The following table summarizes the types of one-liners discussed in this section. The headings provided in the left column are an indication of possible groupings for the devices mentioned in the right column, but it should be noted, again, that they may not constitute entirely separate categories, or tiers. The set forms of jokes are visually

separated from the others because they can be thought to operate at a different level; this is briefly taken up in the discussion (Section 3).

Table 1. A summary of the types of one-liners presented in section 1 in relation to the main devices used

Pun-based (words)	(1) puns, polysemy (2) puns, homonymy (3) puns, paronymy (4) puns, visual and formal
Set phrases	(5) set phrases: meaning of set phrases (6) indirect allusions to phrases / incomplete phrases
Ambiguous syntax	(7) ambiguous syntax
Pragmatics / discourse-based	(8) implicatures, diverse cases (9) implicatures, indirect speech acts (10) discursive / conversational clichés (11) lexical, but reference (12) cultural references
Logical fallacies; observational humour	(13) internal contradictions (with example of diseases) (14) observational humour: gnomic statements (15) absurdist humour: absurd, silly... statements
+ *Set-types of jokes:* (16) **Yo mamma** jokes; (17) **My wife/ girlfriend** jokes; (18) Definitions; (19) **Walks into a bar** jokes; (20) **Stupid blonde** jokes...	

40 As was announced earlier, we will now discuss what the abovementioned examples can say about the emergence of meaning in context. What we will try to show is what one-liners can bring to the discussion; the *combination* of some of the factors we are about to examine is, in particular, part of the problem. Let us therefore try and see what one-liners have to say about (re)interpretation processes, and contextual meaning.

2. One liners, (re)interpretation, and contextual meaning

41 In a number of examples, one *interpretation* could be supposed to be formed by the reader / audience, a second *interpretation* is also formed, and it could seem that the *discrepancy* between both interpretations might be a/the source of humour. This could perhaps for instance be said of examples (1)-(4), (5)-(6), (7), (8)-(11), and perhaps (12). The case of examples (13)-(15) can be brought into question, although they, in fact, might not be the best counter-examples, as we shall see below. Is this analysis correct? If there is such a double interpretation, how can its emergence be accounted for; what is an "interpretation"? It seems necessary to go into some detail and name some of the parameters at stake.

2.1. Interpretation/reinterpretation and merged interpretation

42 The fact that the structure of jokes tends to be binary has already been said of jokes in general:

> One of the first conceptualisations of jokes' structuring is credited to Hockett (1972/1977), according to whom, a joke comprises a *build-up* and a *punch*. (Dynel 2012: 7)

43 It might even be truer of one-liners which, as said earlier, do not allow for an elaboration phase because of their brevity. It could be supposed, then, that the following pattern is the norm and constitutes the basic form for one-liners:

> *build-up: interpretation 1,*
> followed by *punch: reveal, interpretation 1 is wrong → interpretation 2*

44 A number of one-liners could be described in this way, such as in examples (1a) and (1e):[13]

> **(1)**
> a. **I entered a swimming contest at the weekend. I won the 100m butterfly**.
> *What am I going to do with an insect that big?*
> e. **My doctor told me that I had to give up drinking**. It's been three days now *and*
> *I feel really dehydrated.*

45 In these examples, the second part of the joke reveals an interpretation that was not available in the first part. This model quickly reaches its limits, however, something which Dynel (2012) has brought into focus, showing that one-liners are not all based on the *"garden path" mechanism*, i.e. following a pattern in which a first part leads the listener astray, before a second part reintroduces a new, "correct", meaning. "Garden path" is not a term that Dynel invented for the analysis of jokes: the term refers to sentences in which a first meaning is supposed to be computed and then rejected, because something makes it impossible to keep the first interpretation. A well-known example of such sentences is *The horse raced past the barn fell*, which is not humorous.[14]

46 We would like to agree with Dynel, but we can perhaps go one step further: does the comparison with garden path sentences truly apply even for some jokes that *seem* to fall under this category? In *The horse raced...*, no first, "full", meaning is ever achieved, or, at any rate, the "first" meaning has to be *abandoned*—some examples of garden path sentences discussed in Bever (1970) are in fact difficult to interpret, and the paper is a reflection on what makes something interpretable. Dynel (2012) often uses the term "cancel" to refer to what happens to the "first" interpretation. In our examples, the "first" meaning may not, in fact, be cancelled, and it often *is not*. Even in (1a), the *insect*-butterfly is supposed to have been won at a *swimming* competition: in other words, the swimming is part of the content of the situation in which *butterfly* is intended to mean *insect;* the cancellation, if it exists, is incomplete. The two contexts are, in fact, *merged,* instead of having one interpretation cancelled and another one replacing / erasing it. In many cases, interpretations (i.e., here, the *result* of the interpretation, so to speak: how they are probably understood) are not cancelled at all: a given form is made to have several meanings at once, or sequentially. This is the case of examples (1b, c, d, ...):

> **(1)**
> b. The judge has got a stutter, so it doesn't look like I'm getting a **sentence**.
> c. I told a volcano joke down the pub last night. The whole place **erupted**.

d. My friend is sick to death of people always taking the piss out of him for having brittle bone disease. One day he's going to **snap**.
g. Every time I hear a joke, I throw up. It must be my **gag** reflex.
h. I've reached the age where I can't function without **glasses**. Especially if they're empty.

47 several meanings are activated *simultaneously* (eg. *sentence, erupted, snap, gag*) rather than one being cancelled by the other. In (1h), the fact that *glasses* is made to mean *drinking* glasses does not mean that glasses can no longer be thought of as being *spectacles* as well; but a meaning that was not, for lack of a better word, *salient,* is now made to be available.[15] In the two *(fish/army) tank* one-liners, even if the "second" interpretation is made available, the situation in which the reference to them is inserted is still associated to the "first" meaning of the word:[16]

(1)
k. Two soldiers are in a **tank**. One looks at the other and goes, 'Blublublub!'
l. There are two fish in a **tank**. One turns to the other and says, 'Do you know how to drive this thing?'

48 "Blublublub" brings to mind a *fish* tank, but the "soldiers" are still soldiers in the second half of the one-liner, they have not transformed into fish, or not entirely (this can also be linked to the use of anaphora: "one" and "the other" are still linked to "soldiers"); they "are" also still "in a" tank (this part is not cancelled).

49 In (1l), the fish have become potential drivers, so they probably are drivers of *army* tanks, and they speak, but they are still fish; besides, the fact that they are *speaking* is not directly related to the pun on *tank,* it is just another dimension that is added to the representation of the fish that are now *talking* fish, but there is no necessary connection to the use of *tank.*

50 This might lead to the idea that what is sought is not (just) interpretation and reinterpretation, but *multiple interpretation*, successive or simultaneous, and, even, merged. In other words, part of the pleasure might come from the fact that the meaning is enriched and unstable and multiple, and not, or not necessarily, that there is *one,* and *then another* way of understanding it. Even though some interpretations might be made to become salient *later* in the relatively short process of "getting" a one-liner, in the end interpretations can be, or tend to be *merged*, i.e. they are not kept separate.

51 Another aspect may be mentioned here which is linked to, and may be a consequence of, what has just been said. Dynel (2012) has rightly pointed out that *one* given mechanism has been thought to be more systematically present than is really the case. But although we agree that the typology of jokes must be enriched and complexified, perhaps focusing on *where* and/or how the "reveal" takes place[17] might not be of the essence if one is supposed to be dealing with *multiple* interpretations. Maybe this also focuses too much on interpretation as the selection of one *clear, pre-defined option* (as is sometimes the case in analyses that are based on "multiple"—i.e. discrete—meanings, or tiers).[18] The *crossroads mechanism* is called this way because the hearer is supposed to be metaphorically at a *crossroads*, i.e. he/she is possibly hesitating between two *discrete, separate options*. But *are* they discrete and separate? *Where* it happens might not necessarily prove central to distinguish whether the mechanism itself is (perhaps partly) the same. Focusing too much on *discrete, separate, internally logical* worlds may also be something that the "incongruity approach" to humour (used, among others, by Dynel) could be criticized for.[19] The fact that something is deemed *incongruous* is

sometimes linked to the idea that it conflicts with "the standards of the real world," or "conflicting with one's knowledge of the world" (Dynel 2012). But do we actually have (logically) *organized, self-contained areas* which we refuse to combine? We may sometimes seek representations of this kind when constructing theoretical models, but doubt whether these models truly correspond to natural representations of the world. All in all, all of this supposes that meanings are discrete, (automatically?) processed, and that the interpretation of a one-liner can be delineated in terms of what it is, ie. it could be "spelt out" entirely. Because worlds may vary from one individual to another, perhaps another question could be be: spelt out *for,* or *by, whom?* And yet, one-liners often do seem to be based on interpretations supposedly commonly accessed by several independent speakers. In the next sub-section, we will discuss this possible paradox.

2.2. Default/preferred readings

52 Can interpretations be expected to be the *same* for all hearers, or, for that matter, for the deviser and the hearer? A number of one-liners seem to rely on the hope, on the deviser's part, that the same (mis-)assumptions will be made, and then that re-interpretations will work in a common way—hopefully, the same for all members of the audience, and, hopefully, the same as the one expected by the deviser. This could suggest that there is a preferred collective interpretation, one sometimes taken for granted as the default, or preferred, reading—a notion which is not necessarily challenged.[20] But this is, in fact, an interesting, but complex, problem in itself, and we will try to see how a (fixed, set, predetermined) default reading may not necessarily *need* to be posited, although we do believe that there are several sides to this problem. The issue is (partly) related to that of whether interpretations are discrete, since a common interpretation would probably have to be discrete for it to be truly "common", although that might not be entirely necessary. At this point, we could distinguish between *default meaning* and *default interpretation:* one is ascribed rigidly and acontextually to a given entity, the other one is computed and constructed contextually.

53 The fact that a number of set phrases, clichés (linguistic or cultural), and references are used probably ensures that certain assumptions are made, but it does not follow that it is an automatic, rather than a dynamic, process. A number of one-liners use forms that are relatively set, making one particular interpretation more plausible; although there may not be direct form-to-meaning equivalence, a certain interpretation may be entrenched enough for it to come to mind quickly.[21] There might be some sort of priming (i.e., something comes to mind first) at work.

54 Lexical ambiguity does not necessarily allow for such immediate priming, except if one use is much more common than others, and therefore "salient"—but the question is known to be a thorny one: prototypes may play a role here, or frequency, or both. Now it is doubtful whether there is an a-contextual preferred interpretation for *glass* or *tank;* there probably is not. The cases that are based on puns may be the most old-fashioned types, but they are not the simplest cases to explain—quite the contrary. In such cases, (relatively) discrete interpretations seem to come to mind (in other words, it is possible, and often easy, to paraphrase the "meaning" of the word), but this interpretation is not a default meaning at the level of *langage*. It could nevertheless be assumed that a use is made salient at the level of *langue*.

55 We should now return to the fact that one-liners are supposed to be self-contained forms: they are self-contained because they need not be, and often are not, enclosed in a coherent narrative (with something coming before it and something coming after it), but they are *also* linked to a cultural context which means that *not everything* has to be computed from the one-liner itself. In fact, a small proportion of what is understood may be. Besides, even if one-liners are short, they *also* provide contextual, i.e. co-textual, clues, in particular for cases of linguistic ambiguity, which could be analysed in terms of *frayage* ("path-opening", Culioli), even though we might be using this notion in a larger sense that just the presence of one given utterance that paves the way for interpretation ("*énoncé précurseur*", Culioli 1990: 124). We agree here with the suggestion made in Jaszczolt (2010) when she proposes that interpretation is not a question of semantics first, or semantics *only*, and then pragmatics, but that interpretation may be constructed with the interaction of both levels. Given the abovementioned examples, the contextual clues that can be found in them despite their brevity provide sufficient background for one possible interpretation to be made prominent, although not exclusive:

(1)

a. I entered a ***swimming*** *contest* at the weekend. I won the 100m **butterfly**.
e. My ***doctor*** told me that I *had to* ***give up*** **drinking**.
h. *I've* ***reached the age*** *where I* ***can't function without*** glasses.
k. *Two* ***soldiers*** *are in a* tank.
l. *There are two* ***fish*** *in* a tank.
n. *When you* ***eat*** *a lot of* ***spicy food***, you can lose your **taste**.

56 Both interpretations may be opened at the same time, or successively, and some of the hints may even have to be understand retrospectively (but probably remain in the listener's mind when s/he hears the rest of the line, without necessarily requiring any effort, particularly if the one-liner is used orally):

(1)

b. The *judge* has got a *stutter*, so it doesn't look like I'm getting a ***sentence***.
c. I told a *volcano joke* down the pub last night. The whole place ***erupted***.
d. My friend is *sick to death of people* always *taking the piss out of him* for having *brittle bone disease*. One day he's going to ***snap***.
g. *Every time I hear a joke*, I *throw up*. It must be my ***gag*** reflex.
i. I ordered a whole *duck* at a Chinese *restaurant* last night. It was great until I got to the ***bill***.

57 Interpretation is a combination of co-textual and cultural clues, which will probably lead members of the audience that belong to the same, or partly similar, cultural and linguistic background to reach the same conclusion. For one-liners, which can work as self-contained units, an interpretation may need to be at least minimally *opened* to occur, but the self-contained co-text of the one-liner is not the only clue that comes into play. So several interpretations may be permitted successively or conjointly by the lexical and cultural knowledge of the hearer; they are contextually constructed and, therefore, primed (priming being an active process in this case). As said earlier, contextual opening need not just be lexical: the position in a sentence, for instance, may also constitute such an interpretation-building hint:

(**1**j). *Menstrual* jokes are not funny. ***Period***.

58 The use of *period* in a final, isolated position brings "full stop"' to mind. The opening is not lexical, but constructional, so to speak. Other contextual elements may play a role, such as intonation (which will not be discussed here); but they may all contribute to

bring to the fore one interpretation that will probably be of the same kind for a given group of people who share a certain cultural and linguistic background.

59 A set phrase might constitute its own opening, as frequency and (semi-)fixedness can allow for conventional, salient interpretations; co-textual information may become less necessary because there is one "default" reading for set phrases, or, rather, a commonplace, frequent reading—conventional is not the same as default. The less common interpretation is probably going to be the one that needs more overt opening as it is less immediately available. This can account for their strong presence in one-liners, since they vastly facilitate the deviser's (and the hearer's) work. But fixedness and set default meanings do not necessarily need to be posited to explain how a given interpretation is constructed in certain one-liners.

