

Postmodern Power Plays: A Linguistic Analysis of Postmodern Comedy
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Abstract

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The goal of this thesis is to first acquaint readers with the literature on humor that will be useful in analyzing postmodern comedy from a linguistic perspective.

As a genre-specific theoretical tool for viewers-- and readers-- of television texts, this thesis provides a means to an end: a way to “fine tune” our perception and understanding of postmodern comedy, and more importantly, provide concrete means to analyze the structure and implicit messages of one of its primary modes of expression--the prime time television situation comedy. Two case studies will consider the linguistic and textual construction of *The Simpsons* and *Home Improvement* and show how each sitcom relies on a postmodern power play between competing interests to engage the audience, subvert, and yet also subtly reinforce some of our traditional notions of gender and family relations in a patriarchal society.

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Preface:

The goal of this thesis is to acquaint readers with some of the literature on humor that will be useful in analyzing postmodern comedy through a linguistic perspective. This thesis, then, is intended to serve as a genre-specific theoretical tool for viewers--and readers-- of television texts. It is a means to an end: a way to "fine tune" our perception and understanding of postmodern comedy, and more importantly, provide concrete means to analyze the structure and implicit messages of one of its primary modes of expression--the prime time television situation comedy. Following the survey of literature and a brief discussion of postmodern comedy, two situation comedies, *Home Improvement* and *The Simpsons* will be analyzed. The first case study will consider whether *Home Improvement* is simply another middle-of-the-road television comedy designed to attract mass viewer appeal, and also analyze the ABC sitcom using Bahtkin's theory of "polyphonics," postmodern and feminist theory to shed light on the show's conflicting messages competing for the viewer's attention in every episode. Within the bounds of a typical sitcom narrative structure, *Home Improvement* continually experiments with form and content and routinely combines elements of high and popular culture. Joke

target analysis of seven episodes will reveal the way patriarchy is packaged and negotiated for prime time television.

The second case study focuses on the perception of the joke target and the way oppositional conflicts are negotiated in *The Simpsons*. This case study draws on recent research in humor theory and postmodern comedy and peers inside the text of postmodern comedy to see how the subculture humor of *The Simpsons* is “renegotiated” into a cultural norm. Joke target analysis of eight episodes of this hit sitcom also confirms this shift by revealing that the textual construction of *The Simpsons* relies on a constant conflict between the principal joke target [Homer] and a variety of ideological targets that subvert, and also reinforce some of our traditional notions of gender and family relations in a patriarchal society.

Chapter 1 Survey of the Literature

The field of humor research is interdisciplinary: during the course of this discussion, we will examine psychoanalytic and cognitive theories of humor, the humor research of literary and/or cultural studies theorists, linguists, sociologists and others.

Psychoanalytic Theory of Humor

Our discussion of the psychoanalytical theory of humor begins with Sigmund Freud's work in this area. Freud examines a number of jokes according to their language (linguistic) characteristics and categorizes them according to their ability to condense language. Freud refers to this ability as "condensation" or "economy" (see Freud:1905,16-20 trans. Strachey,1960) or displacement of language ("diversion of train of thought"). (51) This manipulation of language may be conceptual or verbal, according to Freud, and the humorous effect may be either tendentious (purposeful play or targeted) or non-tendentious (innocent or non-targeted.) (91) Jokes that are tendentious are aggressive, cynical, obscene or ridicule the subject. Jokes that are non-tendentious often involve word play or are

otherwise abstract, although Freud points out that tendentious jokes may utilize the same arrangement. Freud uses the following example to describe a non-tendentious joke: “Not only did he disbelieve in ghosts; he was not even frightened of them” (92).

Frequently categorized as a release theory, Freud’s theory of humor may be thought of as a response to a momentary freeing from societal constraints, or a force that sparks a vicarious reaction to the spectacle of the unconventional. Berger summarizes Freud’s psychoanalytic theory of humor as a theory that “argues that humor is tied to psychic economies and to aggression, often of a sexual nature, and usually masked” (106). Berger also notes that Freud’s research on humor, “focuses our attention, directly, on the role the psyche and unconscious play in humor and in the social dimensions of humor” (128).

Raskin suggests that Freud’s theory of humor is usually referred to as a release theory, but that Freud’s theory “goes well beyond a straightforward release theory.” Raskin also notes that Freud “maintained that release or relief and the pleasure deriving from them characterized all humor. . . and classified humor in terms of the kinds of relief which are associated with a certain kind of humor. . . .” According to Raskin, the laughter in Freud’s Release Theory “provides relief for mental, nervous, and/or psychic energy

and thus ensures homeostasis after a struggle, tension, strain, etc. “ (38). John Morreall concurs that the release theory in *Jokes and Their Relationship to the Unconscious* is an aggressive response to feelings of repression.

To Freud, the relationship between the humorous response to joking and the unconscious was similar. In the following passage, Freud relates the function of joking and laughter to a release mechanism, a safety valve for repressed hostile or sexual feelings and thoughts, and also to the purpose of dreaming.

Joking (like dreaming) serves as a safety valve for forbidden feelings or thoughts, and when we express what is usually inhibited the energy of repression is released in laughter. In the comic, the energy saved is energy of thought: we are spared some cognitive processing that we have summoned the energy to perform. . . . (111)

Freud's explanation of the response to a humorous jest clearly incorporates elements of the superiority theory as well as indicating that the release the respondent experiences is predicated on the release of repressed emotions. Interestingly, Raskin and Morreall's contention that the perimeters of the release theory are inadequate to Freud's theory of humor was directly addressed by Freud in an essay on humor written twenty years after the publication of *Jokes and Their Relationship to the Unconscious*. In this essay, Freud

suggests that humor is “not resigned; it is rebellious” (113). Freud also insists that the release theory contains elements of the superiority theory, and speculates that self-deprecating humor may function as a defense mechanism to “ward off possible suffering” (114). Clearly, according to Freud, the release theory of humor is meant to be seen as a theory that is neither static, or limited, but is intended to serve as a release from contemporary mores. This release can be playful, or, as in the case of tendentious jokes, serve as a safety valve for repressed feelings.

Superiority Theory: Thomas Hobbes

Thomas Hobbes’s work illuminates this approach to humor theory. Hobbes, an English philosopher and rational materialist, espouses a theory of humor that considers the uneven and unequal power relationships between groups. Morreall suggests that in Hobbes’s theory of humor “human beings struggle with one another for power and what power can bring. In this struggle the failure of our competitors is equivalent to our success” (19). Clearly, Hobbes’s theory is pessimistic of human nature, certainly reflective of his political theories, and seems to place a lesser value on humor and the role it plays in society. Raskin, however, notes, that a belief in the superiority theory of humor does not necessarily preclude that

“humor is necessarily a hostile phenomenon: the civilizing and restraining influence of culture over the centuries has been recognized as a significant factor ” (37).

Critical to understanding Hobbes’s theory is understanding his notion of “sudden glory.” To Hobbes, “sudden glory” is “the passion that makes those grimaces called laughter; and is caused by either some sudden act of their own, that pleases them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another. . .” (Morreall, 19). Thus, to Hobbes “sudden glory” is a visceral response, and perhaps reflective of the brutish, less compassionate acts conducted by human beings. Hobbes also suggests that such laughter is “vain glory” and an undesirable trait. (Morreall, 20)

Henri Bergson

Far from being a theory that can be easily pigeon-holed, Bergson’s theory contains elements of the release, superiority and incongruity theories. The aim of all, according to Bergson, is to work in concert to achieve social improvement. Like Hobbes, Henri Bergson, a French philosopher whose book, *Laughter*, was published in 1900, seemed intent on providing some explanation of the social ramifications of and reaction to the humorous. To Hobbes, the humor response was an affirmation and a replay of the power struggle

between competing interests. Similarly, Henri Bergson believed that the humorous response was also a response rooted in power relations; to Bergson the humorous response could only be invoked by the absence of an emotional connection to the comic. Bergson describes this as a “momentary anesthesia of the heart.” (Morreall, 118). This indifference to subject implies elements of the superiority theory and intimates that in order to participate, a complicity among respondents must occur. In other words, Bergson believed that laughter is a social experience, regardless of how many participate.

To Bergson, the complicit social relationship that forms the humorous response is based on our perception of “something mechanical encrusted on the living.” We perceive, according to Bergson, something rigid, mechanistic, yet reminiscent of human in the comic. Our response (laughter) is predicated on this perception. Yet Bergson also considers the social implications and multi-faceted nature of the comic, comparing the comic to “a certain rigidity of body, mind and character that society would still like to get rid of in order to obtain from its members the greatest possible degree of elasticity and sociability. The rigidity is the comic and the laughter is its corrective” (Morreall, 125). It is this focus on the rigid, and mechanical that moves Bergson’s theory from a theory of superiority to include elements of incongruity.

Clearly, Bergson views the humorous response as a shared social experience, yet it is equally clear that Bergson views the humorous response as a form of purposeful ridicule designed to remove inflexible patterns of behavior. To Bergson, this utilitarian social aspect of humor parallels much of his philosophical ethos. Morreall points out that “[m]uch of Bergson’s thought springs from his opposition to materialism and mechanism”(117). Clearly, then, to Bergson, the social function of laughter is important to the health and wellbeing of society as a whole.

Incongruity Theories of Humor

By far the most important to our discussion and analysis of postmodern comedy are the cognitive-perceptual theories of humor. These theories are focused on the humorous response to the absurd and incongruous; all seem to contain some essence or nuance of Kierkegaard’s notion that “ the comical is present in every stage of life, for wherever there is life there is contradiction, and wherever there is contradiction, the comical is present (Berger 40). To incongruity theorists, life is an absurdist, existential canvas, a canvas that processes meaning paradoxically and perhaps quixotically; Berger’s definition of the cognitive theories of humor summarizes the concerns of these theorists neatly:

Finally there is a theory of humor that ties it to our cognitive abilities and the way we process information. It is connected also to semiotic theories,. . . . It is paradox and moving in and out of play frames that generates humor for the cognitive theorists(106).

Similar to Hobbes's idea of "sudden glory" generating laughter in response to the *faux pas* or failings of the less fortunate, cognitive theories of humor are based, at least partly, on Kant's notion of sudden surprise as a humorous catalyst. To Kant, the humorous response is "an affection arising from sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing" (Raskin 34). Raskin further defines the incongruous jest as one capable of a brief deception that abruptly transmutes the expected into the unexpected. Within these definitions the similarity to Bergson's theory is clear: the rigid or mechanistic is viewed as incongruous--unexpected-- and subverted by our reaction.

Raskin's analysis denotes and emphasizes not only the incongruity that drives the humorous response, but also hints at similarities to both release theories and superiority theories of humor. The humor is active, aggressively deflating our expectations, and like the release theory, often exhilarating in its liberation of expectation. It is important to note also that many theorists have suggested that the various theories of humor (release, superiority,

incongruity) overlap; Attardo suggests that “elements belonging to incongruity theories are often co-opted by other theories. . .[and] the incongruity theory is not incompatible with the hostility and release theories” (49). Other theorists that have proposed incongruity theories of humor include Schoepenhauer, Kierkegaard, and William Hazlitt.

M.M. Bakhtin

Primarily known for his critical work in literature, novelistic structure and devices, Mikhail Bakhtin’s work on laughter and the comic are a natural development of his focus on genre, the serio-comic and carnivalistic folklore. A literary genre, according to Bakhtin,

is always the same, and yet not the same, always old and new simultaneously. . . . A genre lives in the present, but remembers its past, its beginnings. Genre is the representative of the creative memory in the process of literary development. Precisely for this reason it is genre which is capable of providing unity and continuity (87).

To Bakhtin, then, a genre is alternatively volatile and stable, transmogrifying even as it preserves. Significantly, that expression in the late twentieth century may well be the television text, and the lowly situation comedy, designed for commercial mass appeal, is not only a valid expression of literary genre--but also a representation

of a carnivalistic, serio-comical text that is deeply rooted in cultural folklore.

Bakhtin recounts several characteristics that all serio-comic genres share: 1) they are concerned with the contemporary and frequently topical; 2) they are experience and “free imagination” based (Bakhtin describes this characteristic as “completely liberated from legend and myth”); and finally, (3) the serio-comic is “deliberately discordant,” (89). By definition then, the serio-comic, as Bakhtin envisions the genre, is a heteroglossic text that contains elements of high and low culture.

Bakhtin links this literary tradition to late Hellenistic culture and also lists a variety of prose forms that exhibit similar traits. (See Dostoevsky’s Poetics 87) Our examination of the genres within the serio-comic will be limited to Bakhtin’s general discourse on carnivalized literature and the Menippean satire.

