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In spite of yourself : the asignifying force of humor and laughter

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IN SPITE OF YOURSELF:
THE ASIGNIFYING FORCE
OF HUMOR AND LAUGHTER

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in Partial fulfillment of the
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in

The Department of English

by

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Abstract

In Spite of Yourself: The Asignifying Force of Humor and Laughter calls upon the interruptive moments of uncontrollable laughter to challenge rhetoric's historical treatment of humor and laughter. Anyone who has ever suffered a fit of hysterical laughter at precisely the wrong moment, or has begun to laugh spontaneously at an inappropriate joke before stopping short, can attest to laughter's uniquely uncontrollable force. Beyond all reason and control, laughter interrupts us and reminds us of the limits of the human subject. Because laughter does not *signify* meaning in the traditional communicative sense, it exerts an *asignifying* force irreducible to the questions of truth, understanding, and presence. While rhetoricians like Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian attempt to confine laughter's force to calculated aspects of persuasion, their approaches simultaneously reveal an understanding that laughter's effects lie beyond the rational control of the orator. By tracing the often-unintended effects of humor through a range of comedic performances including stand-up comedy, radio, and film, this project ultimately argues that laughter's rhetorical power resides not in what it *means*, but in what it *does*. Ultimately, because laughter is not a signifying language, yet it still produces rhetorical effects, taking up laughter's asignifying force provides a chance to expand the field of rhetoric in ways beyond the reason, beyond signification, and beyond the human.

Introduction

A fiery crash leaves three people dead. Police in Nebraska say a rental truck [voice starts to quiver] carrying two people lost control, crossed the median, and collided head on with a semi truck. Both trucks burst into flames, and witnesses say there were [voice quivers again] several explosions. Two ... [uncontrollable laughter, three seconds] ... Excuse me. The two people in the roo ... [uncontrollable laughter, four seconds] ... The two people in the rental truck and the ... [uncontrollable laughter, two seconds] ... driver of the semi [spoken while laughing] ... This is a sad story, excuse me [spoken while co-anchor laughs uncontrollably off camera] ... were killed. Crews say they had fires contained in about ten minutes [spoken while laughing, co-anchor continues to laugh uncontrollably off camera].

- *TV News anchor Jay Warren, WSLS News 10, reporting live on air*

Consider the following scenario: You find yourself in a formal meeting at work concerning an issue of extreme import to your job. Maybe you are on a committee that is deciding which department will be dissolved due to impending budget cuts, or you are called in to help brainstorm a new direction for the company after extremely disappointing sales reports, or you are at a contentious union meeting listening to impassioned speeches arguing both sides of whether or not a strike should be called. Obviously, the details of such an issue will vary widely depending on your line of work, but, suffice it to say, one constant will remain no matter the particulars: this is no time or place for joking around. Certain contexts demand from us a seriousness that calls upon us to put our most rational face forward, and to maintain a logical, professional, controlled manner that can help all those involved get the task at hand accomplished in the most productive and efficient manner possible. Even if you are more slacker than go-getter in such a circumstance and have no intention of getting your hands dirty, preferring instead to lay low until the present tempest blows over, your tactic will still take some form of quiet thoughtfulness: you need to demonstrate that you know things are serious by projecting an ethos that accurately reflects the grave tenor of the moment. Regardless of your style of engagement – whether you want to play a role in

shaping the scenario's outcome or simply want it to go the hell away without bearing the trace of your fingerprints – you will undoubtedly enter into the situation with every intention of appropriately controlling yourself and your actions.

But yet, as all of us know from personal experience, this doesn't always happen. This seemingly logical approach – to set your rational mind to controlling yourself in a context – can fail. In the scenario described above, a nervous errand boy could enter the room and promptly spill half-a-dozen coffees all over the conference table. A distinguished older gentleman presenting an urgent speech to the group could utter an accidental phrase that conjures up a sexually tinged “That's what s/he said!” double entendre in your mind. A superior who views herself – rather exhaustingly – as the exemplar of stoic, professional conduct could forcefully break wind just as the tension in the room reaches an apex. The catalyst that sets you off in these situations is largely incidental; what matters are the unintentional, uncontrollable, and, in this instance, wholly unfortunate effects of that catalyst: laughter. It strikes in an instant with a sucker punch to your stomach. Direct and unforgiving, laughter seizes control of your chest and the very air you breath before it surges up your body, where it contorts your face into a grimacing smile visible to anyone who can see you, the last physiological warning before your sense of self-control is completely betrayed in a full blown, eruptive laughter that overwhelms your rational being. Sometimes, however, in the brief moment between a simmering laughter and a laughter that boils over, you can consciously catch yourself. The initial jolt that slipped past your logical self-defenses may have gone un-checked, but sometimes you are able to temporarily regain a modicum of composure, desperately aware that an all hands on deck, code red rational response is required to avert a disaster. Sometimes you can hold your breath, bite your lip,