60 In cases of structural ambiguity, interpretation can also go both ways. But, again, co-textual elements are still present, and, again, context is also *cultural*, as can be illustrated by *I made chicken salad* (7g), in which one of the situations is evidently more probable than the other; the same can be said for *Third World War* (7b), or for *slow... children* (7d), in which the second meaning is made more apparent when *that can't be good for their self-esteem* is added. But this is something that is only *likely* to be present in a given hearer, because of what they know, culturally, linguistically—all of this is a matter of probability and of comparative saliency, and a sort of (safer, or less safe) bet on the part of the deviser, which also means that the deviser can fail. This also suggests that culture and co-text function together to create such saliency (although not necessarily entirely in the same way). Pragmatics and semantics both play a role, as is mentioned in Jaszczolt (2005, 2010), but this might not call for "default" (pre-counted, discrete) interpretations. And it does not mean that all hearers will hear it in the same way, or that it will be understood by an "ideal" hearer in the fixed, discrete form that the deviser had in mind.[22]

2.3. To what extent are language-based one-liners specific?

61 We have just mentioned language and culture, showing that one-liners can be both opposed, with the use of different devices, all the while being connected, given that language and cultural references need not be opposed at a more general level. One question that can finally be discussed is whether previous remarks on interpretation apply only, or mostly, to language-based one-liners (puns, etc.), or whether they can be extended to cultural cases, too. The process of creation of multiple interpretations is perhaps generally present in *all* examples, and could be extended to cases that do not openly rely on linguistic material, such as examples (12), which reinforces the idea that one-liners are not always based on linguistic ambiguity:

(12)

a. Maybe it's Maybelline... and maybe it's Photoshop.

b. Fox is so twentieth century.

c. My wife has just left me for Arnold Schwarzenegger. She'll be back.

d. African child dies? I watched those, and couldn't help thinking, "Well, stop clicking your fingers!" (J. Carr)

e. I'm officially changing my remote's name to Wally.

f. And that, Romeo, is why we usually try to take a pulse first.

g. Chaos: what erupts when he-who-lives-in-a-glass-house invites he-who-is-without-a-sin for dinner.

h. So Batman came up to me & he hit me over the head with a vase and he went "T'PAU!" I said "Don't you mean KAPOW??" He said "No, I've got china in my hand." (Tim Vine)
i. Some guy just gave me half of a peace sign.

62 In these examples, some light (not necessarily "new", as old clichés may also be confirmed) is shed on a given situation, by drawing together contexts that may not usually function together, such as in the way in which the wife "will be back" in (12c), or the comparison between the impossibility of finding a remote control and finding Wally in (12e). But it is also a form of *merger*, where knowledge of a given context comes to enrich the knowledge of a first context, without there being any (total?) cancellation, and without there being any need to posit two *opposed, separate* contexts.[23] In cases linked to observational humour, the previous way of seeing something has been enriched, but nothing has necessarily been *cancelled* and replaced with a new belief. So in the end, the opposition between what is based on language and what is based on culture may not be *entirely* relevant at this level of the analysis. Merged interpretations could be sought in a number of cases regardless of the (main) device upon which they are based. The device provides the *tool* that is used, and the merged interpretation is (one of) the *result(s)*[24] that is sought by someone using a one-liner. Re-analysis may be present in the logical fallacy examples as well, but here too, the second part does not cancel the first; the effect comes from the connection of both parts, not from the fact that the first part is cancelled because the second part contradicts it; this would in fact make the whole line pointless:

(13)
a. All we ever do is ask questions: why?
b. I'm a very good ventriloquist, even though I say so myself.
c. There are two types of people: those with Alzheimer's.
d. I was thinking of writing a book, *A Guide to Better Shoplifting*—but who the hell is going to buy it?
e. If you quit rehab, does that mean it worked?
f. Statistically, three in one people have schizophrenia.
g. My mate told me I just don't understand irony. Which was ironic because we were at the bus stop at the time.
h. My friends say I'll believe anything. Damn, I suppose they're right., *etc*.

63 This said, understanding a one-liner does not necessarily make it funny, which leads us to the last part of this paper, in which we will make brief remarks on the comic value of one-liners and its links with the question of interpretation.

3. Now, is this *funny*? Felicitousness and infelicitousness, or: one-liners, genre and creativity

64 The preceding remarks have sometimes led us to leave aside an important aspect of one-liners: they are supposed to be funny. Certain studies sometimes seem to equate the question of *understanding* a one-liner with the fact of finding it *funny*, thinking that explaining how they can be understood explains away what they are, and is sufficient to account for their humorous value. This, however, is not the case. If we use one of Austin's terms which pragmatics literature often resorts to, one could say that one-liners may be more or less *felicitous.* Two conditions may be required for them to be felicitous: a) they should be understood; b) they should be thought funny. But even though it might perhaps be better if they are conjoined, these conditions can be

independently met. Understanding a joke may not mean that the joke is considered funny, and a joke might be considered funny even if it is not understood—as when only parts of the joke are understood, or when the joke is misunderstood (a case we do not have space to discuss here), or when the delivery itself causes laughter. Incidentally, this again shows that incongruity does not necessarily account for the presence of humour, since a joke that is *already* known may *still* be considered funny—or not—if told with brio, used in the right context, etc.

65 The funniness of a one-liner is of course hard to define, and is probably context-dependent, (sub-)genre dependent, and even, sometimes, simply idiosyncratic. The pleasure of recognizing a good pun, of seeing several meanings at once, may already constitute a form of felicity, without necessarily creating an uproar—some people may have a taste for puns, others find them stale and 'easy'. Understanding a merged representation of something such as (13e) can lead to laughter, a smile, or perhaps, occasionally, just interrogation *("finally, does it?")*. The sub-genres mentioned earlier may also come into play now, as they have become templates audiences can be used to: recognition of the type of jokes may cause pleasure (or displeasure), and creativity within a given pattern is what an audience may go for. Cultural recognition of a pattern may help a hearer recognize that the joke is a joke,[25] and might also constitute a template against which the current joke is assessed. *Yo-mamma* jokes seem to be based on a sense of creativity: if you find an original connection and outwit your adversary, your line can be deemed good. But this is also (sub-)genre-dependent: paradoxically, paranomasia-based one-liners may be most appreciated when they are "not" good, i.e. when they are *almost* infelicitous; the more approximate and risky they are, the better they can be thought to be. Different types of horizons of expectations can also be at work in relation to a given comedian, a series of films, a type of show, sometimes in relation to the use of such and such a device, as well. Tim Vine is famous for his collection of pun-based one-liners that come in quick succession. His audience may expect series of complex puns, and the more complex, the better. In Jimmy Carr's case, the audience may be getting ready to see how *risqué* his one-liners can get: the ruder, the better. Woody Allen's one-liners can be expected to be wry, etc.

66 What was said before about contextual interpretation is partly independent of this, since we have said that interpretation and humour are not necessarily linked. But there are, in fact, possible *connections* between the interpretation of one-liners, their comedic value and their forms; the two dimensions (interpretation / comedic value) may work together but may also turn out to be conflictual. Heavy opening, for instance, can make a pun much more understandable, but totally unfunny. The lines also ought to be written in a way that makes it possible to deliver them orally, and this can bring limitations to how syntactic ambiguity can be used, as was pointed out before, since a given parsing may call for specific intonation. Interpretation and comedic value are not one and the same thing, but the humorous dimension of one-liners may in fact have implications on the very shape that interpretation-building devices are allowed to have.

Conclusions

67 In this paper, we have looked at one-liners from a linguistic(s) point of view, and in so doing, we have pointed out a number of questions that they seem to illustrate and

which are often central to linguistic theory: default meaning(s), saliency/priming, the role of context, what an interpretation can be, the respective role of the semantic and pragmatic tiers, for instance.

68 We have tried to show that the interpretation of one-liners was a dynamic process, and suggested that merged interpretations play a very important role, as opposed to successive discrete interpretations in which one interpretation cancels out the other. Dynel (2012) is correct when she argues that more patterns exist than the one in which there is a late cancellation of a first hypothesis, but the process of cancellation needs further inquiry. Although incongruity may be present in a number of cases, a few arguments stemming from the incongruity theory of humour have also been discussed (i.e. something incongruous is not necessarily funny and something funny is not necessarily incongruous), and we have pointed out some aspects of the interaction between the humorous dimension of one-liners and the fact that they may need to be at least interpretable—more opening may make a line more understandable, for instance, but a heavy opening might ruin the comedic effect, suggesting that conflicting strategies may be at stake.

69 Lastly, we have suggested that interpretability is not the same thing as comedic value. While some studies suggest that a one-liner is explained when its meaning(s) are made clear(er), understanding something does not make it funny; it could be a prerequisite, but even that point may be challenged. The perception of humour may be highly context-dependent (i.e. dependent on genre, on the hearer's tastes and expectations, on the hearer's perception of the speaker, etc.), which might make a given one-liner felicitous for some in a certain context, but not for others in another. While additional issues would require further study, we hope to have shown that one-liners are, or can be, good revealers of linguistic problems, and perhaps other, broader subjects as well.

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Stand-up comedy shows

The stand-up comedy shows that were mostly used and cited for this study are Jimmy Carr's and Tim Vine's, and more especially Jimmy Carr, *Laughing and Joking*, 2013, Channel 4 DVDs. Groucho Marx lines have been compiled from the films themselves, and *Duck Soup* in particular has been viewed again in relation to this study. Woody Allen quotes had also originally been compiled. Unfortunately, they have not made it into the final version of this paper. This sad fact may recall one of Allen's quips: "The other day I was alone and a man came up to me and kept saying over and over again, 'You're a star, you're a star.' I thought, this year I'm a star, but what will I be next year—a black hole?"

NOTES

1. It should be noted that, in this paper, "routine" is used as in "stand-up routine", a term used by comedians to refer to their show, and often more specifically, the sequentially ordered content of the show. It is therefore not synonymous with "pattern", or "template", which are also used in the paper to refer to codified forms for one-liners and jokes.

2. We cannot say that "there is no currently no theory of how humour works" (Ritchie 2004, introduction). There is a long tradition of trying to account for humour, linguistically (e.g.,

Attardo 1994) but also more generally: the incongruity theory, the superiority theory, the relief theory; Freudian analyses, Aristotelian analyses, Kantian analyses, Bergsonian analyses, etc. What may be true is that there is no *recognized* theory of how it works, since how and when humour appeared is still very much a mystery. We will not delve into these debates in this paper; among many other possible sources, see for instance Carroll (2014). A few aspects of the incongruity theory are discussed in the course of the paper, however.

3. Aaron (2012) proposes a general classification of jokes, not one-liners, specifically, assigning them to the syntax, phonetic, semantic... tiers of language. We have not tried to follow this, or one, predefined classification as we tried to focus on what seemed to be relevant to this analysis. A presentation of Dynel (2012)'s typology, which is part and parcel of her approach, will nonetheless be included in Section 2.

4. This statement supposes that we know what a sentence is, which is not necessarily true.

5. Daft, children-directed short jokes or riddles that are printed on the back of the paper wrappers of *Carambar*, a caramel sweet.

6. We will not put forward any statistics because they would be entirely irrelevant: despite the large size of the collections (approx. 15,000), they are not taken to be qualitatively representative.

7. Meanings are stable and lexicalized. Uses are values that are associated to certain contexts.

8. This is reminiscent of the Italian-pronunciation-based puns to be found in Chico's dialogues in the Marx Brothers movies. Some of the dialogues in the Marx Brothers films can in fact be considered to be a quick succession of one-liners.

9. This, of course, works better in non-rhotic varieties of English.

10. For the very large literature on the topic, cf. for instance Mejri (2005), Gréciano (1983), Gross (1996).

11. Since "literal" meaning is often (wrongly) assumed to be the easier and more salient meaning.

12. Culture is taken here to mean: what you know because you are part of a community that shares a certain number of assumptions and values.

13. The aforementioned one-liners are reproduced again in this section to facilitate the reading of the analysis; also, we will underline new aspects in bold to draw the reader's attention to what is being discussed in this Section.

14. The example is discussed in Bever (1970) and reprinted in Sanz, Laka & Tannehaus (2013).

15. Dynel also uses the term *salient,* but a *shift in saliency* is not the same thing as a *cancelled meaning,* and even a shift in saliency might not (always) be what is involved.

16. I wish to thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting I should draw more attention to this example.

17. Dynel proposes "a tripartite division of jokes **in reference to their incremental development**" (Dynel 2012: 7; bold added for emphasis): "three major mechanisms of linear joke comprehension can be distinguished, depending on the **stages** and means of *incongruity emergence* and *incongruity resolution*". For the record, as the *crossroads mechanism* is also mentioned further down in this paragraph, the typology she proposes is the following: a) the "garden path mechanism", where the hearer is led to have one interpretation and then to change it; b) the "red-lights mechanism", where new, incongruous material is added and has to be integrated into what was first said; c) the "crossroads mechanism", when the beginning of the joke is uninterpretable and the end of the joke allows it to be understood, although it can remain unclear.

18. Clark (1996) seems to be using an analysis of meaning (and irony?) in terms of *layers*; layers have the disavantage(s) of being both *discrete* and *superimposed* to each other. The discussion of whether there should be different levels of interpretation is of course central to all Gricean and post-Gricean pragmatics and these questions would need to be further developed.

19. Other aspects of the theory can also be challenged: not everything that is incongruous is funny (manifestations of dementia can be incongruous, but they may not be funny), and not everything that is funny is incongruous (one-liners based on observational humour can, in fact, be tautological and be appreciated because they make the world more congruent rather than incongruous).

20. See Dynel (2010). One can distinguish *default,* used by Jaszczolt (2005), and *preferred,* used by Levinson (1983) in his discussion of conversation analysis. Only one aspect of the problem will be mentioned for the time being: the question of whether "default" or "preferred" readings have to be posited in one-liner analysis, and why.

21. Cultural references can have the same role, and the same effect, although they can also restrict the audience of a joke if too culture-specific.

22. The deviser and the hearer may need to be further differentiated (as opposed to Dynel 2010). Writing a one-liner is making a bet on what can be understood and trying to be funny. Part of this problem is mentioned in Section 3.

23. This may be reminiscent of Fauconnier's mental spaces (1984), but what we have in mind may not be self-contained "spaces" with one domain mapped onto another in a systematic way; partial colliding, or clashing, may be provoked, and connections of all forms may be present (some common to many, but individual differences have to be accommodated, too; see following paragraph and Section 3).