What is carnival?

Bakhtin begins his discussion of carnival by defining the essential nature of the ritual pageant of carnival.

Carnival is a pageant without a stage and without a division into performers and spectators. . . .its participants live in it, according to its laws as long as those laws are in force, i.e. they live a *carnivalistic life*. The carnivalistic life is life drawn out of its *usual rut*, it is to a degree ‘life turned inside out,’ ‘life

the wrong way 'round'. . . . (101)

Similarly, in carnivalized literature, we also see this concept of “life turned inside out.” The everyday events of living are merged with the improbable or impossible in an irreverent, insouciant synthesis that is so seamless that the boundaries between the real and the fantastic are nearly impossible to discern. The normative paradigm not only shifts, but is unceremoniously toppled by the “carnival attitude.”

To Bakhtin, the carnival attitude depends on the suspension of all social and “hierarchal barriers.” Bakhtin describes this as the “free, familiar contact among people”-- and states that this familiarity leads to a “new modus of interrelationship. . . counterposed to the omnipotent hierarchal social relationships of non-carnival life” (Bakhtin, 1973:100). In carnival, the inversion of societal hierarchies is an equalizing force, the sacred is no longer sacrosanct, and the lifting of these previously imposed limits encourages a spontaneous recombining, a *carnivalistic mésalliance* that Bakhtin notes “brings together, unites, weds, and combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the lowly, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid, etc.” (Bakhtin, 1973:101). The carnival is unconcerned with wealth or status, stripping privilege

from all participants equally.

The impulse to parody may also be seen as representative of this familiarity and de-privileging; Bakhtin refers to parody as “the creation of a double which discrowns its counterpart; it is that same inside-out world.” During carnival, all participate willingly in this “inside-out world”; the carnival fool is crowned king and the king becomes a commoner. Bakhtin refers to this trait as exemplifying the universal nature of the festival. (Bakhtin,1973:105)

In Hellenistic times, carnivalized literature was created specifically for the carnival; the genre known as the Menippean satire, in particular, exemplifies some of the more compelling features of carnivalized discourse. Bahktin briefly traces the history of this genre and refers to this carnivalized form of literature as “extraordinarily flexible and as versatile as Proteus and capable of penetrating other genres” (Bakhtin, 1973:92). Named for the third century B.C. philosopher, Menippos of Gadra, this is the literature of reinvention, evolving continually from antiquity to present day, for, as Bahktin notes, the Menippean satire “became one of the chief carriers and implementors of the carnival attitude toward this world and has remained so until the very present” (Bakhtin, 1973:93).

Significantly, Bahktin lists fourteen defining characteristics of the Menippean satire; a brief summary of the characteristics follows.

The comic elements in the Menippean satire vary widely and are not bounded by traditional forms of narrative. Menippean satires are fantastical, full of symbolism and frequently topical. Bakhtin describes this topicality as “full of open and hidden polemics with the various philosophical, religious, ideological and scientific schools, tendencies and currents of the time.” Above all else, the Menippean satire is concerned with “provoking and testing the truth” (Bakhtin,1973:97). The truth the Menippean satire seeks to expose, Bakhtin reminds us, is an ideological truth, not a single character’s revelation.

To expose the “truth,” the Menippean satire is also oppositional in nature, juxtaposing gritty realism with fantastical adventures and philosophical dialog. Daydreams, fantasies, and insanity are portrayed in the Menippea, as are dialogs between “conscience” and character.

The milieu of the Menippean satire is similarly oppositional; the plot convoluted with “sharp contrasts and oxymoronic combinations. . .fond of playing with sharp transitions and changes, ups and downs, rises and falls, unexpected comings together of distant and divided things, *mesalliances* of all sorts.” Popular and historical figures mingle with townspeople in the market square and the brothels in the Menippea; the canvas of the Menippea is

unlimited, alternatively homely and grandiose.

Significantly, Bakhtin describes the Menippea as “formed in an epoch of the decay of the tradition of a nation and the destruction of those ethical norms which made up the antique ideals of “seemliness”(beauty and nobility)” (Bakhtin, 1973:97). The Menippean satire, as other genres of this form, are meant to transform, to liberate and otherwise subvert our expectations; however, it is the Menippea that is an end-of-an-era creation, reflecting the unsettled epoch in which it was conceived in such an unflinching way that, as Bakhtin says, causes the Menippea to be “perhaps the most adequate expression of its age” (Bakhtin,1973:98).

Linguistic Theories of Humor

The Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH)

Developed by Victor Raskin in 1979, and then later expanded to book length form in 1985, this theory of humor examines the competence of the speaker and the hearer in an idealized context, uses quantifiable means to analyze the humorous exchange, and extends this examination to include the semantic scripts that bound this exchange between speaker and hearer. These scripts may be compatible or not, and may be subjectively biased or unrestricted. A definition of semantic scripts is provided by Raskin:

The script is a large chunk of semantic information surrounding the word or evoked by it. . . . Formally or technically, every script is is a graph with lexical nodes and semantic links between the nodes. (81)

To Raskin, semantic scripts depend on the exchange of meaning between participants, either unwitting or deliberate cooperation. It may be useful to think of semantic scripts as comprised of a series of interconnected relations between words, and keep in mind that each participant brings a distinct semantic script to every exchange.

Raskin's theory of humor is composed of two parts: the "Main Hypothesis" and a set of combinatorial rules. To Raskin, the foundation of his theory, the "Main Hypothesis" is expressed as follows:

A text can be characterized as a single-joke-carrying text if both of the conditions are satisfied:

- (i) The text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts
- (ii) The two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite. . . . The two scripts with which some text is compatible are said to overlap fully or in part of on this text (Raskin, 85:99). . .

Clearly, Raskin's theory of humor seems to place emphasis on two areas: the compatibility and overlap between scripts, and the oppositional nature of the exchange. When the above conditions are met, the exchange provides "the necessary and sufficient conditions to be funny" (Raskin,1985:99).

To better understand the role of script opposition and overlap in the SSTH, Grice's Principle of Cooperation and non bona-fide communication in the joke structure must be considered also. Grice's Cooperative Principle is based on four maxims: Quantity (relay only the information needed); Quality (adhere to the truth); Relation (speech acts should relate to the conversation); and Manner (be as brief as possible). According to Grice's Cooperative Principle, when the above conditions are met, then bona-fide communication will take place. (Grice, 1989:26-27) Humor, on the other hand, depends on a conscious or unwitting violation of one or more of the maxims in Grice's Cooperative Principle. Similar to the cooperative principle for bona-fide communication, the humorous exchange also relies on a negotiation between hearer and speaker, a set of mutually understood conventions that result in the non bona-fide communication required of joke-telling (see Raskin, 1985:103). While certainly cooperation between the hearer and speaker are important to the success of the humorous venture, the SSTH, as Raskin's Main Hypothesis stipulates is also dependent on the combinatorial rules: script overlap, oppositionality and the script switch trigger.

Script overlap occurs when the text in the humorous exchange evokes more than one interpretation; these interpretations are not

necessarily congruous, but are at least partially compatible. Raskin describes script overlap in terms of “a standard situation which immediately evokes an easy and standard script. . .” (105). The standard script, Raskin notes, is overturned by a perceived violation of one or more of the maxims for non bona-fide communication, which, in turn, causes the original script to be reevaluated or reinterpreted according to this new information. Similarly, the role of oppositions in the SSTH also work to resolve incongruities in the script overlap.

Raskin notes that script oppositions are concerned with “basic quintessential categories of human existence”(114). In the SSTH, Raskin divides script oppositions into categories of real and unreal situations and separates these divisions into dichotomies of actual/non-actual situation, normal/abnormal state, and possible plausible/partially implausible, and much less plausible situation. (111)

The catalyst of the SSTH is the Semantic Script-Switch Trigger. The function of this element switches the hearer’s attention from one script to another, or as Raskin says, switches “one script evoked by the text of the joke to the opposed script,” (114). Raskin describes the semantic switch-trigger as containing either ambiguity or contradiction. The hearer’s assessment of the text(joke) changes

with the introduction of the trigger; Raskin notes that the role of the trigger is to “render this different interpretation more plausible”(115). The function of the script-switch trigger then, as Raskin sees it, is to make the incredible credible. However, it is important to realize that the trigger is only as successful as the unstated agreement to enter into non bona-fide communication between hearer and the joke-teller.

Analysis of a joke using the SSTH

The following joke was analyzed by Raskin (1985:100-127) using the SSTH.

“Is the doctor at home?” the patient asked in his bronchial whisper. “No,” the doctor’s young and pretty wife whispered in reply. “Come right in.” (Raskin:100).

Raskin first analyzes the various scripts evoked by the words in the text. In the first sentence it is easy to see that the script “doctor” is corroborated by the language, doctor, patient, and bronchial; however, in the second sentence, the doctor script is subverted by the inclusion of extra information (young and pretty wife) and by the fact the wife whispers her reply. Recalling Grice’s Cooperative Principle, the maxim of quantity is violated twice in this short interchange: unnecessary information is given, and the

woman's response does not give enough information. The hearer is then forced to reevaluate the information acquired in the previous script (doctor); indeed according to Raskin, "an entirely different situation has been. . . created--a young and pretty woman invites a man other than her husband to come into her house while her husband is away." The hearer must then incorporate a different script (lover) based on the information. Raskin also points out that this joke is "typical with regard to script overlap. . .situated somewhere in-between the two extreme cases. . .that of a full overlap and that of a partial overlap" (104-105).

Despite its success as an analytical tool for a joke-carrying text, and the "universal framework" of the SSTH which the author feels precludes its inclusion into any of the three classes of theories (see Raskin 1985:132), the limitations of the SSTH still remain chiefly in its inability to successfully analyze longer humorous texts. This limitation is fully recognized by Raskin; the function of the SSTH from its inception was to account for the mechanisms at work in the joke-bearing text.

The General Verbal Theory of Humor

The limitations of Raskin's SSTH led to the creation of the General Verbal Theory of Humor (GVTH) by Salvatore Attardo and

Victor Raskin in 1991. The SSTH was created to account for joke texts; the GVTH, a revision of the SSTH, created to analyze any humorous text. Attardo examines the differences between the two theories.

Revision of the SSTH consisted mostly of broadening its scope. Whereas the SSTH was a “semantic theory of humor, the GVTH is a linguistic theory “at large”-- that is, it includes other areas of linguistics as well, including most notably textual linguistics, the theory of narrativity, and pragmatics. (222)

This revision of the SSTH, according to Attardo, is accomplished by the addition of five Knowledge Resources(KR) to Raskin’s original script opposition. The Knowledge Resources developed by Attardo and Raskin include Script Opposition (SO), Logical Mechanism (LM), Target (TA), Narrative Strategy (NS), Language (LA) and Situation (SI). Together, these six Knowledge Resources provide a thorough analytical framework for the examination of any humorous text; and as Attardo notes, the GVTH also develops the idea of “joke similarity” within the text. (223)

The first KR Attardo considers is Language (LA), and Attardo points out that this resource “contains all the information necessary for the verbalization of a text.” This information includes wording, and position of the punch line, which can be critical to the effectiveness of the humorous exchange. (223)

Narrative Strategy (NS) is the KR that encompasses the structural organization of the joke text; Attardo lists several examples of NS, including simple narrative, question and answer, riddle, and conversational aside, and also admits there are countless number of Narrative Strategies unaddressed in his text.

Target (TA) is the optional KR that contains “the butt of the joke” and is based on “(humorous) stereotypes” (224). Attardo also notes that nonaggressive jokes will not have an expressed TA, and refers readers to Davies, 1990 for a detailed study of TA.

Situation (SI), according to Attardo accounts for the circumstances within the joke. Attardo describes SI as the “props of the joke: the objects, participants, instruments, activities, etc.” (225).

The Logical Mechanism (LM) addresses how the various elements in the humorous exchange are conjoined. Attardo explains that the LM can “range from straightforward juxtapositions. . . to more complex errors in reasoning, such as false analogies, etc. (see Attardo 1994: 225-226). In the LM, this expressed logic of the “joke-world” is a logic bounded by the humorous exchange, and unconcerned with the limitations of “real-life.”

The final KR in the GVTH is Script Opposition (SO). As in Raskin’s SSTH, the Script Opposition accounts for the real/unreal dichotomy, and is according to Attardo “the most abstract of all. . .