and clench every muscle in your body as tightly as you can until something else comes to mind – parking tickets, genocide, academic discourse, the fact that you’re about to make an ass of yourself in front of people who have a significant stake in your material existence – anything that can help force the feeling away and reinstate you again as the rightful liege to your self control. Sometimes this works, and your reasonable side – thank god – wins out. Yet, regrettably, at other moments, no matter how hard you try, no matter how hard you want to resist, your rational side isn’t enough. Perched at the tipping point, you fall over the cliff, surrendering all control of your being in an uncontrollable release of rollicking, euphoric spasms. It breeches your levees, seizes the moment for its own, shattering the presupposed notion that a complete and stable presence resides at the origin of the experiences collected under your name. You are laughing your ass off, and there’s nothing you can do about it. As much as we might wish it were the case, where you are and whom you are with does not always create a strong enough boundary to keep you firmly contained in your own wheelhouse, the unconditional captain of your own subjective ship. Sometimes – no matter how seriously you intend to carry yourself, no matter the solemnity you may rationally feel toward the context you find yourself in, no matter how much the stakes of your future are connected to your personal behavior at that moment – sometimes ... you just crack up.

Laughter does not always obey our rational intentions, and anyone who has ever laughed uncontrollably has experienced a loss of self. Like paroxysms of coughing, uncontrollable laughter is the experience of being overtaken by what H el ene Cixous describes as “the rhythm that *laughs you*”; in other words, you laugh uncontrollably, *in spite of yourself* (“Medusa” 885). In a scenario such as the one explained above, laughter interrupts the notion of who we believe we are in the eyes of other people, and, more

significantly, in the eyes of ourselves. That is, we typically operate under the assumption that the script we perform for the world around us is written and directed by ourselves, and, therefore, it can accurately present who we believe we are, or at least who we want people to think we are. But laughter can come along and crash the performance, revealing ourselves to others in a way that is not a part of the official script. When the dust settles and we regain control in these situations, the feelings typically felt are shame and embarrassment. We cannot believe we “let ourselves go” like that in front of other people. Much like when someone shows up unexpectedly at your house when it is in a particularly dismal state of disarray, so much so that you find yourself continually apologizing for it while they are there – “I’m sorry, I’ve been so busy lately, I’m usually not this messy!” – uncontrollable laughter can expose the more intimate areas of ourselves to others when we are least expecting it.

But just as it can expose the more intimate areas of ourselves to others, laughter can also expose the more intimate areas of ourselves to ourselves. For example, you might be at home late at night having a beer and watching television, and an off-color joke that pejoratively depicts a particular group of people in a stereotypical way or makes a rude inference about a value generally held to be sacred might cause you to burst out laughing before your rational mind steps in and asserts, “*I don’t laugh at these kinds of things.*” Laughter can sneak in when we least expect it and interrupt our sense of who we think is sitting on our couch, watching our TV, and drinking our beer. In these moments, it is not how others see us that gets interrupted, but rather it is our notion of our selves – who “I” think “I” am – that becomes shattered. You may believe you embody a certain set of traits you hold dear – for example, tolerance, patience, rationality, compassion, justice – and you might spend the majority of your life consciously working to behave in ways that reflect

those values. And you might be extremely successful at doing so. But in that moment when laughter bursts forth, these values are placed at risk in an instant. This is not to infer that by laughing in these moments, you somehow purge or surrender or renounce the values that you hold dear, revealing yourself to be a fraud and a hypocrite. Yet what laughter does in these moments is remind us that we are not as in control of ourselves as we think. Confronting this fact is often a shocking and somewhat frightening experience. We do not want to believe that we are capable of finding humor where we sometimes find it. And while cracking up in an inappropriate situation generally turns into a funny story at some point down the road, the moments when our laughter betrays ourselves to ourselves are very rarely retold to others as a funny story. We tend to keep those laughing moments private. They cut too close to the bone for comfort, as they place the innermost notion of who we think we are at stake.