24. See Section 3.

25. Dynel mentions the fact that "the interpreter is aware of the *humorous frame* signalled by the speaker" (2012: 13).

ABSTRACTS

This paper examines one-liners from a linguistics point of view, using them to address the question of how meaning emerges in context. A typology of one-liners is first proposed, in which the devices that they rely on are first described and discussed. The paper then tackles the question of what they can illustrate of the contextual emergence of meaning, the emphasis being put on constructedness. The paper argues in favour of the presence of merged representations, as opposed to successive, discrete interpretations—one of which is cancelled in the course of "getting" the one-liner. Additional remarks are made on how interpretability and humour are not two aspects of one and the same question, and a short discussion is included of how the formal and the functional dimensions can interact.

Dans cet article, on envisage les *one-liners* (blagues courtes supposées constituer une seule réplique) à partir de problématiques linguistiques. Nous commençons par proposer une typologie dans laquelle les procédés principaux employés sont mis au jour, et les exemples sont décrits et commentés. La question de savoir ce que les *one-liners* peuvent dire de l'émergence contextuelle du sens est ensuite abordée en mettant l'accent sur la construction dynamique du sens. Nous montrons également l'importance de la présence d'*interprétations fusionnées*, que l'on peut opposer à des analyses supposant une succession entre une interprétation A et une autre interprétation B annulant l'interprétation A. Nous terminons en rappelant ou montrant que la dimension comique des *one-liners* n'est pas soluble dans les questions d'interprétabilité, et pour qu'un *one-liner* fonctionne, il faut certes, qu'il soit plutôt compréhensible, mais avant tout, qu'il

soit drôle, ce qui conduit à une brève discussion des liens que la fonction humoristique des *one-liners* peut entretenir avec la question de leur interprétation.

INDEX

Keywords: one-liners, humour studies, semantics, pragmatics, contextual interpretation, interpretation, humour
Mots-clés: one-liners, études sur l'humour, sémantique, pragmatique, interprétation contextuelle, interprétation, humour

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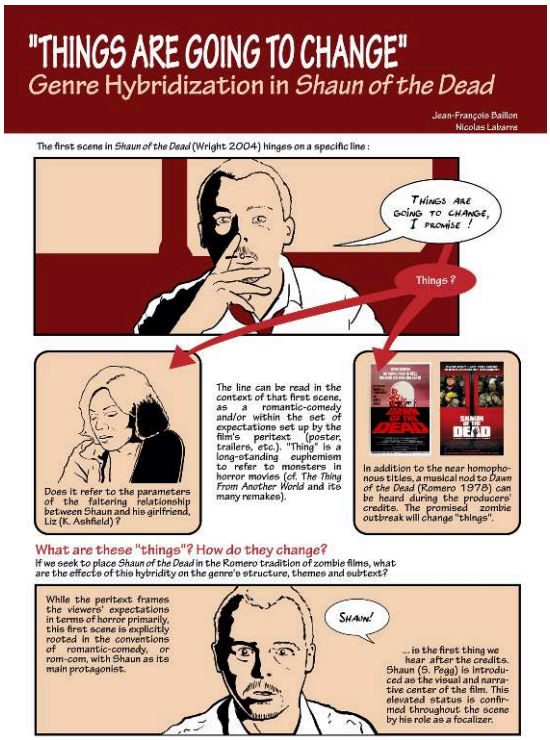
Varia

Things Are Going to Change: Genre Hybridization in *Shaun of the Dead*

Jean-François Baillon and Nicolas Labarre

Page 1: 'Things are going to change': Genre hybridization in *Shaun of the Dead*



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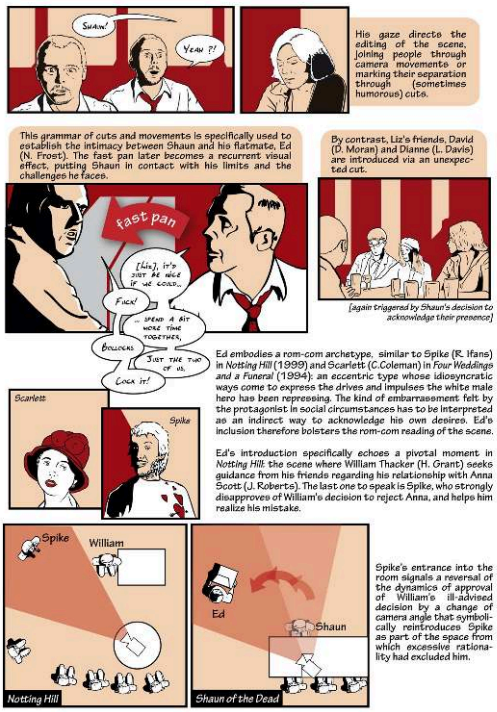

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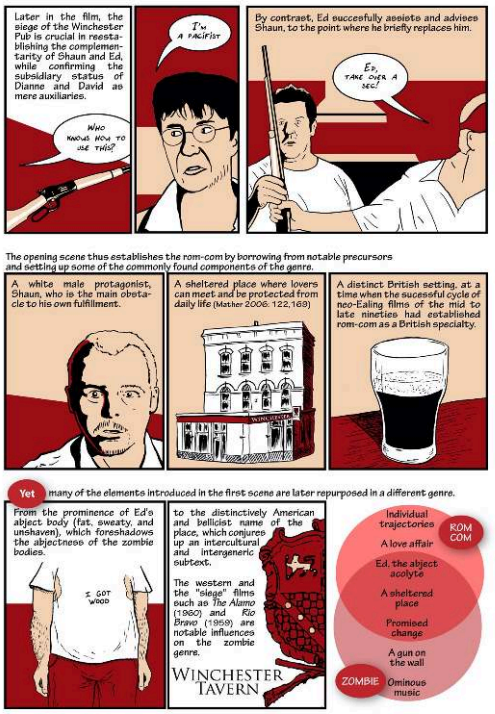

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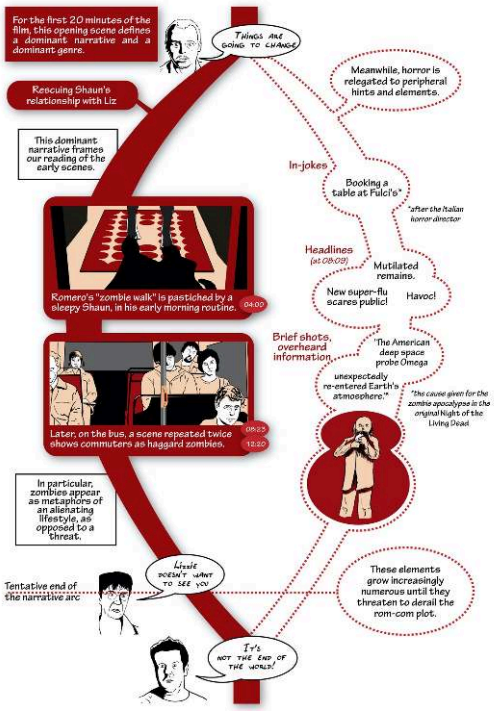

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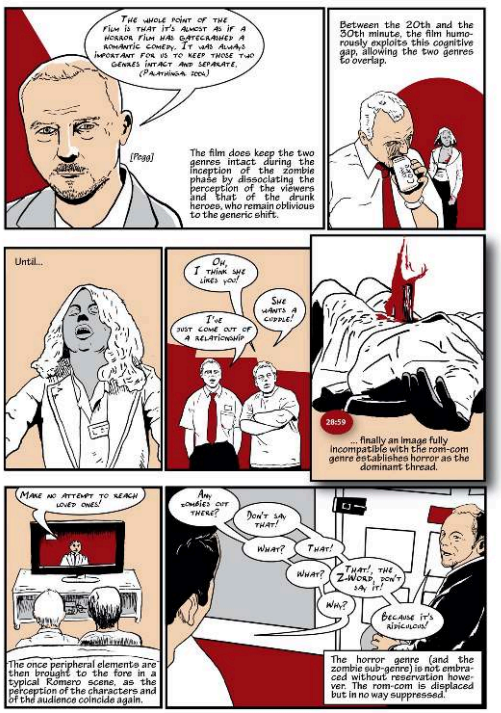

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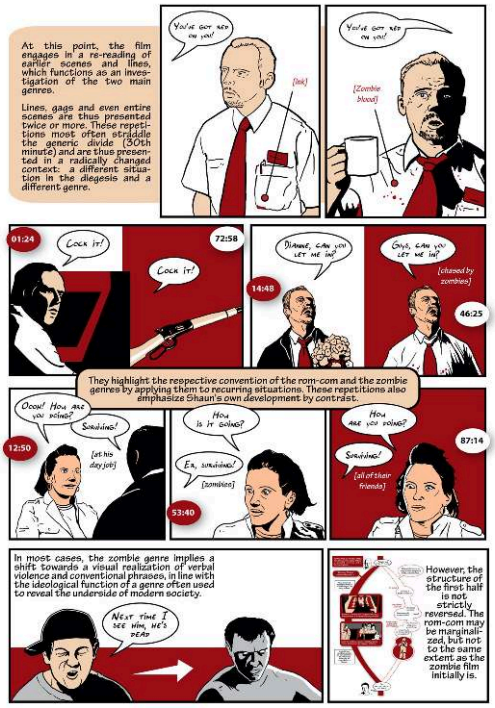

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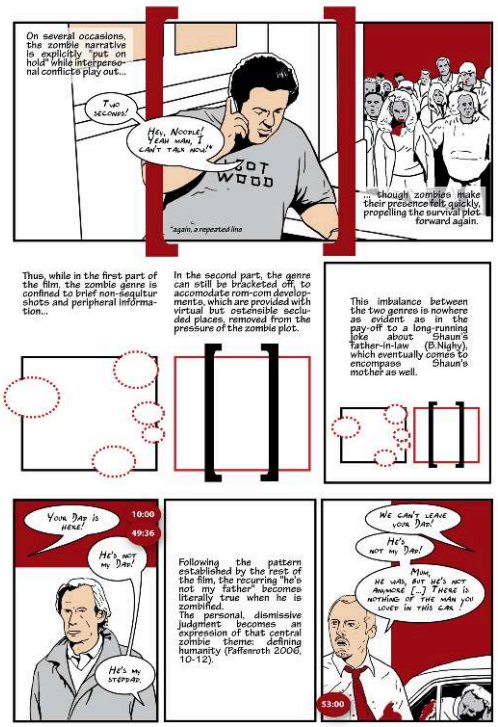

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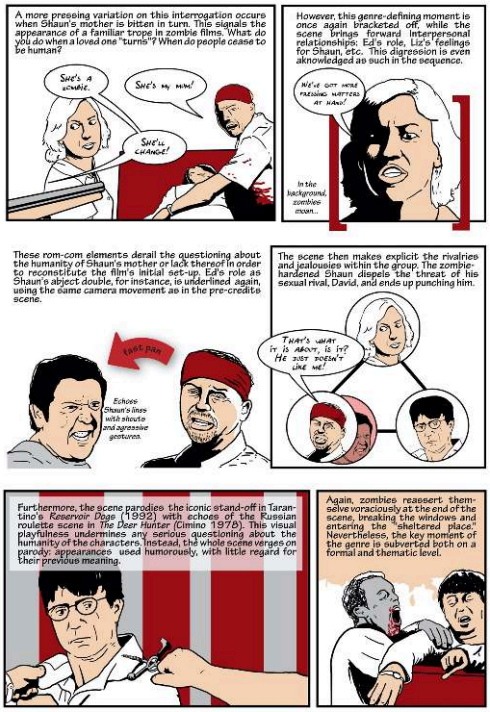

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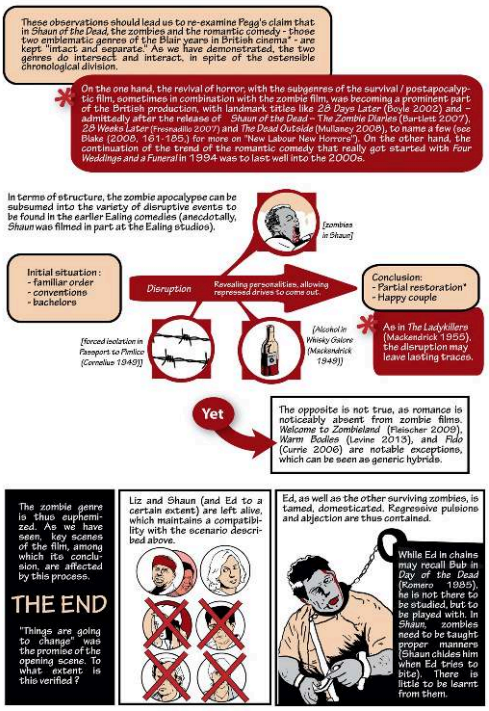
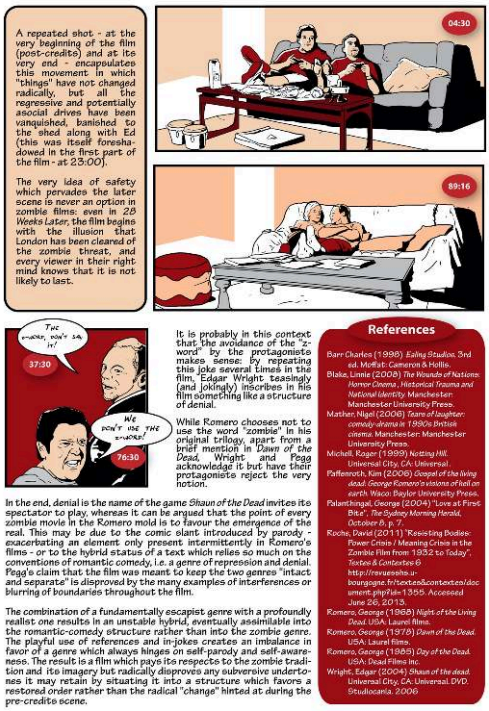
Page 9: 'Things are going to change': Genre hybridization in *Shaun of the Dead*



Credits: Jean-François Baillon and Nicolas Labarre.

Page 10: 'Things are going to change': Genre hybridization in *Shaun of the Dead*



Credits: Jean-François Baillon and Nicolas Labarre.

Transcript:

1 The first scene in *Shaun of the Dead* (Wright 2004) hinges on a specific line: "Things are going to change, I promise!"