KRs, which accounts for the fact that the SSTH could collapse all six KRs onto this one, while basically ignoring all other five, with some exceptions such as TA and LA.” Attardo stresses that any humorous exchange (and text) will contain a script opposition. (226)

Attardo views the GVTH as a “mechanism capable of generating an infinite number of jokes.” (226). The KRs, according to Attardo, may be combined in limitless configurations, and should not be considered as binary values, in particular he notes that the LM and SO appear “limited in number.” While the value of the KRs in determining the structural identity of a text seems clear, it is equally clear that the role of the KRs in longer humorous texts should be more closely examined; in particular, study of the joke target should prove useful. Attardo also suggests a hierarchical format for the ordering of the KRs and presents the following organization: SO, LM, SI,TA, NS, LA. (227)

Three areas appear to be the GVTH’s major strengths: 1) The first area is the Language(LA) component, which gives the GVTH flexibility in analysis of longer texts; 2) Establishing similarity or relationships between jokes, which Attardo says led to the creation of the GVTH; 3) And finally, the ability of the GVTH to account for the semantic as well as linguistic and non-linguistic features of a text. (Attardo,1994: 228-229)

The advantages of the GVTH seem clear; particularly relevant to this discussion is the role of the Knowledge Resource, NS (Narrative Strategy) in establishing relationships between humorous texts. Attardo points out that the NS “parameter deals precisely with the narrative differences between texts, borrowing methodologies from narratology, folklore studies, and literary criticism” (229). The role of the NS adequately accounts for any differences between texts, and resolves any specific requirements such as punch line position in joke texts.

Later research by Attardo examines some problematic areas within the KRs, specifically the Logical Mechanism(LM); however, this research has also created an interesting resolution. Early research conducted by Ruch, Attardo and Raskin (1993) focused on the role of hierarchical positioning of the KRs and came to the conclusion that “the GVTH’s predictions were borne out by the data for all KRs, except the LM.” This research indicated that the LM “did not show up where the theory predicted it should have, but only in relation to the KR next to it (SI)” (Attardo,1997: 409) Attardo posits that this research indicates a revision of the GVTH, and concludes that the LM is the resolution of the incongruity presented in the SO. This revision of the GVTH also moves the LM into an optional KR status since not all humorous texts offer a resolution, similar to the

fact that not all humor contains an explicit TA.

While the basic foundations of incongruity theories are covered in an earlier discussion in this text, it seems useful and pertinent to point out that Attardo (1997) presents a convincing case for the SSTH as an Incongruity Resolution (IR) model. In this analysis, Attardo argues that the “SO and incongruity are different conceptualizations of the same phenomenon”(403). In this model, which relies heavily on psychological and linguistic research into incongruity, Attardo posits a three-stage model that addresses the linear processing of texts via set-up, incongruity, and resolution (SIR), rather than the self explanatory two stage IR (Incongruity/Resolution model). Attardo says that the set-up phase may be considered as “corresponding to the SSTH’s “overlap” of scripts in the SIR model. (413) The final phase of this three-stage model, resolution Attardo asserts is equal to the LM(Logical Mechanism).

The revision from semantic-based (SSTH) to linguistic-based (GVTH) analysis of humor is significant chiefly because longer textual analysis in humor research is a relatively unexplored field. Attardo points out the the value of the GVTH is also increased when combined with a variety of critical approaches to textual analysis. By using the GVTH to explore and quantify the language within the

text, along with the more traditional tools of literary criticism, readers and critics may gain a deeper understanding into the structural identity and critical foundations of a text.

Chapter 2

A Linguistic Analysis of Postmodern Comedy

We have examined relevant theories of humor; we move on to an examination of postmodern comedy in the hope that this analysis offers us, as readers and critics of television texts, the opportunity to engage in a critical dialogue with the implicit and explicit messages delivered into our homes via this significant form of public discourse. The voice of television is omnipresent in American society; it is a voice that alternately delights and dismays us, a voice that subverts traditional notions of society, even as it reinforces the same. It is a heteroglossic voice that rises above all other media with a 24/7 broadcast-in-stereo message.

Jean François Lyotard, a poststructuralist, claimed that science and technology have turned increasingly toward a focus on language via “phonology and theories of linguistics, problems of communication and cybernetics, modern theories of algebra and informatics, computers and their languages, problems of translation and the search for compatibility among computer languages. . . .”(3); this desire to perfect communicative competence remains a primary concern in the present decade. The advances in technology affect the

acquisition of knowledge; like the quest for communicative competence, knowledge becomes less a desirous quality (“a means to end” is how Lyotard describes it), than a commodity that is bought and sold. To Lyotard this leads to power and knowledge becoming synonymous and precipitating two versions of a similar question: “Who decides what knowledge is? and Who will know what needs to be decided?”(9). This, then, is the postmodernist state of affairs; a constant struggle for knowledge as power. To Lyotard, this struggle for ascendancy is also mirrored in language and the quest for communicative competence. Language, like the struggle for knowledge to acquire power becomes, in effect a game between interlocutors engaged in a postmodern power play.

Language Games

We begin our journey towards a deeper understanding of postmodern comedy by focusing our attention on the postmodernist’s concern with language. Borrowing heavily from Wittgenstein’s ideas on language games¹, Lyotard defines the postmodern condition in terms of denotative, performative and prescriptive utterances, and noting that his analysis of “the postmodern condition” is, for the most part, conducted by “emphasizing facts of language and in particular,

¹ For a full discussion on language games, see Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1953) *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1958, p1-30.

their pragmatic aspect”(9). Lyotard summarizes Wittgenstein’s use of the term language games as “each of the various categories of utterances can be defined in terms of rules specifying their properties and the uses to which they can be put. . . “(10). Lyotard also observes the following about language games.

The first is that their rules do not carry within themselves their own legitimation, but are the objects of a contract, explicit or not, between players (which is not to say that the players invent the rules). The second is that if there are no rules, there is no game, that even an infinitesimal modification of one rule alters the nature of the game, that a move or utterance that does not satisfy the rules does not belong to the game they define. The third remark is suggested by what has just been said: every utterance should be thought of as a move in a game. (10)

To Lyotard, the postmodern is concerned with not only the game of language, but how the rules reflect and change the game. If the rules change, the game changes. This observation is striking because it subverts a common misconception that the postmodern delights in eschewing all convention. No; a more likely supposition might be that in postmodernism, the “game” is continually reinvented; when the rules change, a new and completely different game begins. To Lyotard, within this continual re-visioning is the difference between the modern and postmodern sensibility.

The postmodern would be that which, in the modern puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste

which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable. . . postmodern would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*) (81).

In the postmodern, form and convention fall by the wayside in an effort to “present the unrepresentable.” We move beyond the modern, beyond the modernist sense of an underlying narrative, and, yet, according to Lyotard, we are as apt to see a pining for the relative simplicity of *une histoire grande* in the midst of a chaotic, deprivileged stream of micro narratives. What was a boundary in the modern, is no longer a barrier in the postmodern. It is, perhaps, a struggle between the two, a continual revision of the modern that in the postmodern is evoked by the irreverence, the so-called tastelessness, the graphic depictions that were previously unexpressed. Could we characterize the postmodern as purposeful chaos? Perhaps.

Lyotard also alludes to the notion that every utterance ushers in a distinct move in the language game. Each speech act carries the capacity for change; to Lyotard “to speak is to fight, in the sense of playing, and speech acts fall within the domain of a general agnostics”(10). Positioning Lyotard among the three major classifications of humor theory places him among superiority

theorists because Lyotard explicitly tells us that although moves in the game of language are often made for the sheer joy of inventing, they rely “on a feeling of success won at the expense of an adversary--at least one adversary, and a formidable one: the accepted language or connotation (10). If, as Lyotard suggests in his synthesis of Wittgenstein, “games” based on an adversarial relationship with language are an essential part of the postmodernist impulse, then we may reasonably assume that a definition of postmodern comedy will reflect a similar structure.

Olsen and the Postmodern Comedic Vision

Lance Olsen addresses the postmodern comic vision in literature, and asserts that what is most significant about the postmodern comic vision is “the textual universe opens into multiplicity” (26). Olsen’s reading of the postmodern comic vision centers on aligning the postmodern with the comic.

[B]oth the comic and the postmodern attempt to subvert all centers of authority--including their own--and because they both ultimately deride univocal visions, toppling bigots, cranks and pompous idiots as they go, they tend to complement each other well. Both seek through radical incongruity of form to short-circuit the dominant culture’s repressive impulses. Hence both are simultaneously destructive and constructive. Both represent a survivalist aesthetics. . . . Both embrace plurality, an abundance of language games, and the idea that the universe is a text that can be rewritten in a host of equally

acceptable ways. (31-32)

Olsen's theories on the nature of postmodern comedy are contradictory (perhaps reflecting a postmodern point of view); although he successfully aligns the concerns of the comic with the postmodern, his interest is to actively deconstruct what he constructs for he is wholly concerned with proving the "petrification of postmodernism"-- and ultimately that the avant-garde is now a cultural norm. To Olsen, this petrification "underscores that the postmodern is less a historical period, than a mode of consciousness" (26). Though this idea is provocative and worthy of further examination (and certainly the conclusion that the postmodern has been mainstreamed is sound), nonetheless, it appears to be largely subjective-- and indeed contradictory of Olsen's idea that the postmodernist inclination is confined, arising in reaction to neoconservatism, "an artifact of crisis," that surfaces when a culture "perceives itself as undergoing crisis" (150). Olsen refers to the self-reflexivity expressed in Miguel Cervantes, Sterne and Melville as exemplifying traits of the postmodern. If we are willing to accept that notion, we could just as easily say Jane Austen's adherence to the early 19th century form of directly addressing the reader is postmodern in inclination. Yet his conclusions are sound,

for to Olsen the postmodern comic vision is one of intertextual deconstruction; it is a world text that severs boundaries between high and low culture, is under continual revision, and “sometimes even embraces political, social and economic concerns”(27).

Olsen next explores the linguistics of the postmodern comedic vision. Beyond acknowledging the three major theories of humor, and a brief excursion into incongruity theories, Olsen’s interest in linguistics appears to be purely textual, though one wonders why he failed to address Raskin’s Semantic Script Theory of Humor in this discussion. To Olsen, cross-genre work, inclination to heteroglossic text, linguistic games, and mixing of styles are representative of the linguistic aspects of postmodern comedy.

Olsen does not address the effects of the cultural assimilation of the postmodernist impulse on broader social discourse such as film, television etc. beyond comments that conclude the aforementioned has occurred. This also seems contradictory to the nature of the postmodernist comedic vision, an incomplete rendering of a genre that cannot be confined to traditional textual concerns. Still, the relevance of his argument lies in the general work he has done on postmodern comedy. What is clearly evident throughout his work is a clear focus on intertextuality, the inclusion of carnivalized discourse and an emphasis on language play.

Margaret Rose and Postmodern Parody

Margaret Rose's work is also relevant to a discussion on postmodern comedy. Rose thoroughly examines parody throughout history, from ancient to the postmodern, distilling an array of theories in an attempt to "rehabilitate parody" from a reductionist, and modernist position of ridicule, and/or burlesque. Rose sees postmodern parody as a form of the comic that double-codes meaning, and is meta-fictional, intertextual and comic. (277-283)

Rose also addresses the notion that postmodernism is an attitude or perception, although her conclusions are markedly different than Olsen's. Using Joyce's and Sterne's novels as examples, Rose agrees these works contain "elements of the meta-fictional as well as the comic," but she arrives at a strikingly different conclusion than Olsen, because, as Rose says, Joyce and Sterne "do not suggest that what they are doing is a deliberate transformation of the modern restriction of parody to 'either the meta-fictional or the comic' and could not do so given the the further development of that view after their composition "(257). Rose further suggests the following set of criteria for understanding whether a work of parody is postmodern.

- 1) the work will have "overcome both a) the modern reduction

of parody to either the meta-fictional or the comic and b) the modern understanding of the comic as something negative, and 2) followed the modern period and its works in time and with some conscious transformation of modernist principles. (257)

Rose's arguments for the rehabilitation of parody from a modernist definition seem equally applicable to grasping some sense of the potential concerns of postmodern comedy. Postmodern comedy has moved beyond modernism, yet still clearly visible are the traces of the modernist inclination. Similar to Olsen, Rose believes this double-coding of the modern with the postmodern weaves a densely woven web of intertextuality, discontinuity and self-reflexivity throughout the varied discourses of the postmodern comedic text.

Jason Rutter and Wayne's World

Research on postmodern comedy is limited and largely devoted to literary theory; Rutter points out the lack of scholarly inquiry examining postmodern comedy within other discourses (e.g. film, television and stand up comedy).