When laughter laughs us, we are rationally betrayed, in a sense, because in that moment, how others see us and how we see ourselves is out of our control. Because laughter places our rational control at risk, it simultaneously places one of rhetoric's foundational beliefs at risk as well: that a stable, human subject occupies the center of the rhetorical situation and uses language to produce effects of her design. The rhetorical tradition has long asserted that by understanding an audience's attitudes, expectations, and needs, a rhetor can tailor her message accordingly, making the most effective use of her available means of persuasion, to achieve a given purpose. Lloyd Bitzer suggests as much when he identifies the rhetor as wielding discourse to produce her intended effects and control her own reality:

[A] work of rhetoric is pragmatic; it comes into existence for the sake of something beyond itself; it functions ultimately to produce action or change in the world; it performs some task. In short, rhetoric is a mode of altering reality, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action. The rhetor alters reality by bringing into existence a discourse of such

character that the audience, in thought and action, is so engaged that it becomes mediator of change. In this sense rhetoric is always persuasive. (“Rhetorical Situation” 3-4)

It is the rhetor who “alters reality” by choosing how to create her argument, or, in Aristotelian terms, by deriving her artistic proofs from whichever appeals she feels are the most appropriate for the given situation. So when the context calls for a reasoned argument, the rhetor leans on logos, when the audience is more whimsical and looking to feel the argument in their hearts more so than hear it in their heads, a more pathetic appeal is dialed up, and when the rhetor has personal charms and qualities that an audience will likely respond positively to, she, in a way, sells herself, putting her own ethos front and center, conveying a sense of, “You like me, so do what I say.” The subject at the center of this traditional view of the rhetorical situation is essentially *human*. In order to presume a rhetor can produce desired effects in any given situation, a view of the subject that is stable and complete is required. Again, Bitzer writes:

Let us regard rhetorical situation as a *natural* context of persons, events, objects, relations, and an exigence which strongly invites utterance; this invited utterance participates *naturally* in the situation, is in many instances necessary to the completion of situational activity, and by means of its participation with situation obtains its meaning and its rhetorical character. (5, my emphases)

The rhetorical situation here is a natural occurrence, one that is organically participated in by a rhetor who responds in kind; “The situation dictates the sorts of observations to be made” (5). In the case of a rhetor interested in the production of laughter, for example, the rhetor wants to conjure up this response because she thinks it will help sway the audience in her favor, so she takes into account her context and attempts to incite laughter accordingly, in a way that “participates naturally in the situation.” In this way rhetorical handbooks, from the many composed in antiquity to the countless readers marketed for use in contemporary

composition classrooms, are all grounded in some version of this fundamental belief: a stable human subject resides at the center of the rhetorical situation pulling the levers of persuasion and controlling language's effects. By learning how to dress to fit the occasion, so to speak, a rhetor can be trained to lead an audience wherever she wants, including making them laugh. These rhetorical handbooks attempt to help the rhetor produce the response of laughter in the same way they help the rhetor produce any other persuasive aim: by suggesting approaches for how to construct appeals to laughter so they produce desirous effects in just the right way at just the right time. In Cicero's *On Oratory*, Caesar offers numerous, specific suggestions for how an orator could construct a particular joke for particular occasions. For example, he identifies "Ironical dissimulation" as having "an agreeable effect, when you say something different from what you think," and these appeals are "not more appropriate to law-pleadings in the forum, than to any other kind of discourse," suggesting ironical dissimulation is a form of humorous appeal that is useful in many contexts. (II.LXVII). Other jokes, however, have far more restrictive uses, such as those created "when he who has uttered a sarcasm is jested upon in the same strain in which he has attacked another," suggesting this joke is more useful in situations when the orator requires a humorous appeal that is more aggressive, or, perhaps, aggressively defensive (II.LXVIII). Cicero's approaches to humor and laughter survey a range of humorous appeals, making formal and stylistic suggestions for how each joke should be structured, as well as offering situational clues for which audiences and which occasions are the most likely to respond favorably to each humorous appeal. These suggestions, ultimately, are an effort to apply rational approaches to controlling laughter's effects.