2 The line can be read in the context of that first scene, as a romantic-comedy and/or within the set of expectations set up by the film's peritext (poster, trailers, etc.). "Thing" is a long-standing euphemism to refer to monsters in horror movies (cf. *The Thing From Another World* and its many remakes).

3 What are these "things"? How do they change?

- Does it refer to the parameters of the faltering relationship between Shaun and his girlfriend, Liz (K. Ashfield)?
- In addition to the near homophonous titles, a musical nod to *Dawn of the Dead* (Romero 1978) can be heard during the producers' credits. The promised zombie outbreak will change "things".

4 If we seek to place *Shaun of the Dead* in the Romero tradition of zombie films, what are the effects of this hybridity on the genre's structure, themes and subtext?

5 While the peritext frames the viewers' expectations in terms of horror primarily, this first scene is explicitly rooted in the conventions of romantic-comedy, or rom-com, with Shaun as its main protagonist.

6 "Shaun!" ... is the first thing we hear after the credits. Shaun (S. Pegg) is introduced as the visual and narrative center of the film. This elevated status is confirmed throughout the scene by his role as a focalizer. His gaze directs the editing of the scene,

joining people through camera movements or marking their separation through (sometimes humorous) cuts.

7 This grammar of cuts and movements is specifically used to establish the intimacy between Shaun and his flatmate, Ed (N. Frost). The fast pan later becomes a recurrent visual effect, putting Shaun in contact with his limits and the challenges he faces.

> [Liz], it'd just be nice if we could...
> [Ed] Fuck!...
> [Liz] spend a bit more time together,
> [Ed] Bollocks
> [Liz] Just the two of us.
> [Ed] Cock it!

8 By contrast, Liz's friends, David (D. Moran) and Dianne (L. Davis) are introduced via an unexpected cut (again triggered by Shaun's decision to acknowledge their presence).

9 Ed embodies a rom-com archetype, similar to Spike (R. Ifans) in *Notting Hill* (1999) and Scarlett (C.Coleman) in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994): an eccentric type whose idiosyncratic ways come to express the drives and impulses the white male hero has been repressing. The kind of embarrassment felt by the protagonist in social circumstances has to be interpreted as an indirect way to acknowledge his own desires. Ed's inclusion therefore bolsters the rom-com reading of the scene.

10 Ed's introduction specifically echoes a pivotal moment in *Notting Hill*: the scene where William Thacker (H. Grant) seeks guidance from his friends regarding his relationship with Anna Scott (J. Roberts). The last one to speak is Spike, who strongly disapproves of William's decision to reject Anna, and helps him realize his mistake.

11 Spike’s entrance into the room signals a reversal of the dynamics of approval of William’s ill-advised decision by a change of camera angle that symbolically reintroduces Spike as part of the space from which excessive rationality had excluded him.

12 Later in the film, the siege of the Winchester Pub is crucial in reestablishing the complementarity of Shaun and Ed, while confirming the subsidiary status of Dianne and David as mere auxiliaries. By contrast, Ed successfully assists and advises Shaun, to the point where he briefly replaces him. The opening scene thus establishes the rom-com by borrowing from notable precursors and setting up some of the commonly found components of the genre:

- A white male protagonist, Shaun, who is the main obstacle to his own fulfillment.
- A sheltered place where lovers can meet and be protected from daily life (Mather 2006: 122,169)
- A distinct British setting, at a time when the successful cycle of neo-Ealing films of the mid to late nineties had established rom-com as a British specialty.

13 Yet, many of the elements introduced in the first scene are later repurposed in a different genre.

14 From the prominence of Ed's abject body (fat, sweaty, and unshaven), which foreshadows the abjectness of the zombie bodies, to the distinctively American and bellicose name of the place, which conjures up an intercultural and intergeneric subtext. The western and the "siege" films such as *The Alamo* (1960) and *Rio Bravo* (1959) are notable influences on the zombie genre.

15 For the first 20 minutes of the film, this opening scene defines a dominant narrative and a dominant genre.

16 This dominant narrative frames our reading of the early scenes.

- 04:00 Romero's "zombie walk" is pastiched by a sleepy Shaun, in his early morning routine.
- 08:23; 12:20 Later, on the bus, a scene repeated twice shows commuters as haggard zombies.

17 In particular, zombies appear as metaphors of an alienating lifestyle, as opposed to a threat.

18 Meanwhile, horror is relegated to peripheral hints and elements.

- In-jokes: Booking a table at Fulci's (after the Italian horror director)
- Headlines (at 08:09): Mutilated remains./ New super-flu scares public! / Havoc
- Brief shots, overheard information: 'The American deep space probe Omega unexpectedly re-entered Earth's atmosphere.'(the cause given for the zombie apocalypse in the original *Night of the Living Dead*)

19 These elements grow increasingly numerous until they threaten to derail the rom-com plot.

> "It's not the end of the world!"

20 The whole point of the film is that it's almost as if a horror film has gatecrashed a romantic comedy. It was always important for us to keep those two genres intact and separate (Pegg, quoted in Palathingal 2004).

21 The film does keep the two genres intact during the inception of the zombie phase by dissociating the perception of the viewers and that of the drunk heroes, who remain oblivious to the generic shift.

22 Between the 20th and the 30th minute, the film humorously exploits this cognitive gap, allowing the two genres to overlap.

23 Until... finally [28:59] an image fully incompatible with the rom-com genre establishes horror as the dominant thread.

24 The once peripheral elements are then brought to the fore in a typical Romero scene, as the perception of the characters and of the audience coincide again.

- Make no attempt to reach loved ones!
- Any zombies out there?
- Don't say that!
- What?
- That!, the Z-Word, don't say it!
- Why?
- Because it's ridiculous!

25 The horror genre (and the zombie sub-genre) is not embraced without reservation however. The rom-com is displaced but in no way suppressed.

26 At this point, the film engages in a re-reading of earlier scenes and lines, which functions as an investigation of the two main genres. Lines, gags and even entire scenes are thus presented twice or more. These repetitions most often straddle the generic divide (30th minute) and are thus presented in a radically changed context: a different situation in the diegesis and a different genre. They highlight the respective convention of the rom-com and the zombie genres by applying them to recurring situations. These repetitions also emphasize Shaun's own development by contrast.

27 In most cases, the zombie genre implies a shift towards a visual realization of verbal violence and conventional phrases, in line with the ideological function of a genre often used to reveal the underside of modern society.

> "Next time I see him, he's dead!"

28 However, the structure of the first half is not strictly reversed. The rom-com may be marginalized, but not to the same extent as the zombie film initially is. On several occasions, the zombie narrative is explicitly "put on hold" while interpersonal conflicts play out...

29 "Two seconds! / Hey, Noodle! Yeah man, I can't talk now!" (again, a repeated line)

30 ... though zombies make their presence felt quickly, propelling the survival plot forward again.

31 Thus, while in the first part of the film, the zombie genre is confined to brief non-sequitur shots and peripheral information, in the second part, the genre can still be bracketed off, to accommodate rom-com developments, which are provided with virtual but ostensible secluded places, removed from the pressure of the zombie plot.

32 This imbalance between the two genres is nowhere as evident as in the pay-off to a long-running joke about Shaun's father-in-law (B. Nighy), which eventually comes to encompass Shaun's mother as well.

33 Following the pattern established by the rest of the film, the recurring "he's not my father" becomes literally true when he is zombified. The personal, dismissive judgment becomes an expression of that central zombie theme: defining humanity (Paffenroth 2006: 10-2).

> - We can't leave your Dad!
> - He's not my Dad!/Mum, he was, but he's not anymore [...] There is nothing of the man you loved in this car !

34 A more pressing variation on this interrogation occurs when Shaun's mother is bitten in turn. This signals the appearance of a familiar trope in zombie films. What do you do when a loved one "turns"? When do people cease to be human?

> - She's a zombie.
> - She's my mum!
> - She'll change!

35 However, this genre-defining moment is once again bracketed off, while the scene brings forward interpersonal relationships: Ed's role, Liz's feelings for Shaun, etc. This digression is even acknowledged as such in the sequence.

36 These rom-com elements derail the questioning about the humanity of Shaun's mother or lack thereof in order to reconstitute the film's initial set-up. Ed's role as Shaun's abject double, for instance, is underlined again, using the same camera movement as in the pre-credits scene.

37 The scene then makes explicit the rivalries and jealousies within the group. The zombie-hardened Shaun dispels the threat of his sexual rival, David, and ends up punching him.

38 Furthermore, the scene parodies the iconic stand-off in Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) with echoes of the Russian roulette scene in *The Deer Hunter* (Cimino 1978). This visual playfulness undermines any serious questioning about the humanity of the

characters. Instead, the whole scene verges on parody: appearances used humorously, with little regard for their previous meaning.

39 Again, zombies reassert themselves voraciously at the end of the scene, breaking the windows and entering the "sheltered place." Nevertheless, the key moment of the genre is subverted both on a formal and thematic level.

40 These observations should lead us to re-examine Pegg's claim that in *Shaun of the Dead*, the zombies and the romantic comedy — those two emblematic genres of the Blair years in British cinema — are kept "intact and separate." As we have demonstrated, the two genres do intersect and interact, in spite of the ostensible chronological division.

41 On the one hand, the revival of horror, with the subgenres of the survival / postapocalyptic film, sometimes in combination with the zombie film, was becoming a prominent part of the British production, with landmark titles like *28 Days Later* (Boyle 2002) and – admittedly after the release of *Shaun of the Dead* – *The Zombie Diaries* (Bartlett 2007), *28 Weeks Later* (Fresnadillo 2007) *and The Dead Outside* (Mullaney 2008), to name a few (see Blake (2008, 161-185,) for more on "New Labour New Horrors"). On the other hand, the continuation of the trend of the romantic comedy that really got started with *Four Weddings and a Funeral* in 1994 was to last well into the 2000s.

42 In terms of structure, the zombie apocalypse can be subsumed into the variety of disruptive events to be found in the earlier Ealing comedies (anecdotally, *Shaun* was filmed in part at the Ealing studios):

- Initial situation: familiar order, conventions, bachelors.
- Disruption (Zombies in *Shaun*; forced isolation in *Passport to Pimlico* [Cornelius 1949]; alcohol in *Whisky Galore* [Mackendrick 1949]): Revealing personalities, allowing repressed drives to come out.
- Conclusion: partial restoration (As in *The Ladykillers* [Mackendrick 1955], the disruption may leave lasting traces), happy couple.

43 Yet:

44 The opposite is not true, as romance is noticeably absent from zombie films. *Welcome to Zombieland* (Fleischer 2009), *Warm Bodies* (Levine 2013), and *Fido* (Currie 2006) are notable exceptions, which can be seen as generic hybrids.

45 The zombie genre is thus euphemized. As we have seen, key scenes of the film, among which its conclusion, are affected by this process.

46 "Things are going to change" was the promise of the opening scene. To what extent is this verified?

47 Liz and Shaun (and Ed to a certain extent) are left alive, which maintains a compatibility with the scenario described above. Ed, as well as the other surviving zombies, is tamed, domesticated. Regressive pulsions and abjection are thus contained. A repeated shot — at the very beginning of the film (post-credits) and at its very end — encapsulates this movement in which "things" have not changed radically, but all the regressive and potentially asocial drives have been vanquished, banished to the shed along with Ed (this was itself foreshadowed in the first part of the film at 23:00).

48 The very idea of safety which pervades the later scene is never an option in zombie films: even in *28 Weeks Later*, the film begins with the illusion that London has been cleared of the zombie threat, and every viewer in their right mind knows that it is not likely to last.

49 It is probably in this context that the avoidance of the “z- word” by the protagonists makes sense: by repeating this joke several times in the film, Edgar Wright teasingly (and jokingly) inscribes in his film something like a structure of denial. While Romero chooses not to use the word "zombie" in his original trilogy, apart from a brief mention in Dawn of the Dead, Wright and Pegg acknowledge it but have their protagonists reject the very notion.

50 In the end, denial is the name of the game *Shaun of the Dead* invites its spectator to play, whereas it can be argued that the point of every zombie movie in the Romero mold is to favour the emergence of the real. This may be due to the comic slant introduced by parody — exacerbating an element only present intermittently in Romero's films — or to the hybrid status of a text which relies so much on the conventions of romantic comedy, i.e. a genre of repression and denial. Pegg's claim that the film was meant to keep the two genres "intact and separate" is disproved by the many examples of interferences or blurring of boundaries throughout the film.

51 The combination of a fundamentally escapist genre with a profoundly realist one results in an unstable hybrid, eventually assimilable into the romantic-comedy structure rather than into the zombie genre. The playful use of references and in-jokes creates an imbalance in favor of a genre which always hinges on self-parody and self-awareness. The result is a film which pays its respects to the zombie tradition and its imagery but radically disproves any subversive undertones it may retain by situating it into a structure which favors a restored order rather than the radical "change" hinted at during the pre-credits scene.

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ABSTRACTS

This article on comics purports to examine genre dynamics in *Shaun of the Dead* (Wright 2005). In particular, it seeks to detail the interactions between the romantic-comedy elements present in the film and its ostensible alignment with the zombie genre in the Romero mold. The article argues that a close analysis of the film's narrative structure belies the apparent balance between the two genres, which the filmmakers sought to keep "separate and intact". Through an analysis of the role of repetitions, references and influences, the article details the inscription of the zombie plot in the pliable structure of the romantic-comedy, along with the effect of this inscription on the subtext of the zombie genre.

L'objectif de cette article en forme de bande dessinée est d'examiner le jeu des affiliations génériques dans le *Shaun of the Dead* (Wright 2005). Il s'attache en particulier aux rapports entre les éléments relevant de la comédie romantique et ceux qui inscrivent ouvertement le film dans la tradition des films de zombies inspirés par George Romero. S'appuyant sur une lecture détaillée de la structure narrative du film, ce texte cherche à montrer le caractère très relatif de équilibre entre les deux genres, que les réalisateurs souhaitaient maintenir « séparés mais intacts ». Par une analyse des répétitions, références et influences, ce texte entend rendre compte de la façon dont le film de zombie se voit inscrit et contenu dans une structure de comédie romantique, ainsi que des répercussions génériques de cet enchâssement.