Like Rose and Olsen, Rutter's examination of postmodern comedy begins by tracing late modernist comic concerns. Unlike the aforementioned, Rutter suggests that postmodern comedy has been shaped by changes in relationship between audience and performer,

the distribution of said texts and a change in relationship between the comedy performance and other discourses. To Rutter, the modernist comedy text is a linear text in which “the narrative structure is assumed to be an absolute text with a universal reading” (Rutter, 1996). Thus we may assume that the modernist message is delivered from a privileged position (the performer), and wholly understood by the modern comedy audience. He identifies the shift from modern to postmodern comedy as a change from “emphasis on narrative to a highlighting of performance and spectacle” (311).

Rutter asserts that postmodern comedy “enjoys a mixing up of different stories, styles and techniques” and is discernible through audience interaction with the text, intertextuality “. . .and the self awareness that the comedy performance demonstrates” (1996:297-298). Postmodern comedy, then, may be seen as a dramatic deprivileging of the performance; the audience authors and reads the postmodern comedy text, in effect deconstructing and reconstructing as the text unfolds.

Rutter expands on this notion by analyzing the audience and their impact on the creators and the creation of the film “Wayne’s World.” (1992) Rutter lists the following ways audiences have interacted with the text: early stand-up comedy routines that Mike Myers and Dana Carvey originated in Toronto; later segments of

Saturday Night Live; “as purchasers of associated merchandising” (soundtracks, videos); and the adoption of “Wayne and Garth slogans into their personal register.” (Rutter, 1996) The use of “hurl,” and “Not!” are appropriate examples of Wayne and Garth-isms adopted by the audience.

What Rutter clarifies in his essay, is that for postmodern comedy, the text is self-aware and expresses awareness of this fact. In the postmodern comedy, the audience plays a key role in the creation of the text, and the performer is “not only aware of this negotiation with an audience, but also its negotiation with traditional and nontraditional styles of performance, narrative and humour” (Rutter,1996).

Rutter further characterizes postmodern comedy by its use of meta-formic devices, and also defines two classes of meta-formic devices used in postmodern comedy: 1) the first is used to form or otherwise shape the humor (direct to camera speech, humorous subtitles, etc. ; 2) the second is an inappropriate self-awareness of the merchandising and/or marketing of the text. (An example of this device might be when a character in a movie holds up a video of the movie.) To Rutter, it is the role of the audience and the use of meta-formic devices that distinguish postmodern comedy from its predecessors and deprivileges the postmodern comedic text. (Rutter,

1996)

Rutter also locates within postmodern comedy the use of paratext and celebrity intertextuality. Paratext, according to Rutter, may be seen as the proliferation of texts that accompany, but do not directly affect the production of a film text. Much as Rutter charted the ways audience interaction with the text and performer have changed in the postmodern comedy, he also sees paratexts as having “great potential for constructing a reading or reproduction of the text by the audience” (Rutter, 1996). These associated texts, according to Rutter include reviews, screenplays, novelizations, promotional merchandise, etc. and Rutter points out that paratexts are part of a “symbiotic relationship between comedy performance, production structures, and service/manufacturing industries” (Rutter, 1996). We economically respond to the postmodern comedic text, and are aided in satisfying our consumption of paratexts by astute marketing campaigns.

Our fascination with the famous, the cult of celebrity also plays a significant role in the audience performance equation in postmodern comedy. This phenomenon, celebrity intertextuality, Rutter says allows the “performer, performance, and person to become intermeshed” in the postmodern text, and is also fueled by the accompanying paratexts (Rutter, 1996). Reality and

fiction blur in the postmodern comedy, and the resulting product presents a media-manipulated version of reality. Bits and pieces of social history, culture, celebrity, and pastiche make up a nostalgic fictional reality designed to manipulate viewers and create a “fictional” history, that may--or may not-- be an accurate representation of reality.

Avant Norm?

In the postmodern comedy, high culture is deprivileged; this sets up a series of high/low culture oppositions within the text that Rutter characterizes as “binary oppositions in which a quality or system is presented in juxtaposition with its opposite. . . .”(Rutter, 1996). Within this postmodern power play between oppositions, neither opposition prevails; in fact, what is achieved, according to Rutter, is a kind of stability that effectively preserves the status quo--and what the audience ultimately perceives is a form of non-confrontational humor with a “perlocutionary structure [that] seeks to confirm alignments, beliefs and expectations whenever possible” (Rutter, 1996). So despite its reliance on tendentious humor, and the topicality of subjects that postmodern comedy tackles, the postmodern comedic text is a non threatening text with an ability to appeal to a multiplicity of viewers. This issue is particularly

significant for a common misconception that often accompanies the label postmodern is that the text is “avant garde,” or somehow presents a challenge to the prevailing socio-cultural construct. The reality is far different, for the postmodern comedic text, now firmly mainstreamed, has long since shed such avant-garde tendencies.

Masculine Humor, Feminine Humor or Transtextual?

Jason Rutter characterizes joke-telling styles as masculine or feminine. Masculine joke-telling styles, according to Rutter may be likened to the traditional form of punch line signaling the end of the joke; feminine joke-telling styles are characterized as “anecdotes. . . humorous acts which may include a number of points of laughter” (Rutter, 1996). To Rutter, this correlation between styles of humor and joke-telling are also indicative of a shift from modernist to postmodern comedy. Rutter posits that this change in joke-telling style may be indicative of the shift from modern to postmodern comedy.

Rutter claims that the feminine/postmodern style of humor encourages active audience participation; it is transtextual, a highly developed and allusive form of humor that “allows manipulation, and. . . deconstruction of established conventions, structures or modes of production” (Rutter, 1996). Rutter also notes that the

transtextual references are not arbitrary, but are aimed specifically at the intended audience of the postmodern comedic text.

Significantly, though Rutter's primary focus in his essay is on feature films, it seems useful to point out that the primary delivery of the postmodern comedy text to audiences is through a feminized text, the television situation comedy.

Rutter's understanding of the postmodern comedic text and the active participation this genre requires of its viewers adds dimension to what once was viewed as a static, largely passive interaction; similarly his work on the intertextuality of the postmodern comedic text adds depth and meaning to a text that is often maligned for its derivative, pastiche nature. Placed in context, the postmodern comedy text is clearly different from the modern comedic text, shaped by its milieu, its creators, and audience.

John Fiske

Gendered Television, Power TV

We have considered the essential characteristics of humor theory, and some of the linguistic aspects of postmodern comedy, we now turn to examine television as a medium within a broader social discourse.

Much as the cultural artifacts chosen to invigorate the text of

the postmodern comedy are not random, but rather a conscious accumulation of symbols designed to evoke a carefully constructed version of reality, Fiske's work on gendered television and power relationships is instrumental to the reader and critic of television texts to understand the social discourses of television and the role of the situation comedy within this environment.

When we consider the texts of television, we are considering the ways in which social discourses provide pleasure. To Fiske, the pleasure derived from television "results from a particular relationship between meaning and power" (1994:19). To Fiske, the television text allows us a degree of control; it is a form of pleasure that is empowering, allowing viewers to become active participants in the "sense-making" discourse of television. This form of "empowering play" according to Fiske, may be characterized in the following ways:

First, it is structured according to rules and conventions that replicate, but often invert, those that operate in society. . .
Second the player adopts a role of his or her choosing: even though the repertoire of roles may be limited, the sense of choice is far greater than in the adoption of the already written roles that society prepares for us. (1994:236)

This is the reality of a postmodern medium; the rules are reinvented and the game begins anew from the moment we choose to interact

with the medium. The discourse of television breaks ascribed boundaries hourly, daily, weekly; the inverted rules and roles of the carnival topple our expectations, provide a multiplicity of meanings, and liberate us, if only for the duration of the show.

As Fiske notes, this ability of the television text to provide meaning for so many when it is clear that texts often “seek to prefer certain meanings” is, in part, due to the “gendering” of television. Television texts are characterized as either masculine or feminine. Sitcoms and soap operas, according to Fiske are feminine; masculine shows are action-driven and/or “reality-based.” These genres are more or less specific, though Fiske points out there is a significant amount of programming that actively mixes genres. What is significant about the gendering of television texts is “the reading relations” these genres permit. Fiske summarizes the basic characteristics of these discursive practices.

Feminine genres, because they articulate the concerns of a gender whose interests are denied by the dominating ideology, must, if they are to be popular, be open enough to permit a variety of oppositional, or at least resistant readings. . . . Masculine genres, on the other hand, speak to audiences. . . . whose reading strategy is likely to be one of negotiation by which they accommodate their social differences with patriarchy, rather than resistance. (222)

These genres reinforce the dominant ideology; the feminine

accommodates and offers open or resistant readings, the masculine genre merely negotiates from a position of patriarchal power. Yet conversely, Fiske points out that we should hesitate to ascribe such a strict demarcation for the “relationship between the social and the textual is never clear or singular”(222). For the purposes of our discussion, the role of gendered television discourse offers viewers oppositional readings that clearly reflect the familiar, and yet allow for resistant readings and the experience of pleasure. To Fiske, this feature is part of the “semiotic democracy” of television viewing for it is through making meaning, Fiske reminds us, that pleasure is derived.

Postmodern Comedy Club Round Table

Postmodernism, then, is a moment that steps out of the constraints of pre-modern or modernist interpretation. Clearly, when we move from modern to postmodern interpretation, though it appears we are treading on similar and familiar ground, we are, in fact, taking an alternate route. Nearly all of the authors presented in this chapter address this issue in their research. Rose cites Jenck’s definition of the postmodern as “something which both follows the modern, and replaces its concentration on single codes and on messages of an ‘either or’ variety with statements of ‘both

and” (Rose, 1993). Olsen defines the sometimes circuitous (and confusing) paths of modern and postmodern thought around the belief (or lack of belief) in the meta-narrative. In the following definition Olsen separates the two modes of thought based on the presence or absence of *une histoire grande*.

Modern thought wants to believe in an over-arching narrative, but [also] senses there's not one to believe in, and so gets desperate and often gloomy and fragmented in its expression. . . . Postmodern thought assumes there's no over-arching narrative to our lives and revels in its absence, making fun of just about everything, including itself. . . . Now it sounds like these are. . . distinct categories, but in fact they exist along some sort of Moebius-strip continuum. . . . (Olsen, 1996).

Thus, like the Moebius strip, what separates the two modes of interpretation may be construed as a 180 degree twist that is self-aware, and created in opposition to the dominant theoretical framework. The postmodern impulse charts an oppositional, yet parallel course, and unless we are able to discern the “twist,” in the Moebius strip, we may, like so many others, find the two modes of expression indistinguishable.

In contrast, Rutter focuses on the self awareness of the postmodern comedic text and the intermingling of “classical notions of. . . comedy narrative” with the postmodern. To Rutter the postmodern comedic text is merely part of a deconstructing of

previous convention. The postmodern comedic text deconstructs the modern comedic text, and perhaps, in the process is transformed from avant garde status to cultural norm “respectability.”

What seems clear from our discussion on the elusive nature of postmodern comedy is that taken individually, any of the defining features of postmodern comedy we encountered in the previous summary may be ascribed to a general theory of comedy and/or the modernist impulse. However, when we find dense layers of intertextuality shaped by the audience and the creators of the text, the comic, the meta-fictional, self-reflexivity, and a propensity to engage in language games within a text, we can safely conclude the following: 1) we have encountered a set of characteristics that, taken as a whole, may define postmodern comedy; 2) postmodern comedy is a carnivalized genre that invites multiple, oppositional readings, and, is created and recreated by this intertextual relationship between audience, market and technology; 3) the dense intertextual relationships between audience, market and technology that define postmodern comedy also confine postmodern comedy; it is a genre bound by time and technology.

With these thoughts in mind, we now turn to the case studies for further evidence on the nature of postmodern comedy.

Chapter 3

Postmodern Power Plays: Analyzing the Mixed Signals on *Home Improvement*

What's So Postmodern About *Home Improvement* ?

Is *Home Improvement* simply another middle-of-the-road television comedy designed to attract mass viewer appeal? Or is this ABC series a tailored-for-prime time postmodern power play that depicts the shifting alliances gender oppositions must negotiate daily? The answer to both questions is positive--and in the following analysis I will draw upon research on postmodern comedy, power relations and the theories of M. Bahktin to show how the ABC sitcom *Home Improvement's* ability to attract male and female viewers rests in its intertextuality and the conflicting feminist and androcentric messages competing for the viewer's attention in every episode.