But because laughter is ultimately not controllable, it has occupied a bit of a paradoxical position within the rhetorical tradition. On the one hand, the production of laughter is clearly a powerful means of persuasion in the hands of a gifted and capable rhetor, and reasons to conjure it are many. For example, any university Intro to Public Speaking course will undoubtedly cover how starting off with a joke is an effective way to settle down both the audience and the speaker at the beginning of a speech. Certain controversial topics are also rendered more approachable if they are presented in a more lighthearted fashion where personal biases and prejudices can be gently disarmed and softened before the difficult aspects of the material is confronted. And a hearty laugh can do wonders to refresh and replenish the spirits of an audience that has grown weary from a long presentation. The audience's laughter, when considered from the perspective of what it can do productively for an orator, has nearly limitless positive applications, and, therefore, a rhetor's ability to generate this powerfully favorable feeling in an audience can pay dividends with a higher rate of return than almost any other means of persuasion. On the other hand, laughter's power carries with it significant risks. Laughter as a tool is only valuable to the one trying to induce it in an audience if its effects can be controlled, but this is not always the case. And therein lies the rub. Laughter's effects harbor profound persuasive potentials, yet those very same effects often lie beyond our rational control. The question for rhetoric becomes, "What do we do with this stuff?" Because of its unrivaled persuasive potential, laughter could not simply be left out of the rhetorical toolbox. But because of its volatility every effort must be taken to wield this force as carefully as possible.

This project will explore this interruptive power of laughter and its effects on the rhetorical subject. To believe we can control laughter is to believe that laughter is a human

phenomenon, but in fact, what laughter shows us when we are in its powerful throes is that all the things that make us “human” – reason, language, meaning – are interrupted.

Therefore, to appeal to laughter is not to master the available means of persuasion in any rhetorical situation. It is not an endeavor that emboldens the stability of the human subject, but one that requires us to surrender to what is beyond the human. For while appealing to laughter starts out as a rational move – it seeks to structure humorous appeals in the right way so they produce the right effect at the right time – humorous appeals ultimately bring reason and control to their limits. In short, laughter does not show us how we are human, it shows us the limit of the human. Laughter, therefore, gives us an opportunity to question who – or what – is at the center of the rhetorical situation. If what is at the center is no longer a stable subject, then laughter transforms the basis – almost – for what has historically constituted the whole field of rhetoric. In this way, laughter causes us to rethink something rhetoric has long taken for granted. The history of rhetoric has played a bit of a dangerous, risky game in its relationship with humor and laughter, in that it offers advice on how a rhetor can learn to use appeals to laughter appropriately in a way that makes us think we are the ones in control. Yet at the same time, the same approaches to humor and laughter have seemed to intimate, on some level, that humor and laughter are risky appeals because laughter uses us as well. Rhetoric traditionally believes that a human subject rationally employs language to produce effects, but because laughter shows us the limits of the human subject, it also reveals the limits of rhetoric as an art. As such, laughter leads to a rhetoric beyond reason, beyond signification, and beyond the human.

The Question of Terminology

Humor and laughter are a challenge to theorize because of laughter's uncontrollable effects on the human subject, but they are also difficult to write about because the two terms – and the phenomena associated with them – function by means of a symbiotic relationship: the effect insinuates the object. When we talk about laughter as an effect, there is the implication that some sort of catalyst, or object, is responsible for conjuring the laughter. Something always “makes” us laugh, and that something we generally call humor. Even if sometimes it may seem that we break out laughing spontaneously at nothing, closer inspection usually reveals that something set us off, even if the something is only a loosely identifiable abstraction of life's absurdity. You might not always be able to put your finger on precisely what it is that you are laughing at, but it can be reasonably assumed that it is some form of humor. As Matthew Hurley, Daniel Dennett, and Reginald Adams describe in *Inside Jokes*, a recent project that argues for and seeks out an evolutionary purpose for humor and laughter, the dictionary definitions of humor and laughter in use today are somewhat circuitous:

There is a tight little circle of definitions that go from *humor* to *funny* and *amusing*, and then to *that which causes laughter* – and when you look up *laughter* you find that it is the expression made when something is funny, amusing, or humorous. From this, and from our daily lives, two important truisms emerge: humor causes laughter, and humor is a *quality* of the things that we laugh at. (16)

While a theoretical distinction between the humorous object and laughter itself exists, the boundary separating these concepts is inherently fluid, because any discussion of laughter always presupposes a humorous object, and any discussion of a humorous object implies a laughing response. To deal with one term without the other is to render both concepts incomplete.