INDEX

Keywords: genre, horror, romantic comedy, comics, film, Romero George, Wright Edgar
Mots-clés: genre, horreur, comédie romantique, bande dessinée, cinéma, Romero George, Wright Edgar

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Photographing the Miner's Strike at Lea Hall Colliery, 1984-1987: Interview with photographer Nigel Dickinson

Mathilde Bertrand

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Transcript:

1 Okay, well... This work I started at the beginning the strike. I went to Lee Hall colliery to a picket line by chance with a lot of friends. In fact, it was with the miner's support group from Birmingham miner's support group and we went to a lot of different picket lines. And when I went to the Lee Hall picket line, there was just something that happened there that made me want to go there again. It made me feel that I wanted to do something more important with that particular group of people.

2 In fact, the picture from the front of the book shows Huey, who is the black guy with the V sign like that [gestures] and the interesting thing about that picture, of course, is that on one level you know he's saying 'Victory!', but he's also saying 'Fuck you!' So that's the whole point. And Huey, who became a very good friend of mine, he was that type of person. He didn't care about getting arrested or doing anything that would antagonize the police, because it was always this relationship between the strikers on the police, where the police were trying to hold down the strikers, and the strikers trying to, you know, be empowered.

3 There was a very interesting little event that happened in the strike actually, a little bit later on, but I'll talk about it now... there was a Chief Inspector Nesbitt, and there was a song that was written by the cultural theatre group Banner Theatre. Banner Theatre was a musical group. Three Davids, I think they were, and they had one of their famous songs which was about Chief Inspector Nesbitt and it went something like: 'Chief

Inspector Nesbitt, Chief Inspector Nesbitt, Chief Inspector Nesbitt, DI DI DEE, DI DI DEE DEE, DI DI DEE DEE. Now I'll tell you what the DI DI is once I've told you the story because, otherwise, that defeats the punchline.

4 It was wintertime. There was heavy snow. There was the legal number of strikers on the picket lines and they had built a snowman and Chief Inspector Nesbitt arrived with his Range Rover and he said to the strikers: 'Well, this snowman constitutes another person. You have to either get rid of the snowman or you have to get one man less on the picket.' And the people refused to do that. And Chief Inspector Nesbitt being that he was a bit of a bastard, like a lot of the police were, he reversed his Range Rover and ran over the Snowman. And the song went like this: 'It was DEE DEE DEE DEE and Chief Inspector Nesbitt ran over a concrete block and he totaled his car', totally, on this concrete block around which the Snowman was built... and wrecked his car. So that was one of the sort of highlights in the strike, and just one of those funny instances that happened.

5 Lee Hall was a minority bit. And that meant that there were something like 200 miners who were on strike, and there were something like 800 who were going to work. So Lee Hall was particular because of that. And there were a lot of minority bits in the Nottingham area and Staffordshire and that made it very difficult, and it also made Lee Hall very interesting because the solidarity that existed amongst the strikers — not just the strikers but also the women, the wives — was exceptionally strong.

6 The miners' wives to an extent held this strike together, because when it came towards the end of the strike, when some of the men started to feel the crunch, the lack of money, there were often women who were saying: 'You know we're out on strike with you; you don't go back.' And there was one woman who said to her husband quite famously: 'If you go back to work, I'll break your legs!' So there was this type of support that existed, this type of relationship that existed within the communities which made the solidarity of the strike so important.

7 For me, I started working at Lee Hall... and I suppose I went every single week from whatever time that I started going to this to the legal picket line... it wasn't at the very beginning, it was probably a month or two in, and probably I'd go up there a couple of times a week, sometimes I'd stay over, sometimes I'd stay in their houses, whatever... and I was very much a permanent member of the strike, if you like, as an outsider. And there were a lot of people going in and out of Lee Hall, and a lot of people from Lee Hall who were involved in the miners' support committee in Birmingham, which was a whole mixture of Trade Council, political parties, individuals and so forth.

8 And, to begin with, a lot of the solidarity that took place with the miners sort of came out from outside. And I think what happened during the strike was that the miners and the wives became more involved in everything that was supporting them, so that in fact it was them who were involved in the support groups. So it was actually... you know, you got rid of all the petty politics that happened to an extent, that began with different political parties, different left-wing groups who were there who wanted to push for their own ends. Classically there were certain groups at the beginning of the strike who didn't want to be collecting food for the miners or things like that. They wanted to be out on the picket lines and fighting for the miners.

9 And there was a classic cartoon in one of the papers of a striker on a picket line throwing a can of baked beans at a policeman, and it was ridiculed that this can of baked beans would hit the policemen and that would stop the strike. But, in fact, it was

exactly that that was necessary, because eventually it became this war of attrition, and it became a very very long strike, a year-long strike, and it was the support and it was the solidarity of the people with the miners, and that was huge for that solidarity with them which enabled the miners to be on strike for so long.

10 In terms of my own involvement, I mean... I don't know... I mean it's like with most of the work that I do. I create a relationship and suddenly that work takes over. The work that I did with Lee Hall Colliery... I thought the work took place over a three or four-year period. So it started in 1984 and the book probably was produced in 87, the exhibition in 86. So the book wasn't just about the strike itself, it was about the year after the strike, it was about all the solidarity, and it was also about the way in which the miners and the miners' wives learnt, and how they gave solidarity with other groups, so that it was actually about their development of people.

11 They were involved with me all the way through. I mean I became part of that group of people who were on strike. So that, in a way, relates to how I'd learnt to work, because when I was at college I was reading a lot, and I used to like reading Brecht, I used to like reading Walter Benjamin. I read this essay by Walter Benjamin, 'Author as producer,' and in that essay Walter Benjamin talks about the relationship with the means of production, and he says, I think, what is important is not the relationship... not the point of view that somebody has towards an activity, but what is his relationship within it, what is his relationship within the means of production, and to an extent that is something that operated for me... in terms of how I operate as a photographer or a filmmaker... is that I'm not just somebody who has a point of view. I'm somebody who works within, and I become part of that, and then to an extent I express a collective point of view about what's going on.

12 In the end of the book, when we eventually put the book to bed, if you like, or we put the exhibition to bed, first of all, we all got together and I brought some writers with me towards the end of the strike who were people from the same sort of political point of view, and people who had worked with Banner [Theatre] and had worked with Charlie Parker and had worked with this sort of history of the labour movement. They came from this history of working with labour movements and working in media and working in a way where they gave a voice to the people... who were filming or working in radio, or whatever happened to be.

13 So it wasn't just about, you know, being somebody like the BBC or a media and coming in and photographing and going away. It was giving people a voice and trying to represent those people's voices. And so that's what we did. We got together, we did lots of interviews with people, we got everybody together for a weekend, and for a whole weekend everybody talked about what had gone on during the strike. And we had pictures on the wall, we put texts that we'd had from previous weekends... Eventually you've got this exhibition, as it were *pro forma* exhibition, a rough exhibition: lots of pictures... And you can see that in the end of the book. There's a picture which shows all of us looking at these pictures, and people pointing at various pictures, and that's what happened.

14 And there were lots of disagreements about... there were lots of disagreements about, you know, which pictures should be in, and which texts should be in, and so forth... and we talked about it. And, to an extent, virtually everything that I wanted to put in, and the writers wanted to put in, was put in. There were things added, there were certain little things taken away, and, you know, it was a collective point of view that the

problem was, of course... that there were some people who wouldn't like things that were said... So what happened was that when we had all these images on the wall, there were certain men who didn't like it to be said that they were chauvinist and macho. And the women had said these things, because it *was* the case. And we had arguments with the men to say, 'Well, look, you know, this is the point of view of the women.' You know that it was difficult for them, and they agreed that this had happened, but they thought that it detracted from the strengths of the work by having this type of conversations in the book, and we argued with them that actually this was a strength of the work because the work was about the reality of what happened. It wasn't trying to gloss over everything, it wasn't trying to gloss over what had actually happened, and what the difficulties were. So eventually all these things were left in.

15 One of the nice things after the work was produced was that the Lee Hall strikers and women ... I should say the Lee Hall miners and miners' wives, they took the exhibition around, and sometimes there were places where they would be able to put up the work, there were other times where right-wing councils or right-wing municipalities didn't want to put up the work. I was told of one event where they went down in a coach to this place with the exhibition, and because they were not allowed to put the exhibition up in the council house, or whatever it happened to be, they stood outside in the sort of plaza in front of the town hall and everybody held a panel of the exhibition and that's how they stood there for the whole afternoon. So this was marvellous. They felt very proud of this exhibition which was theirs, and, you know, this is what it was about: they were communicating through the work that we produced together something which they wanted to show to the rest of the world.

16 I took all the pictures, I mean, it wasn't as though they'd taken the pictures, but they had participated in the strike and the strike was about them, and 'Hanging On By Your Fingernails' [the title of the book] is, in a way, it's like a pamphlet about how to go on strike. It teaches people who've never been on strike, what could be the problems you'd face, and how do you get by. And then each double page, or each series of pages, deals with a different thing, and that's how it came together.

17 The way in which the project was financed... basically, to begin with, I financed everything myself. When it came to producing the exhibition, that was a time where I actually looked for financing, and I got finances twice from the West Midlands Art, which is part of the Arts Council of Great Britain, and they funded the production of the exhibition, and they also helped towards the production of the book which was then published by Spokesman Press. In terms of earning money, I didn't earn a great deal of money from it. I mean there wasn't enough money available in the pot to really make it work, and a lot of the miners were having a hard time. Some of them had been victimized, some of them had been sacked. What I agreed to do was to work for the minimum wage that a miner got, which was very small amount, and now when I look back on it, I think that was a terrific mark for solidarity, because I wouldn't work for those sort of wages ever again... but at that time, it seemed the best way to do it, and I knew that the miners and the strike committee and everybody else was reaching in their pockets to help it, so I did that myself as well. I mean, I worked all hours of the day to produce it, but I didn't mind. And a lot of friends came to help me to produce a book, to do the design and everything like that ... I was paid all the materials to produce the exhibition, etc. and I did it all myself. That was the time of typesetting and galley proofs and no computers or anything like that. So everything was typeset, all the

pictures printed the exact size that they should be. They were stuck down onto a piece of paper and the typesetting was stuck down. So I did every single page and then we laminated it and just hoped that one of them wasn't wrecked on the panels, and none of them were, so we were okay.

18 So it was a solidarity... it was a solidarity action, it was a collective work. It was... we did it in the way that felt right and everybody was happy with it. I remember hunting for ages and ages and ages for a picture which would give this overall feeling of Lee Hall and the village, and the power station. The power station was this very important symbol of Lee Hall because Lee Hall quarry was right next to the power station. And then there was Rugeley itself, and there was this tree... and so that just was, I think for everybody, that was the image which presented in a way the death of that community, because unfortunately what happened was that Lee Hall was closed down, just like so many others.

19 If we look at this one here, the Lucky Strike... that was great. There was a lot of interesting people who supported the strike and she was... I can't remember her name, but she was like a sort of punk hippie person who had this huge knotted *stump*, as one of the miners' women called it, she said... I remember one of them said: 'Well, I wish my husband had a stump like this!' So these type of comments that came from miners... and it was this fantastic solidarity and also acceptance of other cultures, I mean. That was what was interesting because the miners were on the whole quite conservative, working-class people, but very much changed in the experience of the strike, and the people who came to help them and were in solidarity with them were people who were completely different to the type of people they would meet had they not been on strike. So this was one of the sort of marvelous things that happened during the strike... that it brought all these different types of people together.

20 Yes, this picture here... very important picture, probably one of the best pictures I did during the strike, who knows. I mean there was this propaganda from the government all the time. Lots of lies every single day. There were figures put up, released by the Coal Board and the government, shown on the BBC, with the numbers of people who *apparently* had gone back to work or *had* gone back to work... and so there was this war, really, this psychological war that was going on, and this picture epitomizes that, because you've got the striking miners' family who are sort of living in difficult circumstances, and the toys, and the things that they've got, and the coal that were given to them... all this comes from the solidarity that they received, so that picture is all about that.

21 There was this war of attrition that the BBC was fighting along with the government to make people go back to work. It was very hard and a lot of people couldn't take it any longer, and a lot of people went back to work, unfortunately. Not the majority, but some did, some couldn't deal with it and the people who went back to work felt guilty forever after, you know. And it was very very difficult. And, of course, there were even families where you had both working miner scabs and strikers in the same family, and that caused enormous splits.

22 Well I think that the people who were proud were the strikers, you know. They were the people who fought. They didn't win, they lost the battle, they lost the war, but they came out with pride, yes.

23 There's a picture of me here, picture of the artist as a young lad, being kissed by one of the women. I think that was at Barnoldswick. I think it was a solidarity march for the

garment workers in Lancashire, and it was just part of what happened out of the marvellous solidarity that the miners' wives and the miners felt, and they went and supported other strikes, and other struggles, in the same way they had been supported.

24 This picture here, I gave it to him and he looked at it, and he said: 'I'll stick that on the garden gates and that will keep the dogs away.'

25 I mean I stayed friends with many of those people until now. I mean, some of them are still my very best friends, even though we don't see each other very much. I've had exhibitions in London where, you know, people who were part of the Lee Hall 'Hanging On By Your Fingernails' exhibition have come, and seen exhibitions that I've done, lets say, about the Roma. When I was 51, one of them sent me a miner's lamp. That was very nice.

26 You never forget because we were all there in it together. It was it was a very strong experience. I went back for the 25th anniversary of the strike. My aim had been and it may still be to do something more about the strike. I wanted to do Lee Hall revisited, I wanted to video people, I wanted to get people's point of view, I wanted to make an exhibition where we were photographing them before and now, and they were sort of interested in doing that, and it did rekindle some of the feelings that we had when we were working collectively, together. I had great difficulty getting funds for that, I had great difficulty getting interest from any major local gallery in the area of Birmingham, Wolverhampton, and Staffordshire, to actually put on a show and I had difficulty finding any support from the labour movement ... unfortunately I didn't carry it on. I mean, there's still the possibility of doing something, but I didn't do it. And what can you do? The 30th anniversary has just gone, or is just in the middle of, so again ... it's a little bit like if I want to do it now, I have to do it by myself. There doesn't seem to be the support from anywhere to do it, and at the time when the strike was going on, it was really the time to do it. And I would never wish that I never did it because it was a fantastic thing to do, and it was part of solidarity and everything else, but now, to do a revisit, it's harder because people aren't together anymore. The miners' communities were full of solidarity and the miners' communities were full of solidarity not only in times of strike but in times of working in the mines, because the miners had to look after each other, so there was an extraordinary feeling of collectivity within the miners, and that's something that has been lost. And so for me to come back and do that again... it just didn't seem appropriate. We'll see maybe another time... I'm doing lots of other revisits to other projects.