The gender-based communication conflict that forms the basis of the relationships portrayed on *Home Improvement* has allowed this ABC sitcom to retain a solid spot in the Nielsen Top Ten ratings for seven years and given the creators of the show ample room to experiment with animated segments, meta-narratives and a clash of

high and pop culture within the confines of a typical sitcom narrative.

Peering at Postmodern Comedy

Critical to understanding *Home Improvement's* ratings success and appeal is first recognizing that behind the ABC sitcom's facade of middle American sensibilities and subject matter lies a distinctly postmodern comedic vision. Viewers are routinely exposed to a wide variety of opposing points of view and an assortment of texts on the show (see Chap.2) e.g. Tool Time segments, overt references to other texts, Tim Allen as comedian and star of TV and movies, publicity and merchandising such as Sears Tools or Tool Time Girl Heidi's calendars, spinoffs derived from *Home Improvement (Soul Man)*, and appearances on other sitcoms (*The Drew Carey Show*). Each of the other stars appearing on *Home Improvement* bring a similar variety of the same texts to the show.

Intertextuality is deeply enmeshed in *Home Improvement*; the creation of this sitcom is based on a deliberate melange of comedian Tim Allen's masculinist-based humor with a trio of late 80's best-selling pop culture self-help books, *Iron John: A Book About Men* by Robert Bly, *Fire in The Belly* by Sam Keen and *You Just Don't Understand: Men and Women in Conversation* by Deborah Tannen.

The creators of *Home Improvement* openly acknowledge mining the ideologies in these books as fodder for humorous material (Arkbush,1995); Wilson's stories and anecdotes reflect Bly's men's movement ideology while Jill and Tim's communication problems mirror Tannen's thesis that men and women have different communication styles. Tannen's approach to gender conversational style in *You Just Don't Understand:Men and Women in Conversation* is described by Mary Crawford in *Talking Difference* as advocating "the two sex culture" (92).

Recalling how Bahktin remarked that "the epoch itself made the polyphonic possible (1994:90)" we may begin to see that this wedding of men's movement ideology and "two sex culture" on *Home Improvement* presents a very contemporary point of view on gender communication. Rooted in a densely woven intertextual web, the voices and points of view presented on *Home Improvement* reflect the current state of gender relations. Tim's overt masculinity, Al's sensitive male, Jill's female point of view, and Wilson's world cultural truisms are all presented weekly for the audience to peruse and identify with. The Tool Time Girl Heidi provides calendar girl daydreams while Jill is shown reading Susan Faludi's book *Backlash*. Next door neighbor guru/ philosopher Wilson uses the 16th century novelist Cervantes to illustrate the

Oriental concept of yin/yang and the psychological musings of Carl Jung to explain the fine points of maintaining a marital relationship to relationship fumbler, Tim. The voices and points of view we are exposed to on *Home Improvement* are always oppositional, contradictory, yet coexisting--and most importantly--the constant clamor of these competing voices ensures there is no central univocal point of view on the show.

Relating *Home Improvement* to a work of polyphonic postmodern humor may seem odd, yet if we view the text of the show as one more artifact of late 20th century television pop culture affected by postmodernism, the comparison is logical. What was the realm of the avant-garde is now the norm--and as Abercrombie(1996) points out "many theorists of postmodernism claim that its most important features have found their way into the culture of everyday life" (36). Television is certainly a part of everyday life; prime time television sitcoms are a major revenue producer and part of network television's status hierarchy. After six seasons, the show and Tim Allen's trademark grunts are easily recognizable; a 1995 syndication deal of 3 million dollars per episode has allowed the show to reach a national and world audience(2/7/94 Business Week 7 Feb.1994. 36.).

This melding of postmodern inclination and traditional sitcom

format is exemplarily shown in episode 95 entitled “No, No Godot (air date 3/21/95).” Beckett’s play revolves around a conversation between two men and the “spiritual awakening” the characters arrive at as they wait for the absent Godot to arrive; in the following brief synopsis, we see how the characters in Home Improvement parody the absurdist drama.

Tim buys hockey tickets, forgetting a theater date with Al and Ilene. Tim then decides he and Al will sell the tickets to the hockey game in front of the stadium while Jill and Ilene go to the theater and wait for them. Tim refuses to take a cut in price, thus they miss several opportunities to sell the tickets until guest star Max Gale agrees to buy the tickets at full price. Gale, an undercover police officer, performs an excerpt from Beckett’s “Waiting For Godot” with Al just before he takes Al and Tim to jail for scalping tickets. Meanwhile Jill and Ilene are left waiting at “Waiting for Godot” for Tim and Al to arrive. Jill believes Tim and Al have went to the hockey game and is so angry, she begins to act “like Tim.” A woman patron admonishes Jill and Ilene to be quiet and Jill responds: “Listen lady, there are only five people in the world that understand this play--and you’re not one of them!” Jill then upsets one of the actors on stage, who stops the play and refuses to continue until Jill quits whispering. Both couples, Tim and Al in a holding cell, and Jill and

Ilene at the play eventually arrive at “spiritual awakenings” when their preconceived notions are humorously upended. Al and Tim discover that a burly inmate/tattoo artist is an articulate theater buff, while Jill and Ilene discover that the men did intend to go the theater, but end up in jail instead. The twisting of Beckett’s work to fit the sitcom genre of *Home Improvement* with the premise of a canonical work of literature shows an ability to play with the traditional genre form in a creative, non- threatening way.

Gender relationships and conflicts have remained the premise of the show since its network debut on Sept. 17th, 1991. This gender conflict premise has been extremely successful; Nielsen ratings consistently place the show in the Top Ten since its debut. (Mr.Show Biz web site). In a 1993 interview the executive producer and creator of Home Improvement stated:

In regard to appealing to the public, our show is broad. We have physical comedy. We try to be witty when its called for. There’s some double entendre, no doubt about it. But we do it when the character calls for it. At home Tim may try to set something up without reading the instructions, but that’s because he thinks he can make it better. He’s enthusiastic. He has a noble cause, though the results are physical comedy. It’s not because he’s an idiot. He’s just very male(Writer’s Digest 44).

Tim Taylor’s over-developed sense of masculinity is given a

forum on the Tool Time segments of Home *Improvement*, a running meta-narrative that serves as a sub-plot to the show. On Tool Time, Tim frequently vents his frustration with his relationship and makes sweeping generalizations about women such as this excerpt from the pilot episode.

[TIM starts the drill again] “But you won't even be halfway through your aug[sic] before you hear this--” [TIM speaks in a high squeaky voice] “Honey, shut that thing off, it's making too much noise.” [Grunting] U-huh? “Always let go of that first plate. Just makes her yell a little louder” (Pilot Episode Home Improvement).

Tim's exaggerated masculinism and home repair catastrophes on Tool Time are effectively counter-balanced by the presence of Al, Tim's quietly competent assistant. When Tim suggests a risky method of home repair or chooses an inappropriate tool, Al responds with a terse “I don't think so, Tim.” When Tim makes an insensitive sexist remark, Al raises a placard that has Tim's name and the Tool Time address and intones, “That's Tim Taylor, care of Tool Time. . . .” The frequency of these catch phrases serve as a humorous buffer to the aggressive nature of the humor, and again reflect the oppositional dialogue between competing points of view, Al's sensitive male and Tim's masculinist position.

The jokes directed at women in the episode No.24

“Stereotypical” (air date 5/5/92) seem a good example of the negotiation between oppositions that the characters on *Home Improvement* engage in. During a Tool Time episode that features “A Salute To Saws” Tim waxes over the power of a Binford chainsaw, describes the saw as a tool “a man can relate to” and then starts the chainsaw. After a brief physical comedy episode when Tim holds the saw above his head and runs towards the audience screaming (an allusion to the movie *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*) he then returns to the stage with the saw running and yells in a high-pitched voice: “You won’t have this thing revved too long before you hear the wife asking “Are you supposed to have this thing running in the bedroom?” Al then holds up a placard with Tim’s address at Tool Time and repeats Tim’s address. Tim makes an exasperated noise and replies “The women know I’m kidding!” Tim then takes the chainsaw and cuts through Al’s placard. Tim takes the placard and walks towards the trash can, saying “They know I’m kidding. If not, they’re too busy yapping to hear me anyway!” Al then holds up another placard and announces “ That’s Tim, he’s not kidding Taylor care of Tool Time. . . .” (“Stereotypical” 5/5/92).

Again we see a dialogic pull between oppositions, the power play negotiated and eventually defused by the incongruous ineptness and impulsiveness of Tim Taylor. In the episode that is

excerpted above, the power of the negative stereotypes are neutralized in a follow up scene when Tim attempts to install a stereo without reading the instructions, shatters all the windows in his living room and subsequently finds out his homeowner's insurance policy rates have been doubled because he is considered accident prone.

The Postmodern Comic Protagonist: Taylored For Tim

Can we define elements of the postmodern comic protagonist by peering at the antics of Tim Taylor on *Home Improvement*? Perhaps; Tim's attempts at home repair or participating in traditionally male-oriented activities such as operating heavy construction equipment or Scottish caber-tossing usually backfire and Tim becomes the target of most of the jokes. The target of a joke is never insignificant; indeed Davies (1996) posits that the "butt" or target in ethnic jokes on stupidity may be seen as possessing "a strong sense of tradition, customs or relationship and lacking power or influence within their social and economic sphere" (45). In *Home Improvement* the powerful, traditional patriarch within an explicit patriarchal structure is turned inside out and portrayed as a buffoon. Recalling that postmodern comedy is seen as self-reflexive, prone to mixing of genres and dualistic in nature, the inversion of the

dominant patriarch Tim and his status as joke target reflects this duality--and this duality involves the subversion of power. Fiske (1993) notes that "the struggle between the power-bloc and the people always involves power"(10). For our purposes in this thesis, the "power-bloc" is patriarchy; it is white, male, and rooted in the upper middle class. It is important to remember that despite Tim Taylor's veneer of regular guy pursuits, he is not working class. His position is white collar; he is college-educated. He is one of the privileged "haves" and as such, the inversion of the dominant patriarch may be seen as a distorted reflection of the ongoing struggle between the "power-bloc" and the people that levels the gender playing field in the sitcom world of *Home Improvement*. More power routinely becomes less power in the Taylor sitcom household-- and the antics of Tim Taylor as the joke target in *Home Improvement* functions as a leveling mechanism in a postmodern power play. In an attempt to prove this supposition, seven random episodes of *Home Improvement* were analyzed for joke target [For a definition of target, see Chapter 1. A short summary of the data is presented on the following page.

Joke Target Data

<p>1.)Pilot Episode Air date: 17 Sept.1991 Tim: 13 Al: 3 Jill: 7 Kids:1 Women "Every Wife" 3</p>	<p>5). "Dream On" Air date: 12 Jan.94. Tim 10 Al 5 Jill 2 Ilene 1 Kids 0 Women 0</p>
<p>2). "Stereo-typical" Air date: 5 May 1992 Tim: 28 Al:7 Jill:5 Kids: Women:2</p>	<p>6). "No,No, Godot" Air date:21 Mar.1995. Tim 13 Al 11 Jill 4 Kids 1 Ilene 1 Wilson 1</p>
<p>3). "Birth Of A Hot Rod" Air date: 12 May 1993 Tim:21 Al: 1 Jill:4 Kids:1 Women:1</p>	<p>7). "Whose Car Is It Anyways?" Air date: 22 Oct.1996 Tim 23 Al 3 Jill 4 Kids 1</p>
<p>4) "Blow Up" Air date: 3 Nov.1993 Tim:17 Al:9 Jill 4 Women:1</p>	

The joke target data collected in this analysis shows that Tim is the target of a joke 125 times while Al is targeted 44 times, Jill 30 times, the kids, Wilson and Al's girlfriend Ilene are targets 5 times. Jokes that are aggressively directed at women occur 7 times. This analysis affirms that Tim's aggressive humor directed at women is effectively defused by his stance as target. It is also significant that several other continuing plot line soften these occasionally aggressive jabs; in the sixteen episodes I viewed that covered all 6 seasons, Tim is always shown as a good father, a loving husband, and a good friend. Though many of his activities involve his passion for sports and cars, he is also shown participating in Habitat for Humanity, helping a down-on-his-luck friend Benny and coming to the aid of other family and friends with problems. These charitable, giving activities combined with his inept home repair skills and stance as joke target provides a concrete example of how the show uses conflicting signals to depict gender communication problems.