ABSTRACTS

In the spring of 1984, a few months after the beginning of the Miner's Strike against pit closures, Nigel Dickinson joined the struggle of the miners and their families at Lea Hall colliery, a "minority pit" in Staffordshire, photographing all aspects of a dispute which went on for a year. His involvement with the community continued after the strike ended. Collectively, the Lea Hall Strike Centre used Dickinson's photographs for an exhibition shown around the country as well

as a book entitled *Hanging On By Your Fingernails* (Spokesman Press, 1987). In this interview Nigel Dickinson talks about his personal involvement and working conditions, emphasizing the construction of a sense of collective action which the photographs contributed to sustain.

Au printemps 1984, quelques mois après le début de la grève des mineurs en Grande-Bretagne, Nigel Dickinson rejoint la lutte des grévistes et de leurs familles dans le village minier de Lea Hall dans le Staffordshire. Lea Hall Colliery est l'une des exploitations où les grévistes sont minoritaires. Le photographe documente tous les aspects de ce conflit qui s'est étiré sur un an. Son implication dans la communauté se poursuit jusqu'en 1987. Au long de cette période, les membres du Lea Hall Strike Centre, organisation qui gère le quotidien de la grève, travaillent en collaboration étroite avec Nigel Dickinson sur les photographies qu'il a réalisées, et produisent une exposition ainsi qu'un ouvrage intitulé *Hanging On By Your Fingernails* (Spokesman Press, 1987). Dans cet entretien, Nigel Dickinson évoque son engagement personnel dans la grève ainsi que ses conditions de travail. Il insiste sur le processus de construction d'un sens de l'action collective, processus dans lequel les photographies ont joué un rôle indéniable.

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Mots-clés: grève des mineurs, Royaume-Uni, Dickinson Nigel, photographie, représentation, action collective, participation, mémoire, syndicalisme, entretien
Keywords: UK, miner's strike, Dickinson Nigel, photography, representation, collective action, participation, memory, unions, interview

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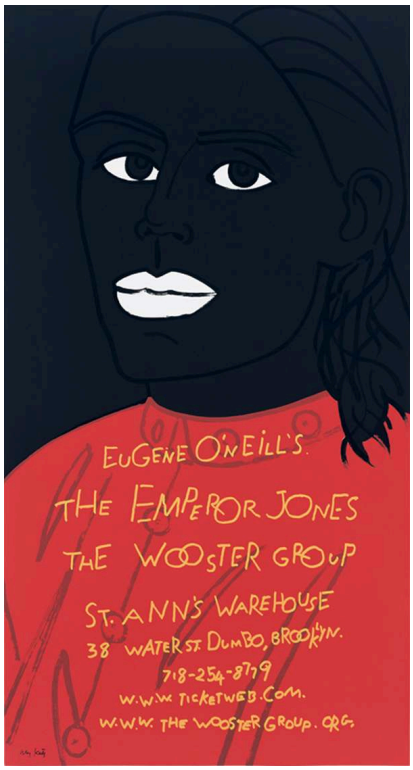
Gender and Race Trouble: *The Emperor Jones* by The Wooster Group

Emeline Jouve

Figure 1: Charles Gilpin in *The Emperor Jones* (1920)

Source: ProvincetownPlayhouse.Com http://www.provincetownplayhouse.com/history.html

Figure 2: Poster of The Wooster Group's *The Emperor Jones*



Print by Alex Katz. Source: The Wooster Group Website, http://thewoostergroup.org/posters

1 In *Gender Trouble* (1990) and later in *Bodies That Matter* (1993), philosopher Judith Butler argues that identity is not a biological phenomenon but is produced through "discourses." Identity is thus "performative" in that "it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (*Gender Trouble* 185). Although Butler focuses mainly on gender identity in her works, she reminds her readers in the introduction to *Bodies That Matter* that racial identity is "always a racial industry," that it is, like gender, the product of reiterated social practices or acts (*Bodies* xxvii).[1] As a consequence, identity is constructed and defined by the cultural context in which one lives, a context which fixes the individual's social identity depending on predefined socio-historical criteria. Rejecting the postulate of stable selves, Butler calls on individuals to "trouble" the long-standing, stifling definitions of identities which trap them into specific categories. As long-standing "trouble-makers," The Wooster Group plays with fixed patterns and creates productions that are relevant to Butler's theory. Although the members of the iconoclastic American company deny any interest in theory and assert in interviews that they are just "making art," I argue in this paper that Butler's premise on the performative nature of identity offers valuable insights into The Wooster Group's works and, in particular, into their 1993 revival of Eugene O'Neill's most controversial play, *The Emperor Jones*, first performed in 1920 by the Provincetown Players.[2] This play in eight scenes dramatizes the attempted escape of African-American-*cum*-island dictator Brutus Jones after his subjects have rebelled against him. Jones's spatial journey through the forest becomes a psychological journey of "racial" memory as the former slave recalls scenes from his early life, from the time before he had established himself as Emperor of an island in the West Indies.

2 Starring OBIE-Award winning white actress Kate Valk as a black-faced Brutus Jones, The Wooster Group's production "troubles" the traditional configurations of both gender and race. Elizabeth LeCompte's company questions the playwright's construction of racial and gender identity. Butler believes that to free individuals from the yoke of norms it is necessary to overturn the power of the sign, of the symbolic. I will demonstrate in this essay's second part that The Wooster Group's staging proves symbolically subversive as it plays with the codes of representation to create new fluid, polymorphic categories that shed light on the artificiality of the conventional binary system opposing the masculine to the feminine and Whites to Blacks. Yet, one may wonder to what extent The Wooster Group succeeded in displacing the "strict lines [that are] drawn between the performance and life", overcoming another type of binary system which is paradoxically that of theatre itself as it confronts the imaginary with reality, i.e. the stage with the audience (Butler "Performative Acts" 278).

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From Construction to Deconstruction

Construction: Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*

Figure 3: ***The Emperor Jones*** by The Provincetown Players (1920)

Credit: The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Source: https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/oneill-gallery-performances-and-reviews-oneill-plays/.

3 Hailed as the "Father of the Modern American Theatre," Eugene O'Neill's dramatic progeny were not very diverse in terms of gender. As Judith E. Barlow asserts, the playwright "created a world populated primarily by men" (164). In *The Emperor Jones*,

for example, O'Neill immerses his readers in an all male-world. Apart from the character of The Old Native Woman, who has no other function than setting the context of the rebellion at the opening of the play, all the characters are men: "BRUTUS JONES, *Emperor*; HENRY SMITHERS, *a Cockney trader*; LEM, *a Native Chief*; SOLDIERS, *Adherents of Lem*" (O'Neill 3). Unsurprisingly, the play deals with themes that are traditionally associated with masculinity, such as the issues of domination and honor as well as with the anxiety of losing power. The Old Native Woman appears merely as a subordinate figure because she embodies fear and submission and acts as a foil for the other characters present in Scene 1. From the start of the play, she helps to establish the supremacy of the male characters including Smithers and Jones whom she significantly refers to as the "Great Father" (O'Neill 7). The woman's brief appearance on stage before leaving the floor to the male characters helps to establish a contrast between presence and absence, visibility and invisibility, an opposition which is reminiscent of the patriarchal binary system that posits men at the center and women on the margins. By introducing the audience to a world where men rule and where women have no other part to play than to serve men, O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* offers from the outset a conservative vision of the relationships between the sexes. Furthermore, the issue of masculinity in the play is inextricably linked to that of race as all the male characters are black, with the sole exception of the British trader.

4 The play is considered as a landmark in the history of African-American acting since The Provincetown Players was the first white company featuring a black actor in a leading role (Figures 1 and 3). The black artist O'Neill entrusted with the part of Brutus Jones was Charles Gilpin, who, "by the time he took on the role of Emperor Jones was a veteran of minstrel shows" (Aberjhani and West 102). Although it would be too reductive to label Gilpin a "minstrel show actor", since he also played in Tom Shows and even played a white character in the 1915 production of Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon*, most of his early successes were indeed on the minstrelsy stage (Salzman, David and West, 1110). Prior to the 1920s, few black actors took part in productions by white directors and most were confined to the part of the minstrel "nigger" which mostly implied "caricaturing their physical characteristics and lampooning their intelligence" (McArthur 51). Even though O'Neill has been praised by scholars for his momentous decision to cast a black actor, Barry B. Witham asserts that Jasper Deeter, who played the part of Smithers in the original production, had, in fact, to convince the playwright *not* to choose a white actor for the part of Brutus:

> O'Neill's preference for a black actor has been widely documented, but Deeter claimed repeatedly that he lobbied for Gilpin rather than a more seasoned white actor—Charles Ellis—who would do the demanding role in blackface as was the custom. (Witham 29)

5 As Aoife Monks observes, the casting O'Neill finally agreed on was considered "radically progressive in an era of widespread black-face minstrel practice on the stage" (Monks 540). However, O'Neill did not totally manage to come to terms with the stereotypes of blackness conveyed in minstrelsy. Contrary to the expressionistic scenes that follow, the first scene of the play is realistic in style and supposedly offers a "realist" depiction of Brutus, only the playwright paradoxically does *not* introduce the readers to a realistic, true-to-life character but rather to a "type" since, for example, the protagonist is said to have "*typically negroid*" features (O'Neill 8). For many scholars, including Matthew H. Wikander, Brutus Jones appears as what was once referred to as a "Minstrel nigger": "In *The Emperor Jones*, the stage directions abound in stereotypes

('*Jones's eyes begin to roll wildly. He stutters* [...]') and the dialect is reminiscent of the minstrel show" (Wikander 225). This interpretation cannot be deemed anachronistic: in the 1920s, black commentators criticized O'Neill's play because it seemed to "portray the worst traits of the bad elements of both races," a view deplored by African-American scholar and activist W.E.B. Du Bois who applauded the dramatist for managing to go beyond the "almost universal misinterpretation" of the African-American ("The Negro and the American Stage" 228).

6 Scholars have been divided over the interpretations of O'Neill's intentions behind his dramatic portrayals of African-Americans, as Edward L. Shaughnessy reminds the readers of "O'Neill's African and Irish-Americans: stereotypes or faithful realism?" (149). For Robert Károly Sarlós, one of the first historians of the Provincetown Players, *The Emperor Jones* does not deal with race but, rather, with "the blatant duality of human nature" (124). Joel Pfister questions whether the playwright created Black characters the audience would sympathize with or whether he extended "the stereotypes [...] that inhabited the cultural swamp of [his] literary imagination" (132). Margaret Loftus Ranald's view is less nuanced: she believes that "The Emperor Jones presents serious difficulties because of its racist overtones" (207).

7 Politically, Eugene O'Neill had no agenda regarding civil rights. As Gwenola Le Bastard writes, if the playwright "contributed to the integration of black actors within the American theatre and of the black community within American society, [he] made no direct political claim" (§13). One may believe, as John Patrick Diggins contends, that O'Neill felt compassion for people of African descent but that this did not prevent him from inheriting the prejudices of the white society to which he belonged. Although O'Neill declared in 1946 that Charles Gilpin was the only actor who could "carry out every notion of a character [he] had in mind," O'Neill seemed, in the words of Wikander, to "have forgotten his dispute with Gilpin in 1920" when he learned that the actor, "suddenly finicky about using the work *nigger* (called for in the script), was rewriting the role." The playwright was even reported to have threatened the actor: "If I ever catch you rewriting my lines again, you black bastard, I'm going to beat you up" (qtd. in Wikander 224-225). O'Neill's attitude towards Gilpin may be read as evidence that the writer had not only to assert his authorial power but also his social authority over the black actor who, it should be said, was suffering from alcoholism, a problem that hampered his acting skills and infuriated the playwright. The white dramatist's decision to give center stage to black protagonists at a time when segregation reigned supreme was undeniably a step forward as it shed light on racial issues. However, since the political motivations of the artist were unclear, the political scope of the play was limited.

Deconstruction: Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* by The Wooster Group

Figure 4: Scott Shepherd, Kate Valk and Ari Fliakos in The Wooster Group's *The Emperor Jones*

Photo by Paula Court. Source: https://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/14/theater/reviews/an-emperor-who-tops-what-oneill-imagined.html

8 The Wooster Group introduces their works as "part of the radical post-modern experiments of the time" (The Wooster Group, Facebook). As a postmodernist theatre company, The Wooster Group deconstructs theatre in order to stress its "artificiality," as Andrew Quick writes in *The Wooster Group. Work Book* (8). Contrary to O'Neill's expressionist experimentations, which attempt to reinforce the power of illusion, The Wooster Group's postmodern aesthetics breaks the theatrical illusion by "self-consciously and systematically draw[ing] attention to its status as an artifact" (Waugh 2). In their production of *The Emperor Jones*, the tacky plastic palm trees on the boxing ring-like stage, which ostentatiously establish the fakeness of the set, or the presence of visible cables and backstage equipment which lays bare the fabric of the theatre, constantly remind the audience that they are watching a fiction. The Wooster Group's self-reflexivity also stems from the intermediality of a performance that mixes theatre, cinema, dance and music.

9 The metafictional nature of the performance is also conveyed by The Wooster Group's staging of the agents or "actors" of the creative process. *The Emperor Jones* starred three performers: Black-faced Kate Valk playing Brutus, Ari Fliakos and Scott Shepherd who alternated in playing Smithers and the Stage-Assistant.[3] Valk, Fliakos and Shepherd are introduced as performers, playing fictional parts: Valk's mask-like black face, her cross-race and gender performance as well as Valk and Fliakos's Kabuki costumes (Figure 4), all work as "emblems of the actor's impersonation in the American Minstrel tradition and the classical Japanese tradition" and as such identified Kate Valk and Ari Fliakos as actors (Jouve). Additionally, the blend of "Asian-African fusion" blurs the location of the plot and disorients the spectators (Frank). Moreover, throughout The

Wooster Group's production, the Stage-Assistant is present and the performance stresses his function as an off-stage figure participating in the creation of the show. He comes and goes during the performances and his backstage activities are visible because there is no curtain between the wings and the ring-like stage. The portrayal of Smithers fulfills multi-metatheatrical functions: introduced by the company as a fictive character impersonated by an actor, the Cockney trader also embodies the figures of the stage-director and of the playwright.