Thus we see that a chameleon-like quality is derived from the polyphony of voices and conflicting messages present in the text of *Home Improvement*. This ability to offer mixed interpretations also allows viewers of this show, regardless of gender to perceive positive messages from the text as they watch. Lichter, Lichter and

Rothman(1994) seem to agree with this position when they state: “In his effort to uphold his masculine ideals, along with his inevitable failures to play handyman in his own household, Tim’s character satirizes male attitudes toward women and life in general”(46-47). Yet this satire may also be read as an affirmation of stereotype by some viewers. Television’s ability to offer mixed interpretations is defined as a “producerly text” by John Fiske (1987). Fiske states:

the “producerly” text draws attention to its own textuality. . . does not produce a singular reading subject, but. . . treats its readers as members of a semiotic democracy, already equipped with the discursive competencies to make meanings and [are] motivated by pleasure to want to participate in the process” (95).

So the sexist remarks occasionally uttered by Tim may be seen as satire-- or not, and the inversion of the dominant patriarch infuses the show with multiple meanings that allows males and females to derive pleasure; the popularity of this show among women seems to attest to this point of view. Zoglin’s review of the show in Time magazine asserts that *Home Improvement* “typically ranks higher than even *Roseanne* among women ages 18-49” (71-72), and more recent figures(1997) show that *Home Improvement’s* popularity among women viewers has continued unabated. Steve McClellan in Broadcasting and Cable magazine states: “Katz’s

November sweeps analysis of affiliates in the top 100 markets shows *Home Improvement* delivered the highest share of women in access, averaging a 21 share of women ages 25-54”(50-51).

This popularity among women viewers also translates into a significant amount of advertising dollars; McLean in USA Today lists 1995 advertising rates for *Home Improvement* at \$305,000. 00 per 30 second spot (USA Today 1995 Jan 30, Section B p5). Appeal to women viewers is integral to the show's success; a study by Steve Craig covers some of the benefits advertisers reap by soliciting to women viewers in prime time. Craig (1996)states that :

Women are considered by Madison Avenue to be the primary purchasers of fast moving consumer goods but their steady migration out of the home and into the paid work force has made it more and more difficult for advertisers to reach them during the day. To reach women working outside the home, advertisers have increasingly relied on commercials scheduled during the heavily-viewed prime time hours (64).

So it is financially imperative for *Home Improvement* to find a way to successfully appeal to women and men viewers and allow both to derive pleasure and construct meaning from the show. Tim's position as joke target suits these dual purposes like a well-tailored piece of clothing.

Who's on First? The Voice of Authority in *Home Improvement* --or never underestimate the power of a polyphonic text

We have seen that *Home Improvement's* conflicting messages attract female and male viewers and also contribute to the show's "polyphonic point of view," yet is there a true voice of authority in *Home Improvement*? And more importantly, if there is a voice of authority, is it the voice of a traditional patriarchal system? One key factor to analyzing and eventually answering this question is to examine the apparent role reversal of the two main characters, Tim and Jill. Fiske(1987) points out that, "comedies frequently invert normal relationships and show the adults as incompetent, unable to understand and the children as superior in insight and ability. Alternatively "inverted" adults are treated more sympathetically and are treated as honorary children" (242). Bakhtin's theory of carnival refers to role reversals as the "peculiar logic of the inside out." All laws and norms are suspended in the carnival--and as Bakhtin notes "all were considered equal during carnival(1994:199-200)".

The role reversal of Tim and Jill in *Home Improvement* provides a carnivalesque equality to a show that portrays an explicit patriarchal structure. Surrounded by males, Jill's is the only clear female point of view; Ilene, Al's girlfriend, though a recurrent

character, does not vocally challenge the patriarchal structure, nor does the Tool Time Girl, Heidi. Heidi's presence is, for the most part, strictly visual. Her appearances are usually without dialogue; she is viewed as merely an objectified female. It is interesting to note that of all the women characters on the show, Heidi's real life pregnancy was chronicled on the show and in the episode "The Tool Man Delivers," Tim delivers the baby while Jill transmits coaching advice from Wilson. This episode seems to reaffirm the patriarchal system with the males aiding in the birth of the attractive objectified female, while Jill, a mother who has given birth several times, is relegated to the role of translator of patriarchal wisdom.

Jill's character within this patriarchal system does convey a feminist position, yet her feminism is cloaked by a motherly voice of reason and her character continually expresses this division of interest. In one episode she expresses the wish for autonomy; she acknowledges the excess of male energy on the show and her household with a wry comment "There's testosterone dripping down the walls in this house." Yet in a later episode, she also attempts to exert control over Tim's excesses much as a mother would attempt to restrain a child. "Think of what Jill would want you to buy," she instructs Tim before he goes off to the stereo store in the episode "Stereotypical." In several episodes Jill also refers to her "four

children” and with this reference Tim, the breadwinner, dominant male in a patriarchal society is “turned inside out.” His impulsiveness, risk-taking behavior, and physical comedy border on the childish and grotesque as Bakhtin’s theory of carnival suggests. Tim’s schemes to add “more power” to household appliances end in his being mildly injured or being viewed as foolish--and as Bakhtin reminds us, in carnivalesque discourse we are invited to participate in the lifting of the laws and tradition and vicariously participate in the antics of the dominant male Tim playing the carnival fool. So, despite the patriarchal system we see in place on *Home Improvement*, women and men may derive equal pleasure from Tim’s “inverted position” as carnival clown, the child-like, impulsive, undisciplined patriarch engaged in a long-running gender conflict.

The character of Wilson also adds an interesting dimension to the patriarchal structure of *Home Improvement*. Wilson, for the first four years of the show was portrayed as a dispenser of eclectic wisdom and tribal customs from around the world as he offered free advice over the fence. to Tim, and less frequently Jill.

Wilson’s role as the patriarchal voice of reason remained unchallenged until 1994. In the 81st episode Wilson’s patriarchal fallibility is revealed in an episode entitled “Let’s Go To The Videotape” when Jill and Wilson match wit and wisdom over the

fence and Jill trumps Wilson's advice with a reference to a feminist theorist. Wilson concedes to Jill's acumen, remarking that since Jill returned to school, his job is now "much more difficult." In the 100th episode entitled "Wilson's Girlfriend," Jill plays matchmaker with Wilson and her psychology professor; their budding romance is the focus of the show. In this show, Wilson reveals an inability to establish intimacy in a relationship and Tim counsels him on how to express his feelings. In Episode 143 "Wilson's World," Wilson again reveals his insecurity when he decides to become "more like Tim," after a critic declares Wilson's performance art out of touch with reality.

These challenges to Wilson's role as patriarch seem in keeping with the show's affinity for sending mixed signals on gender communication and family problems. It is relevant that Jill played matchmaker for Wilson with a female authority figure she admired, yet the patriarchal structure remains intact and unchanged despite this new relationship. Jill's reference to Andrea Dworkin (feminist theorist) is also another direct challenge to the patriarchal system of *Home Improvement* and Wilson's subsequent concession seems to indicate some acknowledgement of the show's imbalance.

Power Walks and Talks:

The role reversal and carnivalesque equality that Tim and Jill engage in on *Home Improvement* is also apparent in the language and conversational interaction between the two characters. Jill is verbally fluent; her discourse shows she bridges the “two sex culture” gap during communication and discussions, while Tim’s attempts to engage in intellectual conversation are usually as disastrous as his attempts to add more power to household appliances. When Tim does foray into intellectual activities, he turns to Wilson for advice. Tim also acknowledges Jill is his intellectual superior in two episodes. (No.75 and No.103).

Jill participates in conversations that cover a wide range of diverse topics such as the efficiency of Holley Double Pumper carburetors and tire sizes as well as feminist theory, psychology, history, art theory, etc. . Wilson admits that Jill is his intellectual equal while Tim frequently exhibits poor listening skills and a limited vocabulary. When Tim needs a word to stump Bob Vila in a tool man competition, Tim turns to Jill to ferret out the appropriate word, awl (Episode 17 “What About Bob?”). When Tim turns to Wilson for advice and then attempts to transmit this advice, he frequently mangles the aphorism into unintelligible nonsense, e.g. the Roman Rhetorician Seneca becomes the Italian Sunoco; the

psychologist Carl Jung becomes a Chinese philosopher, Mah Jong. On another episode, Jill forbids Tim to help the children with homework unless she supervises.

Jill and Wilson are shown to be studious and scholarly; Wilson possesses advanced degrees in science while Jill is shown pursuing an advanced degree in Family Counseling. Tim's honorary doctorate from his alma mater is awarded to him as a public relations ploy (Episode 110, "Doctor In The House"). Tim's interests are strictly "blue collar": hot rods, sports, tools and poker. He is openly disparaging of theater, ballet, opera, literature and other high culture leisure activities. The role reversal the characters engage in is reflected in their discourse and social interactions; this aspect of the role reversal may be connected to Tim's status as joke target on the show, because, as Christie Davies notes, the target of ethnic jokes on stupidity are less powerful in social and intellectual settings because of a lack of education and experience(45).

Sitcom Sense and Sensibility

So, despite *Home Improvement's* ability to push boundaries and make use of facets of postmodern comedy within the show, the show reaffirms the basic patriarchal family structure and posits a noncontroversial position. Minorities are under represented on the

show; Tim's boss Bud is a black male; he and his wife have recurring roles on the show. Another recurring minority role, a plumber is played by a black male. These roles however are noncontroversial and do not usurp the traditional patriarchal structure of *Home Improvement*. Gays and lesbians are virtually nonexistent on this show--the closest to an overt reference to homosexuality is an episode when Al and Tim are mistaken for a gay couple ("Roomies For Improvement"). This noncontroversial position is reaffirmed in the web-zine Entertainment Weekly Online in an article by Gregg Kilday entitled "Gays Work Behind The Scenes To Give Entertainment A Make Over." Kilday states:

The conventional wisdom, despite evidence to the contrary, is that gay topics are a tough sell on TV. Says Rick Leed, president of Wind Dancer Production Group, which turns out *Home Improvement*, "I certainly do my best to work with gay-oriented material, but honestly, our company is a business, and one of our problems is that mainstream America is not really gay friendly when it comes to mainstream TV shows (Entertainment Weekly Online).

Leed's position on gays in mainstream television is reflected in the patriarchal, noncontroversial structure of *Home Improvement*. Yet this perceived lack is not necessarily a detriment, for the show has remained true to its original premise and strengths. This show was conceived to send a message about the myriad of mixed,

conflicting signals males and females face as they negotiate changing relationship roles in society. This show was designed to satirize these changing roles and perhaps mildly tweak our conscious while we laugh rather than field regular doses of controversial issue-oriented entertainment. Jeff Jarvis's "Couch Critic" review of *Home Improvement* seems to sum up *Home Improvement's* strengths succinctly when he states:

It is still the best at taking family stereotypes and turning them into good laughs: Allen tries to act like a pig but inevitably ends up a pussycat ("I've always had a sneaking yet disturbing suspicion that there actually might be something to me.") Patricia Richardson is a nearly perfect mom but has a much better sense of humor than Donna Reed ever did. The boys try to be hell-raisers but turn out to be good. . . . It is still just a good sitcom with characters who are easy to like, jokes that are easy to laugh at, and life lessons that are easy to take. (TV Guide May 4-11)

It seems clear that, when looking beyond the tremendous appeal and ratings success of *Home Improvement*, the show does reinforce some of our traditional notions of gender and family relations in a patriarchal society; yet it is also apparent that *Home Improvement* expands the boundaries of the traditional sitcom genre and sends viewers conflicting signals on this same patriarchal structure by continually subverting the dominant patriarch, allowing a polyphony of voices and points of views to coexist on the show, and

structuring the episodes to include elements of high and popular culture. This postmodern power play centered around gender conflicts has been--and continues to be--extremely successful in the ratings-conscious arena of prime time television.

Chapter 4

Dangling oppositions: Targeting The Simpsons

As we viewed in the previous chapters, postmodern comedy depends upon intertextuality, self-awareness and changes in relationship between text, performer and audience. In the postmodern comedy then, it seems safe to surmise that meaning is negotiated --and renegotiated-- in a constantly shifting power play; narrative gives way to performance and spectacle, univocal meaning is replaced by polysemy, and high culture clashes with low. Meaning becomes a matter of interpretation in postmodern comedy. To further complicate this issue, I would like to propose that in addition to all of the above, the renegotiation of the oppositional conflict as cultural norm is the locus of the postmodern comedic text-- and exemplified in the animated sitcom series, *The Simpsons*.

Central to advancing the argument that the renegotiation of oppositional status differentiates the postmodern comedic text from the modern comedic text is first defining the postmodern (see Chapter 2). The creation of *The Simpsons* seems representative of this shift in oppositional status. Matt Groening, the creator of *The Simpsons* was a cartoonist and creator of a successful underground

comic strip "Life In Hell." On a modern/ post modern Moebius strip continuum (see Olsen, Chapter.2, p.44) Groening's artistic expression is in direct opposition with the established cartoon market.