> The character of Smithers was staged as a figure of authority. Physically absent from the stage at the beginning of the first scene, the white trader was however "technologically" present on the TV screen; he could also be seen off-stage, speaking his lines into a microphone. Jones turned his back to both the technological and the real off-stage Smithers as if the emperor was interacting with a voice only. This presence-absence strategy conveyed the impression that, from the start, Smithers was both literally and figuratively "behind" Jones, that this character, who can be seen as the narrative catalyst of Brutus's doom, stood as a voice-spirit triggering Jones's actions and thus controlling him. Smither's control over Jones was akin to that of the stage-director or of the author over her or his actors or characters. Smither's made-up moustache bore a striking resemblance to Eugene O'Neill's. This "metatextual" echo established Jones as "the representational creation of [O'Neill], the seemingly 'absent' playwright but the true arbiter of Jones's fate." (Jouve)

10 The implied presence of O'Neill playing on stage suggests that The Wooster Group's purpose was to explore *The Emperor Jones* as the product of the playwright's subjectivity and to introduce Brutus Jones as an artifact created by O'Neill.

11 *The Emperor Jones* marked a turning point in LeCompte's career since "it was the first time the Group had presented a play under its original title, largely uncut and unaltered textually, and without the interpolation of any other scripted text" (Bechtel 128). In the group's previous works, which corresponded to Hans-Thies Lehmann's definition of "postdramatic theatre," the text was considered "as a 'material' of the scenic creation, not as its master" (Lehmann 17). In *The Emperor Jones*, however, the text plays a central role: the company explores the very construction of the text to deconstruct the playwright's subjective interpretation of the theme of identity in his play. By reviving the minstrel tradition and casting a female Brutus, Kate Valk, who "sounds like a large black man, snarling, elongating words, shifting the pitch and tempo of her lines, almost singing the phrases," The Wooster Group posits O'Neill's subjective interpretation of identity as stereotypical and exposes its white and male-centered biases (Frank).

The Power of the Symbolic: Repetition and Subversion

Eugene O'Neill and Symbolic Reiteration

12 O'Neill's Brutus Jones, as staged in The Wooster Group's production, can be seen as an illustration of what Judith Butler denounces as the fictitious dimension of identity in contemporary Western societies which value the "performative" over "the ontological" (*Gender Trouble* 185). The individual, according to the philosopher, is thus conditioned to reproduce a set of attitudes to match different social expectations corresponding to the racial and gender categories to which one belongs. Initially introduced as a realistic character in the first realistic scene of the play, Brutus should consequently be the

representative of *objective* reality—the representation of objective reality being central to realism—while he is, in fact, a representative of O'Neill's *subjective* reality, which somewhat mirrors the conventional segregationist social mechanisms at play in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century.

13 When Charles Gilpin questioned the use of the word "nigger" in O'Neill's script, he pointed out the power of the symbolic, of the signifier over the signified, a distinction that Butler later makes in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*. For Butler, identity—and thus gender and race identities—are abstract concepts which result from symbolic repetitions, that is, from "the repeated [naming and] stylization of the body, a seat of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (*Gender Trouble* 33). O'Neill's white patriarchal society provides a "rigid regulatory frame" by which the black individual must abide. By using the word "nigger" in his play and then, in a fit of anger, by calling his actor a "black bastard," O'Neill perpetrated the set frame of what Butler calls the "racial industry," that is, preconceived social visions of blackness. By attempting to get away from the prejudiced set patterns of the minstrel show and having a black actor on stage while paradoxically reproducing these very same patterns through stilted "*typically negroid*" characterization, O'Neill unintentionally demonstrated that he was trapped by the reiterative power of social discourses.

14 Very few scholars have discussed the presence of black-faced actors in O'Neill's production of *The Emperor Jones,* focusing instead their attentions on Gilpin, who not only became "the first Negro ever cast by a white American company for a major role," but also "the first black actor to achieve Broadway stardom in a non-musical drama," since *The Emperor Jones* was brought to Broadway after its initial success on the stage of the Provincetown Players (Sheaffer 32, Krasner 96). The parts of the Native Chief, Lem, and of The Native Woman were performed by black-faced white actors, respectively Charles Ellis—who had initially been cast as Brutus Jones, according to Jasper Deeter—and Christina Ell. Both Ellis and Ell were reported to have "blackened their bodies as required" by their parts (Smith 207). It can be argued that, from a formal perspective, black-facing is to race what drag is to gender, that is a "reidealization of hyperbolic [...] norms" (*Bodies that Matter* 85): by blackening their faces, the white actors of The Provincetown Players reiterated the conventions of the minstrel show which in itself was an exaggerated reiteration of the way black people were perceived in 1920s America; the blackened bodies of the white actors maintained the "norms that govern the intelligibility" of race (*Bodies that Matter* 96).[4]

15 "The omnipotence of whiteness as the social 'author' of identity is underscored in [O'Neill's] text by Jones's eagerness to pass as white, which stands as the norm, the normality that any free powerful man aspires to reach" (Jouve). In the character description, Brutus is described as being dressed like a white man in the American army:

> *He wears a light blue uniform coat, sprayed with brass buttons, heavy gold chevrons on his shoulders, gold braid on the collar, cuffs, etc. His pants are bright red with a light blue stripe down the side. Patent leather laced boots with brass spurs, and a belt with a long-barreled, pearl-handled revolver in a holster complete his makeup.* (8)

16 The term "makeup" posits Brutus's outfit as "a kind of parody of white clothing, a garish version of a western military outfit" (Monks 546). Brutus, like any individual according to Butler's theory, is deprived of any agency, he is not free to choose which

identity to enact, although he believes he can. The tragedy of the protagonist's life is indeed to think that by changing his costume, by dressing like a white man, he can change the script of his life, a belief that leads him to his death. In scene 1, for example, the protagonist claims that he has learned the lessons of life by "listenin' to de white quality talk": Brutus Jones is the product of white culture whose "talk[s]," or discourses, he blindly reproduces at his own expense (O'Neill 12). Rather than subverting the dominant racial discourse, he reiterates the symbolic and reinforces the racial framework which equates power with the whiteness that he tries to imitate. If O'Neill's protagonist can change his surface costume, i.e. his military outfit, he cannot change the ultimate costume he is made to wear: his black body.

17 To explain the performative dimension of the body, Butler introduces it as a *physical* signifier prior to the *linguistic* signifier which influences actions:

> The body posited as prior to the sign, is always *posited* or *signified* as *prior*. This signification produces an *effect* of its own procedure the very body that it nevertheless and simultaneously claims to discover as that which *precedes* its own action. If the body signified as prior to signification is an effect of signification, then the mimetic or representational status of language, which claims that signs follow bodies as their necessary mirrors, is not mimetic at all. On the contrary, it is productive, constitutive, one might even argue *performative*, inasmuch as this signifying act delimits and contours the body that it then claims to find prior to any and all definitions [emphases in the original]. (Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 6)

18 Brutus cannot escape the fate of matter. As the fall of the protagonist looms near, his body becomes increasingly visible. In Scene 4, Jones rids himself of the costumes of the white master which he now tellingly compares to a "strait jacket"—"I'm meltin' wid heat! Runnin' an' runnin' and runnin'! Damm dis heah coat! Like a strait jacked! [*He tears off his coat and flings it away from him, revealing himself stripped to the waist*]"—, but he cannot escape from social oppression. Instead, he is reduced to the original, social status which his skin color assigns him in American history: that of a slave (Scene 5), then that of a savage whom the white God cannot save (Scene 7) (O'Neill 33). In O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones,* bodies are symbolic of the conventional social order as illustrated by the depreciation of the black body and the invisibility of the female body.

The Wooster Group and the Crisis of the Symbolic

19 While *The Emperor Jones* relegates women to the margins of both plot and society, The Wooster Group's staging of O'Neill's play questions this symbolic absence. At the opening of the performance, the stage is plunged in darkness and there are no signs of life except for a TV monitor with a scrambled screen which then reveals the face of the Old Native Woman played by Kate Valk. The Wooster Group introduces life as artificial: the natural body of the actor is replaced by a televised image. The physical absence of the female character on stage stresses the theme of women's absence in O'Neill's patriarchal society. In this production, the native woman is the only character who speaks in Scene 1, as the lines of her interlocutor are omitted. While Smithers's silence could be seen as the symbol of the female character's empowerment, it actually reinforces the impression of her submission to a looming superior entity. Since no one replies, her fears of retribution by the white trader and her Emperor appear as internalized alienating fears of male authority. The silence surrounding her lines elicits palpable tension, a sense of suffocating oppression. Female alienation is also conveyed by the TV monitor itself, as the woman appears trapped by the superficial frame of the

video set. Just as The Wooster Group literalizes the metaphor of Jones's inability to escape his fate as a black man by pulling down a metallic structure which entraps the protagonist on the ring-like stage in Scene 7, they literalize the social metaphor of women's forced isolation in Scene 1. The issue of gender is complicated in this production by that of race by casting a female white lead to play the part of a black male, demonstrating that the problems of definitions of gender and racial identities are subject to similar mechanisms.

20 In "Brutus Jones 'n the 'Hood: The Provincetown Players, The Wooster Group, and the Theatrical History," Roger Bechtel examines the opening of the play and, focusing on the staging of race, argues that "from the outset of the performance, virtually every representation of race is in some way destabilized":

> Perhaps the most exemplary instance of this is the opening image, the digitally negativized picture of the old native woman, which loses none of its disorienting effect when Valk's actual face is first illuminated. In fact, the effect is compounded, for the negative image does not serve as a relativizing erasure of the black makeup on Valk's face, but instead creates a racial hybrid that neither melds the two races nor privileges one over the other. Not only is the digital "whiteface" troubled by its black lips and eyes, but the dialect it speaks is clearly Afro-Caribbean. When we see the actual Valk in blackface, we understand that the screen image is a video distortion of a black face—or is it? (Bechtel 148-149)

21 Echoing the beginning of the play, the closing scene, in which the faces of Smithers and Lem—both played by Fliakos—appear on the TV monitor, also helps to destabilize the construction of racial identities as the black negative image of Fliako's face representing Lem and the positive image representing Smither call "into question the stability of racial origins" (Monks 556). Of course, the stability of racial, gender identity is also questioned by Valk's performance since, on screen, she represents a *woman* right before appearing, "live," wearing the blackface mask of the male minstrel as the male Emperor. This series of reversals challenges accepted patterns of gender and racial representations. The Wooster Group's use of videos, which often function as the reiteration of a previous image, can be interpreted as the staging of the Butlerian theory of symbolic repetition fostering social identities. The Wooster Group's repetition of normative patterns, which they subvert through technological and performative masking, creates hybrid bodies, both black and white, male and female that helps to destabilize conventional notions of race and gender.

22 Hybridity defines the very aesthetic of The Wooster Group's *The Emperor Jones*, an aesthetic which Aoife Monks defines in terms of "cross-dressing":

> Cross-dressing can be immediately located in the Wooster Group's production, with Valk's gendered, raced, Orientalist, and mediated crossings on stage. Cross-dressing manifests itself in the production through a variety of masks: the make-up, costume, and vocal stylization, and the technological masks provided by the Wooster Group's famous use of television screens and microphones on the stage. (Monks 542)

23 As Cherise Smith, quoting Marjorie Garber, reminds us, "cross-dressing goes beyond the popular understanding of a man wearing woman's clothing and instead includes any type of crossing of identity boundaries, whether ethnic, class, religious, sexual or otherwise" (15). "One of the goals of the cross-dresser," Smith adds, "is to pass temporally as or for the assumed identity" (15). I would argue that, in The Wooster Group's production, "cross-dressing" is not an attempt to pass as an "other," to *cross* in the sense of to *go beyond* the boundaries of genders and races to impersonate a new

social persona. The ensemble's "cross-dressing" is rather a constant *criss-crossing* of boundary lines that fosters hybrid figures. By playing with hybridity through such *criss-crossing*, the company provokes what Butler calls a "crisis in the symbolic." Focusing on the theme of the sexed body in her chapter "Gender is Burning" from *Bodies that Matter*, Butler writes:

> The crisis in the symbolic understood as a crisis over what constitutes the limits of intelligibility, will register as a crisis in the name and in the morphological stability that the name is said to confer... The body which fails to submit to the law or occupies that law in a mode contrary to its dictate, thus loses its sure footing—its cultural gravity—in the symbolic and reappears in its imaginary tenuousness, its fictional direction. Such bodies contest the norms that govern the intelligibility of sex. (Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 96)

24 For Butler, American novelist Willa Cather is one of the few artists who manages to subvert the performative power of signs. "In Cather's fiction," she writes, "the name not only designates a gender uncertainty, but produces a crisis in the figuration of sexed morphology as well. [...] [I]n this sense, Cather's fiction can be read as the foundering and unraveling of the symbolic on its own possible demands" (97). Butler continues:

> Cather cites the paternal law, but in places and ways that mobilize a subversion under the guise of loyalty. Names fail fully to gender the characters whose femininity and masculinity they are expected to secure. The name fails to sustain the identity of the body within the terms of cultural intelligibility; body parts disengage from any common center, pull away from each other, lead separate lives, become sites of phantasmatic investments that refuse to reduce to singular sexualities. (Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 97)

25 Like Cather, The Wooster Group cite the paternal law by staging O'Neill in their production and they subvert this law. The signifiers or the symbols that carry meaning, the costumes and the masks in the theatre, fail not only to gender the fictional figures but also to assign a racial identity to the characters whose bodies are staged as hybrid. The Wooster Group's staging disrupts the fixed patterns of social identity in which O'Neill's characters are trapped.

The Wooster Group, Theatre and Resistance

Performance and Performativity

26 In her article "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," Judith Butler questions the power of theatre as a place of resistance.[5] Because she considers performance to be the repetition of a preexisting model, she argues that artistic performances and performing arts are rarely subversive. The Wooster Group proves Butler wrong, however, in part at least, as we shall see. If on the level of the *modes of representation* the company manages to break away from repetitive patterns, we may wonder whether they actually manage to displace the "strict lines [that are] drawn between the performance and life" (Butler "Performative Acts" 278).