Underground comics are youth-oriented, designed to titillate, and/or shock their audience with over-the-top scenes of graphic violence, explicit sex, sexism and/or acid political satire. Fame derived from an underground comic strip is usually limited, yet the popularity and off the wall humor of the comic strip "Life In Hell" on college campuses led television producer James Brooks to Groening. Based on a few hastily-drawn sketches of the bug-eyed dysfunctional family during a pitch session, Brooks requested a series of animated shorts for *The Tracy Ullman Show*. With this collaboration between a prime time television producer and a cartoon artist of sub-culture humor, a prime time animated sitcom is created, and the oppositional status of its genesis is transformed into a beloved, dysfunctional family cultural icon.

From the creation of the characters to content, *The Simpsons* have been vilified by conservatives as anti-family, politically incorrect--even Groening(1997) refers to his characters as equal opportunity offenders. Oszersky(1996) argues that "the fundamentally hopeless" picture *The Simpsons* presents "commits us to a shared vision of pessimism and self-deprecation(212)." The

polysemy of the television text and the sparring of the competing oppositions in the postmodern comedic text invite multiple, oppositional readings; an equally convincing case may be made that the anti-family malaise Oszersky ascribes to *The Simpsons* is merely a satirical reflection of our cultural insecurity on the same issue. We must turn to Bakhtin's interpretation of the Menippean satire to understand the textual intentions of this carnivalized genre and its relevance to postmodern comedy--and *The Simpsons*.

As we have seen in Chapter 1, Bakhtin characterizes the Menippean satire as multi-voiced, calling it an "organic combination . . . of the free fantastic, the symbolic, at times even a mystical-religious element with an extreme . . . crude slum naturalism" (1994:190). Springfield is every town, a mythic, idealized veneer that reflects the gritty reality Bakhtin refers to. Bakhtin likens slum naturalism in the Menippean satire to an unflinching collision of extremes because "the adventures of truth on earth take place on the high road, in the dens of thieves, in taverns, the marketplace (1994:190)". The text of *The Simpsons* shows this constant clash of extremes; the show is laced with nostalgic pop culture references to small town life, yet also contrasts these same idyllic small town images with the excesses of the less-than-perfect residents of Springfield. To Bakhtin, the Menippean satire contains "all sorts of violations in the generally

accepted and customary course of events and the established norms of behavior and etiquette (1994:191)” and is concerned with “current and topical issues”(1994:192).

In *The Simpsons*, the carnivalesque adventures of the Menippean satire becomes the extraordinary lives of the residents of Springfield. Krusty the Clown is a case study in oppositions: the local kiddie show host performs with Sting, and is usually shown holding a martini glass. Krusty may play the fool--but he is no fool; episodes have chronicled his marketing schemes and investments like Krusty The Clown cereal and a seedy children’s camp. In one episode, Homer becomes a side-show freak for youth culture in The Lollapalooza Tour; in another, Bart has a chance at a starring role in the live-action film of his favorite comic book character, Radioactive Man. Homer even plays “God” in a recent episode when he dons a mask of the Hindu deity Ganesh and attempts to frighten Apu’s mother.

The residents of Springfield do not lead ordinary small town lives; they lead lives of Menippean excess in an idealized sitcom portrait of small town life that pays a skewed homage to early sixties family sitcoms and idealized film images of small towns, e.g. “It’s a Wonderful Life.” Groening acknowledges this deliberate caricature when he describes *The Simpsons* as a “combination of “Leave It To

Beaver” and “Ozzie and Harriet” and all the other cornball sitcoms that I love, mixed with a bit of revenge on my friends and neighbors as I was growing up” (BBC Interviews).

These images contrast sharply with the uncompromising realism in the show. Similar to Capra’s film, the cartoon antagonist Montgomery Burns is as malevolent and money-grubbing as Mr. Potter; the character of Moe bears a striking resemblance to barkeep Nick² and an argument could be advanced that Homer may be a loutish George Bailey, the everyman who longs for the adventurous life. Homer’s list of attempts to escape the confines of his ascribed role as patriarch and provider is lengthy. Homer has been a mascot for a major league team, a car designer for his brother’s firm, the town crier during the Springfield Days festival, a safety activist, and also a member of a Grammy-winning barber shop quartet. He’s been fired from his job, resorted to gaining weight to work at home and like George Bailey, even attempted suicide and received “divine” inspiration from above. None of Homer’s efforts to escape his role are successful, and like George Bailey, Homer also has to be reminded of the importance of friends and family.

The distortion of these idealized familiar images of small town life contrast with the hyper-reality of the animated town of

² The character of Nick in “It’s a Wonderful Life” was played by Sheldon Leonard, an extremely powerful Hollywood producer.

Springfield. Groening, the creator of *The Simpsons* likens this distortion to “elastic band reality” and notes that it is a primary characteristic of animation (BBC Interviews). Thus we see in *The Simpsons* reality stretched to its outermost limits in an exaggerated representation of stereotype. The river running past the nuclear plant is home to mutated fish, while in other episodes we see a burning tire dump, Apu’s Kwik-E-Mart, a school field trip to the State Prison and a nuclear power plant. Otto, the school bus driver is a burned-out hippie who dispenses advice to the students like “Party hearty means tardy, little dudes,” while bland, well-behaved Beaver becomes acid-tongued Bart.

Familiar images of family life are also deconstructed in *The Simpsons*. Marge tries to live up to the legacy of June Cleaver and Harriet Nelson, but falls short in characteristically Simpson-like ways. Marge of all the characters seems the most two-dimensional and consistent; she is always a good mother/wife in spite of her occasional excesses--or the excesses of those around her. When stress causes Marge’s hair to fall out, the Simpsons hire a nanny, Shari Bobbins. In another episode, Marge and Homer are charged with child neglect and the children are removed from their home. Marge has been publicly humiliated when Homer tells-all in a community education class--she even becomes a compulsive gambler

and contemplates adultery on more than one occasion.

Gender roles and a patriarchal system are strictly ascribed in *The Simpsons*. This stratification into assigned roles is interesting, given the often timely and topical subject matter of the series. Marge, true to her June and Harriet legacy is the stay-at-home mom, devoted to her husband and children, though she has temporarily ventured into the world of work on several different occasions. Marge is the stereotypical, isolated, long-suffering wife in suburbia. She is never shown developing female relationships or in any socially active role other than housewife and mother; similarly viewers are rarely exposed to Marge's inner life, fantasies or thoughts. Marge's status appears to be an objectified female: she has been pursued by Moe, Barney and Mr. Burns when Homer is believed to be dead, and her physical attractiveness referred to by a number of male characters. The odd, sleeveless form-fitting shift the Bouvier women wear is also (at the least) interesting when compared to the clothing of the other women characters, as is the fact that all of the Bouvier women have been pursued romantically in various episodes. The surname Bouvier is an interesting choice, for it evokes the name of the idealized and chastely objectified Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, an icon of the early 60's.

Homer, the head of his nuclear family works at the nuclear

power plant; his lifestyle is vastly different than Marge's . He has an active social network of friends, and is frequently shown socializing at Moe's Bar and the bowling alley. He is indolent at home and at work; shown lying on the sofa while Marge works around him or eating doughnuts with his feet propped up on his control board. His position is white collar; he is a technical supervisor at the plant and The Simpson's lifestyle includes vacations, children's camp, and all the conveniences our consumerist culture offers. Viewers are also privy to Homer's inner life; episodes have played out his fantasies and frequently Homer's thoughts are made explicit via voice-over. His advice to his children is imparted with good intentions, but is often outrageous, and completely contrary to the expectations of a good parent. He is the antithesis of the 60's patriarch, an extreme satirization of stereotype functioning in a patriarchal system as are all of the residents of the town of Springfield.

The Simpson children are similarly circumscribed stereotypes. Bart is typically aggressive, taught how to fight dirty by his grandpa in one episode, more interested in sports, television and comic books than academics. Maggie is the voiceless child, though she transcends her ascribed role in a nursery school commando raid to rescue confiscated pacifiers. When Maggie finally does speak, her first word is "Daddy" (voiced by Elizabeth Taylor) and uttered after Homer

declares “The sooner kids talk, the sooner they talk back.” As he tucks Maggie in bed, he tells her, “I hope you never say a word.” When her bedroom door closes, she removes her pacifier and says “Daddy” (“Lisa’s First Words” Air date: Dec. 3,1992 The Simpson Archives).

Lisa is, by far, the most interesting amalgam of stereotypes. She is precociously bright, frequently expresses the feminist point of view, yet her position as female child in the Simpson household is that of lower status. Her achievements are overshadowed by Bart’s mischief, her rational point of view usually ignored. This unequal relationship in the treatment of male and female characters reflects not only the idealized images of 60’s sitcom family relationships, but also the way patriarchy is packaged and negotiated for a prime time audience.

“Pop” Power

The power of the satirized patriarchal system in place on *The Simpsons* is significant, especially given the show’s status as a prime time ratings success. With 23 Emmy nominations and 9 wins, several Outstanding Animated Program Awards and a Peabody Award (The Simpson Archives), *The Simpsons* mainstream success is acknowledged by the entertainment community as well as legions of

devoted viewers. In 1995, *The Simpsons* entered syndication and preliminary figures set the series price at 2 million dollars per episode (Business Week:36). *The Simpsons* is the longest running prime time animated series (the 200th episode aired Jan. 11,1998), and marketed to attract a primarily adult audience; recent figures place the percentage of adult viewers at 71 percent (Solomon:20). We have seen how the genesis of *The Simpsons* lies in the oppositional subculture of underground comics, and that this Fox sitcom shares many similarities with the carnivalesque discourse of the Menippean satire. It is also clear that from these dangling oppositions engaged in constant conflict and negotiation--*The Simpsons* became a prime time ratings success and have acquired cultural norm status.

Topically Homer

The humor on *The Simpsons* is frequently topical, and the joke target is not a person, but rather an ideological concept. Current events and public figures, crass commercialism, holidays-- even idealized notions of romantic love have been the butt of a joke in various episodes. In this brief excerpt from the episode entitled "Another Simpsons Clip Show," we see how romance functions as the ideological joke target after Marge reads The Bridges Of Madison

County.

Marge: Children, your father and I have fed and clothed you but we've neglected something more important: it's time to learn about love.

Bart: No need, Mom. We already learned in school.

[0:38 clip from 8F22: Fuzzy and Fluffy Bunny]

Marge: I mean "romance," not "love".

Lisa: Mom, romance is dead. It was acquired in a hostile takeover by Hallmark and Disney, homogenized, and sold off piece by piece.

Marge disagrees, claiming romance is all around them, citing examples from 9F13 (Ned serenading Maude) and 9F05 (Smithers dreaming of Burns flying through the window). ("Another Simpsons Clip Show" The Simpson Archives)

Within this excerpt, we see commentary on the commercialism and mass marketing of romance via best-selling books and corporations like Disney and Hallmark. Lisa also likens romantic love to a "detached tale of modern-day alienation (The Simpsons Archives)". Viewers see oppositional, unresolved points of view on romantic love in rapid-fire succession, e.g. Ned Flanders serenades his wife, Smithers dreams of Mr. Burns flying through his window, while Marge and Homer recount adulterous liaisons as examples of romantic love. Both recall Homer kissing Ned Flanders. In short, we see shared cultural stereotypes about romance becoming an ideological joke target that threads throughout the episode. In humor research, this phenomenon is referred to as a

series of recurring jab lines³ that develop into a separate strand; however, because of the frequency of the jokes in this strand and the significance of the social commentary, I feel that it is necessary to differentiate between target and ideological target. The reason this distinction must be made is because the definition of jab line is quite specific: jab lines are “humorous parts of the text,” but do not subvert the text. In *The Simpsons*, the ideological target subverts the text by drawing an incongruous parallel to the strictly ascribed patriarchal system portrayed on the show. Our expectations and cultural norms are violated throughout the entire text, but the incongruities in these violations are not always simply to evoke humor, but to raise our awareness, hence the term ideological target will be used.