27 Butler asserts in an interview that "[w]hereas performance presupposes a preexisting subject, performativity contests the very notion of the subject" (Salih 56). Significantly, The Wooster Group's *The Emperor Jones* effectively illustrates this opposition between

performance and performativity. Since its creation in 1975, the group led by Elizabeth LeCompte has been breaking away from the tradition of realistic theatre in which performance—the bringing to life on stage of a story, the enactment of a narrative—is a faithful physical translation of a text based on "preexisting" social patterns that it mimics. Rather than offering a realistic imitation of O'Neill's script, the troupe's performance subverts the repetition of the symbolic both through the visual construction of hybrid bodies and the confrontation of two levels of performativity. By textually citing the normative paternal law and playing on visual subversions through racial and gender cross-dressing, the company confronts two semiological systems: the visual sign, on the one hand, and the linguistic sign, on the other. The visual sign system, which is composed of the bodies of the actors, the costumes, the set, etc., contradicts the script, the linguistic sign system, or what Butler calls the "name." There is indeed an opposition between the text, which refers to a black man, for example, and its visual rendering, since the black man is represented on stage by a black-faced white woman. This opposition between the performativity of the written signs (the first level of performativity) and the performativity of the visual signs (the second level of performativity) suggests that the performance does not reproduce or repeat the first level of performativity but, on the contrary, fosters a new level of performativity.

28 The Wooster Group demonstrates that, as an art of performance, theatre has the power to resist the vicious circle of repetition as the performance does not repeat the preexisting script but has the power to subvert it and create new meanings.[6] Through cross-dressing, the company enacts this resistance. Although parodic drag performance, according to Butler, maintains the dominant norms by "being used in the service of both the denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic [...] norms" and thus "further[s] a politics of despair," the hybrid, cross-dressed and criss-crossed performances in *The Emperor Jones* displaces the very norms "that enable representation itself" and thus promote a politics of change (*Bodies* 85, *Gender Trouble* 200, 203). "If identities were no longer fixed as the premises of a political syllogism, and politics no longer understood as a set of practices derived from the alleged interests that belong to a set of ready-made subjects," Butler writes, "a new configuration of politics would surely emerge from the ruins of the old" (*Gender Trouble* 203). I would like to argue that The Wooster Group does manage to create "a new configuration of politics," and that this emergence of new identity representation through the deconstruction of traditional forms typifies what Philip Auslander defines as "postmodernist political theatre," a "theatre of resistance that 'investigate[s] the processes which control [given representations]' through the examination of iconography and the effects of mediatization on political imagings" (104). Politically challenging the *modes of representation*, we may wonder, however, whether The Wooster Group as a theatre company also manages to prove Butler wrong about their ability to challenge the traditional politics of configuration *on the level of reception*.

Reception and Distantiation

29 In terms of reception, physical and psychological distanciation are the tenets of The Wooster Group's approach. Although the company emerged from Richard Schechner's Performance Group, which has been highly influential in the troupe's approach to spectatorship, LeCompte departed from Schechner's "subjective theatre concentrat[ing] solely on 'the psychology of perception'" to establish a more distanced

relationship with her spectators (Innes 271). Among the troupe's different distancing strategies is the "the metaphor and the physical reality of the mask" (Quick 273). According to Andrew Quick, Kate Valk believes that "the mask can appear in many guises" and that "[i]t is most obvious in the use of blackface."[7] One of the functions of the mask is that "it establishes a sense of distance between the performer and the audience, creating a barrier between a two-way process of potential psychological identification: the performer with the audience and the audience with the performer" (Quick 273). Distanciation is a principle of political theatre in the Brechtian tradition which encourages the spectators to disrupt empathetic identification and to react intellectually—rather than emotionally—to a production in order to question the dominant social order. If we go back to Butler's theory and views on theatre, we may question The Wooster Group's strategy which consists in maintaining a distance between the fiction that is being performed and the reality of the audience.[8] If the production of *The Emperor Jones* does involve the spectators intellectually, it does not however directly engage them in the concrete process of identity reconstruction. In her essay, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," Butler writes:

> Although the links between a theatrical and social role are complex and the distinctions not easily drawn [...], it seems clear that, although theatrical performances can meet with political censorship and scathing criticism, gender performances in non-theatrical contexts are governed by more clearly punitive and regulatory social conventions. Indeed, the sight of a transvestite onstage can compel pleasure and applause while the sight of the same transvestite on the seat next to us on the bus can compel fear, rage, even violence. The conventions which mediate proximity and identification in these two instances are clearly quite different ... In the theatre, one can say, "this is just an act," and de-realize the act, make acting into something quite distinct from what is real. Because, in this distinction, one can maintain one's sense of reality in the face of this temporary challenge to our existing ontological assumptions about gender arrangements; the various conventions which announce that "this is a play" allows strict lines to be drawn between the performance and life. (Butler "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" 278)

30 Contrary to Schechner's theatre in which the division between the worlds of the actors and that of the spectators is blurred, the spectators attending *The Emperor Jones* are never invited to cross the "strict lines [...] between the performance and life."[9] LeCompte focuses on reforming the world of fiction and on empowering her "actors"—the word is meaningful—who are entrusted with the "ethical" mission to reinvent forms of both racial and gender identities rather than creating a new reality "through a genuine social exchange between performer and spectator" as Schechner tried to do (Quick 274, 9). The "spectator's role, as [LeCompte] expresses in an interview with David Savran, is to witness events, rather than become an active or equivalent participant in their performance of them" (Quick 9). By establishing the spectators as "witnesses," LeCompte seems to minimize their power of agency: viewers are put in the position of "witnesses," that is, etymologically speaking, of those who "testify," "acknowledge" social injustices with regard to race and gender but who cannot become agents of change. As the company introduces the audience to new patterns of representation in *The Emperor Jones*, the spectator may regret that LeCompte did not go as far as to build bridges between the world of reconfiguration and the sphere of the *real* in order to encourage *real* concrete changes. Rather than a "theatre of resistance," which implies the attempt to initiate tangible social changes, The Wooster Group's *The*

Emperor Jones can be defined as an "aesthetic of resistance," a phrase which appears more appropriate to account for the subversive nature of the reconfiguration of identity in the fictive world.

31 Although Butler minimizes artists' exposure to "political censorship and scathing criticism," both O'Neill and The Wooster Group took risks in staging their works (Butler "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" 278). If the playwright's progressivism should be qualified, it is important to stress, as Bechtel does, that O'Neill was facing judicial prejudices by casting a black actor in the United States in the 1920s. By revisiting the minstrel tradition, The Wooster Group exposed themselves to criticism and funding cuts, as they did with their 1981 show *Route 1 & 9 (The Last Act)*, "a radical revisioning of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*" which featured "a mish-mash of popular past performance styles, including blackface minstrelsy and pornography, the combining of which caused controversy, protest, and the rescinding of forty per cent of the Group's funding from the New York State Council" (Monks 561). Although the use of blackface in *The Emperor Jones* may have seemed offensive to some, the production did not generate as much controversy as did *Route 1 & 9*. Bechtel argues that the different reception of *The Emperor Jones* may be explained by "the historical evolution of authorial license," as well as by the evolution in the way the group approached the minstrel tradition in the two works (160). Unlike with *Route 1 & 9*, blackface was "explicitly introduced as a mask, *both* a theatrical and a social construction of blackness in *The Emperor Jones*" (Jouve). Indeed, contrary to their previous production in which the actors' whole bodies were blackened, in *The Emperor Jones* only Valk's face was made up in black—her neck, hands and arms remained white. Because of the integral blackening of the bodies, the black characters in *Route 1 & 9* could be seen as "drags," to return to Butler, imitations of the blackface minstrel characters, an imitative strategy which exposed The Wooster Group to the ambivalence of the reiterative drag-like performance. The drag performance could be interpreted as a "reidealization" of the norms underpinning minstrelsy and thus be perceived by the detractors of the company as racist. In *The Emperor Jones*, however, The Wooster Group broke away from the traditional representation of the male minstrel character by adopting a criss-crossed, cross-dressed performance, and thus avoided the trap of the drag performance. This syncretism resulting from the gender/race combination but also the fusion of European, African and Asian theatrical aesthetics softened the potentially offensive effect of blackfacing alone on which *Route 1 & 9* centered. Contrary to the 1981 show, the relative absence of strong negative reactions to the use of blackfacing in *The Emperor Jones* may be accounted for by the gender reversal from a female performer *to* a male character. If men dressed up as women have proven to have a comic potential in the theatrical tradition in general but also in the minstrel tradition in particular, women representing men on stage reshape the interpretation of blackfacing as above ridicule. By explicitly deconstructing, rather than imitating, the racist male-centered minstrel pattern, LeCompte's troupe powerfully demonstrated in this production that identity is a construct, and that, in O'Neill's times—and perhaps in subsequent historical periods—, race and gender representations were stereotypical and offensive.

32 If The Wooster Group's *The Emperor Jones* does not challenge Butler's assumption that theatre can "break down [the] conventions that demarcate the imaginary from the real" by maintaining both spatial and psychological distance with the members of the audience, Elizabeth LeCompte's aesthetics of resistance engages in a reconfiguration of

the codes of gender and race identity and as such "troubles" the long-standing stifling definitions of identities which trap the individual in specific categories (Butler "Performative Acts" 278). In asserting that they are just "making art," The Wooster Group shows that "Art for Art's sake" can prove to be socially challenging since *The Emperor Jones* raises fundamental political questions.

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NOTES

1. Judith Butler posits that there is an industry of racial construction, yet she remains very vague on the issue. Scholars, like E. Patrick Johnson among others, have however demonstrated that her theory of performativity is relevant to analyze race.

2. Due to its original success, the production of *The Emperor Jones* was revived in 2006 and again in 2009. The present analysis of The Wooster's staging of O'Neill's play is based on the DVD recording of the performance at the Goodman Theatre, Chicago, Illinois, on January 10th, 2009 during the O'Neill Festival.

3. In the 2009 Chicago production, Smithers was played by Ari Fliakos and the Stage Assistant by Scott Shepherd.

4. The comparison between drag and blackface is relevant from a formal, structural point of view in that they both consist in adopting a socially constructed preexisting model to signify this model. Politically, however, these two strategies of imitation strongly differ: blackfacing was initially performed in order to make fun and devalue black identity, whereas dragging was originally adopted as a form of protest and emancipation. As will be seen later in this paper, Butler denounces dragging as she believes that it paradoxically maintains the traditional dominant norms rather than subverting them as it is meant to do. The analogy between drag and black-face remains a touchy issue as shown by the recent controversy sparked by remarks uttered in January 2015 by Mary Cheney, the daughter of former US Vice-President Dick Cheney, in which she compared drag and blackface.

5. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" was first published in 1988 in *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 4. Butler's article was the object of an intense critical debate by feminist theatre scholars, such as Jill Dolan and Elin Diamond. In the November 1993 issue of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Butler published "Critically Queer" in which she discusses her initial assertions about theatre. As this article was written after The Wooster Group's original production, I will not discuss it here.
6. It could be argued that a show repeats itself night after night, but the term "repetition" is here to be understood as "imitation" of a preexisting discourse, whether it be a script or a social pattern, and not in the sense of "reiteration."
7. As I demonstrated in "Through the Looking-Glass," the strategies of distanciation used by The Wooster Group in *The Emperor Jones* are manifold. The company plays with masks to establish psychological distance but the alienation of the characters "was also conveyed by the use of different media on stage, attracting the audience's attention to the fabric of the show." Moreover, the company played with the spectators' expectations (Jouve).
8. Judith Butler does not make any distinction among the different theatrical genres and she posits distance between the fictive world and the "real" world as a principle underlying the art of theatre, a generalization that can be questioned.
9. In *Environmental Theater*, Richard Schechner emphasizes the importance of the audience's participation in the show which should be perceived as a "social event" and no longer a fiction: "Participation occurred at those points where the play stopped being a play and became a social event—when spectators felt that they were free to enter the performance as equals. At these times, the themes of the play—its 'literary values'—were advanced not textually but wholly through action [...] For spectators who participated, performers were no longer actors but people doing what they believed in 'spontaneously.' It was impossible for most people to acknowledge that the attributes of 'actor' and 'person' were not mutually exclusive [...] letting people into the play to do as the performers were doing, to 'join the story.'" (44)

ABSTRACTS

This paper is a study of The Wooster Group's staging of identity-related tensions in Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*. Using Judith Butler's theories on performativity as an analytical framework, this paper shows how Elizabeth LeCompte's iconoclastic American company deconstructs O'Neill's 1920 work to "trouble" the traditional configurations of both gender and race. By playing with the codes of representation, The Wooster Group sheds light on the artificiality of the conventional binary system opposing the masculine to the feminine and Whites to Blacks. As they subvert traditional signs and symbols, The Wooster Group creates an "aesthetic of resistance," this paper argues, opening onto a reconfiguration of gender and race identities.

Cet article s'intéresse à la façon dont le Wooster Group met en scène les problématiques liés à la construction d'identités genrées et raciales dans *The Emperor Jones* de Eugene O'Neill. Convoquant les théories de Judith Butler sur la performativité, cette étude démontre comment la compagnie américaine iconoclaste fondée par Elizabeth LeCompte déconstruit l'œuvre originale de 1920 pour venir semer le « trouble », selon l'expression de Butler dans *Gender Trouble*, dans les configurations traditionnelles des genres et de ce que les Américains définissent comme

« races. » The Wooster Group met en avant le caractère artificiel des conventions sociales qui opposent le féminin au masculin, les blancs aux noirs, en subvertissant les codes de représentation. La compagnie se joue alors des signifiants et des symboles et crée une « esthétique de résistance » ouvrant des perspectives sur une possible reconfiguration des identités par-delà le système binaire normatif.

INDEX

Mots-clés: théâtre, théâtre américain, performance, performativité, genre, race, O'Neill Eugene, Wooster Group (The), Butler Judith
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Emeline Jouve is Assistant Professor of American Literature and Culture at Champollion University and Toulouse Jean-Jaurès University (France). She is the chair of the English department at Champollion University. She has given papers at several international conferences in France, Spain, and the U.S.A. on Susan Glaspell, Eugene O'Neill, Gertrude Stein, Paula Vogel, the Wooster Group and the Big Art Group and has published articles in French and American journals and anthologies. She edited the issue on "Staging Mobility in the United States" for the journal *Miranda* and co-edited the issue on "Staging American Memories" for the journal *Les Cahiers de FRAMESPA* (forthcoming). She also co-edited *Susan Glaspell's* Trifles *and "A Jury of Her Peers": Centennial Essays, Interviews, and Adaptations* with Martha C. Carpentier (McFarland; forthcoming). Emeline Jouve is the editor of the new section "Ariel's Corner: theatre" for the peer-reviewed e-journal *Miranda*. Apart from her academic work, Jouve is also involved in the practice of theatre, staging several plays and working with professional theatre companies.
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