To understand the implication of the ideological target in *The Simpsons* we must also turn to the work of Davies, and Attardo and Raskin on joke target. Davies(1996) argues that the “butt” of ethnic jokes are generally a group of people, similar to the joke-teller, yet separated by either “cultural or local dominance” or socioeconomic situations (41-42). It is clear that joke target is generally associated with people or a group and may be also seen as an in group/out group situation. Though Attardo and Raskin point out that many

³ “jab lines” are humorous parts of the text which are unlike punch lines in that they do not occur necessarily at the end of a text (see Attardo, 1996).

jokes do not have a clear target, non-tendentious humor also does not seem to address the clear ideological target lampooned in *The Simpsons*. With this definition in mind, we can tentatively identify the function of the ideological target in *The Simpsons* as a joke target that focuses on prevailing institutions, mores and ideas, and also competes with the principal joke target (see Joke Target Analysis) for the viewer's attention.

Culturally shared stereotypes about romance are targeted in this episode indirectly and directly 21 times; these targets are always incongruous images. It is also clear that Homer is an equally significant target throughout the episode. Joke target analysis of this episode reveals that Homer is the joke target 22 times, Marge 5, Bart 4, and Lisa 3. What we see developing is a situation where the function of the ideological target of romance is similar to the jab line in that the romance target is indispensable to the developing narrative, however, these targeted images function on two levels: they are humorous, and incongruous, and yet also provide serious social commentary on an ideological issue.

These image are varied, and always grotesque exaggerations: Montgomery Burns flies through Smithers's bedroom window in a dreamy moonlit fantasy spun by Smithers, Homer kisses Flanders in another episode; both are incongruous images of homoerotic love.

Next door neighbor Flanders is shown dressed in a giant heart and strumming a ukelele while he serenades his wife. This is an oppositional, exaggerated stereotype of heterosexual romantic love. Even Lisa's precocious summation of the "homogenization" of romance is incongruous, but also serious social commentary. Thus we see the significance of the ideological target competing with the principal joke target, Homer for the viewer's attention.

A summary of the joke target analysis for eight episodes is presented on the following pages.

Joke Target Analysis

Episode 1.

“Bart The General” written by John Swartzwelder

Original Air date: April 8, 1990

TV Guide Synopsis: Terrorized by the school bully, Bart seeks counsel from “the toughest Simpson alive,” but Grandpa Simpson defers to a warfare expert, who emphasizes troop strength, training discipline and strategy (The Simpsons Archives).

Joke Targets:

Homer: 10

Marge:1

Bart:9

Lisa:1

*Children:(The code of the schoolyard) 2

Grandpa:2

*War:15

*Advertising:1

Episode 2. “Homer’s Odyssey” written by Jay Kogen and Wallace Wolodarsky

Original Air date: June 3,1990

TV Guide Synopsis: After being fired from the nuclear power plant for negligence, Homer becomes a safety activist, facing a crisis of conscience when his former boss tries to silence him with a new position and a raise (The Simpson Archives).

Joke Targets

Homer:9

Marge:1

Bart:2

Lisa:0

*Nuclear Power Plant Safety:7

*School:10

*Unemployment:13

Joke Target Analysis

Episode 3. "Brush With Greatness" written by Brian K.Roberts

Original Air date: April 11,1991

TV Guide Synopsis: not available

Synopsis: Homer goes on a diet after getting stuck in a water slide; Marge rediscovers her artistic "self" while painting a portrait of Mr. Burns.

Joke Targets:

Homer: 13

Marge:0

Lisa and Bart:1

Mr. Burns:4

Smithers:3

*Parents and children: 2

*Advertising:3

*News:1

*Art: 15

Episode 4. "Homer's Triple Bypass" written by Gary Apple and Michael Carrington

Original Air date: Dec.17,1992

TV Guide Synopsis: not available

Synopsis: Homer needs a triple bypass operation and opts for Dr. Nick Riviera's \$129.95 special.

Joke Targets:

Homer:21

Marge:2

Bart:0

Lisa:2

*Children(MTV generation)3

*Health Care:20

Police:6

Patty and Selma:1

Moe and Barney:1

*Religion:7

Joke Target Analysis

Episode 5. "Homer the Vigilante" written by John Swartzwelder

Original Air date: Jan.6,1994

TV Guide Synopsis: not available

Synopsis: After a rash of burglaries, Homer and his neighbors form a vigilante group to search for the Springfield Cat Burglar.

Joke Targets:

Homer: 14

Marge:3

Lisa:1

Bart:4

*Vigilantism:20

Flanders:1

Mayor Quimby:2

*Police:7

*Old People: 9

*News: 3

*Mob Rule: 4

*Security measures: 3

Episode 6. "Another Simpsons Clip Show" written by Penny Wise

Original Air date: Sept. 25,1994

TV Guide Synopsis: not available

Synopsis: After reading The Bridges of Madison County, Marge decides she and Homer have neglected to tell their children about romance.

Joke Targets:

Homer:22

Marge:5

Bart:4

Lisa:3

Moe:10

Flanders:1

Smithers:1

*School: 2

*Romance:21

Joke Target Analysis

Episode 7. "Radioactive Man" written by John Swartzwelder

Original Air date: Sept.25,1995

TV Guide Synopsis: not available

Synopsis: A Hollywood film crew comes to Springfield to film an action adventure movie about Bart's favorite comic book character, Radioactive Man.

Joke Targets:

Homer:7

Marge:0

Lisa:0

Bart:8

*Hollywood:30

Milhouse:7

Milhouse's parents: 2

*Computer "Geeks": 2

*School:4

Mayor Quimby:6

Moe:5

*TV News:1

Ralph:1

Lionel Hutz:1

*Religion:1

*Police:3

Krusty:1

Otto:2

Owner of the "spirograph" toy factory:1

Mickey Rooney:4

Joke Target Analysis

Episode 8. "The Two Mrs. Nahasapeemapihons" written by Richard Appel.

Original Air date: Nov.16,1997

TV Guide Synopsis: Marge pretends to be Apu's wife so he can avoid an arranged marriage. But his mother(Andrea Martin)learns the truth, and sends for his intended(Jan Hooks).

Joke Targets:

Homer:19

Marge:4

Lisa:0

Bart:3

*Male/female roles:5

*Religion:6

*Indian culture:5

*Arranged Marriage:8

*Old People:7

*denotes ideological target

Homer's function as the principal character joke target also appears to be a fairly consistent feature of the show. In the eight episodes I analyzed, Homer is the principal target of a joke 115 times, while a variety of ideological targets e.g., religion and other social institutions, the abuse of authority, corruption in business and politics, police, art, even vigilantism are the joke target 214 times. Marge is a joke target 16 times, Bart, the target of a joke 32 times, while Lisa is a target only 8 times. Clearly, the ideological target and the resulting social commentary within *The Simpsons* are more significant than the principal character target.

Yet this analysis of *The Simpsons* also shows the explicit patriarchal structure in the show, and Homer's function as the principal character joke target is in direct opposition to this structure. Recalling that the conflict and negotiation of oppositions are the locus of postmodern comedy, this constant dethroning of Homer of patriarch is as it should be, but we must also turn to Bakhtin's analysis of the Menippean satire and the needs of prime time television programming to fully understand the carnivalistic quality of this subversion of the patriarch. To Bakhtin, the inappropriate and eccentric behavior in a Menippean satire

manifests as “cynical frankness, or . . . profanely unmask a holy thing, or . . . crudely violates etiquette (1994:191)”. Thus we see the representation of Homer Simpson within this explicit patriarchal structure as a devaluation of the once sacred institution of patriarchy established in 60’s family sitcoms; his inappropriate actions as patriarch proof that father doesn’t always know what’s best. The following excerpt from the episode “Homer’s Triple Bypass” illustrates Homer’s patriarchal ineptness as he attempts to offer his children some advice before he has surgery.

Homer: Kids, I wanna give you some words to remember me by, if something happens. Let's see...er...Oh, I'm no good at this.

Lisa: [whispers into Homer's ear]

Homer: Bart, the saddest thing about this is I'm not going to see you grow up--

Lisa: [whispers into Homer's ear]

Homer: --because I know you're gonna turn out well, with or without your old man.

Bart: Thanks, Dad.

Homer: And Lisa--

Bart: [whispers into Homer's ear]

Homer: I guess this is the time to tell you--

Bart: [whispers into Homer's ear]

Homer:--that you're adopted and I don't like you.

[Homer realizes what Bart has done and shouts] Bart!

Bart: [whispers into Homer's ear]

Homer: But don't worry, because you've got a big brother who loves you and will always look out for you.

Lisa: Oh, Dad. [hugs him] (“Homer’s Triple Bypass” The Simpson Archives)

The role reversal in this excerpt shows the devaluation of the patriarch through Homer's lack of "words to remember him by." This lack of words is quickly filled by the children, and though Homer may not be an ideal patriarch, nevertheless the children understand his intentions and willingly aid him. This excerpt also illustrates how the needs of prime time television may also play a pivotal role in determining the patriarchal structure of *The Simpsons*. Certainly for the show to be considered a ratings success, male and female viewers must derive equal amounts of pleasure as they watch. Within this excerpt we see Lisa able to express an appropriate sentiment, while Bart's sentiment is prefaced by an inappropriate put-down, the difference between the children's abilities shows the satirization of a patriarchy where the males are not equipped with the skills that the females possess. This oppositional position is in direct contrast to the traditional patriarchy of the 60's families where the patriarch was wise, capable and altruistic. Ward Cleaver would have possessed the acumen and known exactly what to say to comfort his children; Homer does not. Ozersky(1997) believes the ensuing result of this oppositional conflict between traditional family norm and the dysfunctional family chaos depicted on *The Simpsons* is a passive acceptance that "subverts alarm at the graver discontents in real life "(212).

Perhaps; but this position does seem disparaging of the intellectual capabilities of *The Simpsons* viewing audience and also seems to negate the significance of the social criticism levied on the show--and we have seen through target analysis that the ideological target occurs more frequently than any other joke target on the show. Clearly, the ideological target is meant to be heard, not dismissed, and along with the inverted role of the patriarchy functions to renegotiate limited audience, subculture material to appeal to a multiplicity of viewers.

Conclusions

This discussion has focused on two distinct areas within the field of humor research: joke target analysis and postmodern comedy as it is conveyed in the situation comedy. The messages this genre sends to its viewers are, for the most part, implicit, masked by the conventions of formula television, a three act structure with a prescribed amount of gags per script page. By counting the intended “butt” of the jokes in a situation comedy, we are able to eliminate speculation about the intended target; the target of the joke is quantified.

The results of joke target analysis are sometimes surprising. In *The Simpsons*, we see our expectations subverted: target analysis shows us the principal joke target Homer is not the primary joke target; instead, we see a variety of non-specific personal targets (“ideological”) targets emerge as the primary joke target in this sitcom. Clearly, joke target analysis coupled with the more traditional tools of literary criticism offer readers and critics of television texts an opportunity to quantify and perhaps, illuminate comedic television discourse in a previously unexplored way.

The discussion on postmodern comedy also draws several clear

conclusions. Firstly, the postmodern comedic text deconstructs the modern comedic text, and perhaps, in the process is transformed from avant garde status to cultural norm “respectability.” Any discussion on the elusive nature of postmodern comedy must take this oppositional postmodern power play and the resulting discordancy into account, because, it is, as Bakhtin noted, a basic characteristic of the serio-comic genre. Second, we have also seen that taken individually, any of the defining features of postmodern comedy we encountered in this discussion may be ascribed to a general theory of comedy and/or the modernist impulse, and hence were able to conclude that a definition of postmodern comedy must contain the following characteristics: dense layers of intertextuality shaped by the audience and the creators of the text, the comic, the meta-fictional, self-reflexivity, and a propensity to engage in language games within a text.

Our examination of postmodern comedy as a genre also demonstrated that: 1) the above characteristics, taken as a whole, may define postmodern comedy; 2) postmodern comedy is a carnivalized genre that invites multiple, oppositional readings, and, is created and recreated by an intertextual relationship between audience, market and technology; 3) the dense intertextual relationships between audience, market and technology that define

postmodern comedy also confine postmodern comedy; it is a genre bound by time and technology.

Future Shocks

My research on postmodern comedy continues in several areas. First, the analyses in this thesis will be developed to broader corpora to test my conclusions against a more representative sample. Other areas of investigation are also planned. Since it is technology and time that bounds the creation of the postmodern comic text, a chronological development of the postmodern comedic text might encompass the end of the modernist impulse and the beginning of the contemporary period in literature. We could further speculate, perhaps, that a chronological development of this genre might begin with the Marx Brothers.

Research on the use of the ideological target in postmodern comedy, and cogent evidence of the same in film or other textual discourses may yield interesting results on the nature of postmodern comedy. And finally, research on the future of postmodern comedy and the proliferation of paratexts on the World Wide Web is planned in order to examine the ways these primarily fan-based texts alter the boundaries between creator, creation and audience.

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