But beyond the difficulty of separating these two phenomena on a conceptual level, the past efforts of those who have tried to theorize these two terms further complicate the challenge in writing about humor and laughter. These efforts have left us with significant epistemological concerns and questions surrounding what we really mean when we talk about humor and laughter. For example, the term “humor” as referring to the object that inspires laughter is hardly a stable and agreed upon definition, and depending on the individual theorists and the particular historical moments of their work, humor has drifted across a porous continuum, mingling, entwining, and sometimes even colliding with a range of other terms – wit, comic, mirth, absurd, ridiculous, and ludicrous, to name a few – that have referred to myriad aspects of the overall humorous experience. Some of these terms have been used synonymously with humor at certain times in history. But at other times, they have been used relationally, referring to experiences and phenomena that range from the broader, more macro humorous experience to more micro depictions of specific forms. For example, Freud’s delineation between wit, the comic, and humor, that “the pleasure of wit originates from an economy of expenditure in inhibition, of the comic from an economy of expenditure in thought, and of humor from an economy of expenditure in feeling,” (*Wit* 384) places the term *comic* in a much narrower sense than Bergson, who paints his definition of *comic* in much broader, more general strokes as simply “something mechanical encrusted on something living” (*Laughter* 28). Conversely, Jerry Aline Flieger settles on a different definition of *comic* as “the most inclusive term” for her study:

[T]he comic may be a mode of writing which is not necessarily funny (and which may even seem frightening or poignant) but which can nonetheless be associated with the kind of clowning or gaming so prevalent in late twentieth century writing. Indeed, I use the term *comic* as a performing metaphor that both demonstrates and generates the process it describes. (*Purloined* 13)

Paul McGhee, rather than define *humor*, first chooses to state what humor is not: “humor is not a characteristic of certain events [...] not an emotion [...] [and] not a kind of behavior,” before embarking on a detailed, and somewhat hysterical (although perhaps not purposefully so) glossary of “related terms” (*Humor* 6). These include the *absurd* (“illogical or inconsistent with what is either known or strongly believed to be true”), the *ridiculous* (“often used synonymously with ‘absurd,’ although it also refers to events that are laughable and not to be taken seriously”), *ludicrousness* (“This is a higher-order concept, referring to any event that produces laughter because of incongruity, absurdity, exaggeration, or ridiculousness”), *funny* (“used more than any other to mean ‘humorous’ [...] also refers to unusual events that are puzzling, but not humorous. The use of the word ‘funny’ in referring to something puzzling is puzzling in itself, because the word ‘funny’ is derived from ‘fun,’ which does not have a comparable meaning”); *amusing* (“This term is sometimes used interchangeably with ‘funny,’ although it seems to describe a milder form of experience”), and *mirthful* (“The term ‘mirth’ is often used as if it were synonymous with humor. This is an inappropriate usage, and it will not be adopted in this book”) (6-8). The term humor has even been used to suggest that there exists some kind of a gender divide to the experience of humor, as Martin Grotjahn alluded to in the mid-1960s when he said, “wit is his; humor is hers” (*Beyond Laughter* 59).¹ Terminology is clearly a significant issue here, and any theorist

¹ While there is much research on gender in comedy – is there a male sense of humor and a female sense of humor? – that discussion comes after the presubjective determinations this project makes. In other words, this project argues that the very notion of subjectivity, of identity, is divided in advance by the otherness of laughter. In doing so, it features and demonstrates the untenability of subject positions: they are non-essential and incomplete. So the political intervention here is prior to determinations of gender or, as will be seen, even species. It is an ethics that is before identity politics; it is subjectivity itself that is in question here.

who has attempted to theorize humor in any capacity has run up against the challenge of defining what it is that humor actually *is*. This difficulty is reflected in the complex and, sometimes, contradictory responses to this challenge. Because humor is inextricably linked to laughter, a force that operates beyond our rational control, attempts to theorize it show us the limits of theory itself.

This difficulty is complicated by the fact that the problem of terminology is not limited to the discussion of whatever we refer to when we refer to humor. Articulating what laughter *is* has proven just as difficult for theorists. For example, consider what some theorists define as the two “physiologically distinct” varieties of laughter: Duchenne and non-Duchenne (Hurley, et al 19). In Duchenne laughter, or the spontaneous, explosive kind, the body reacts by “laughing with the brow furrowed and the corners of the mouth turned up strongly by pull from the *orbicularis oculi*” (19). In non-Duchenne laughter, the form that generally occurs when we find ourselves laughing at something we don’t really find funny such as the nervous giggling that accompanies awkward party conversation, “the orbicular muscle plays little or no part” in laughter’s physiological manifestation” (19). Beyond the physiological distinction made between Duchenne and non-Duchenne laughter, Hurley et al also make a more qualitative differentiation between the two: “It has been shown that true enjoyment only occurs with Duchenne laughter, whereas non-Duchenne laughter usually implies some ulterior purpose in laughing other than as an expression of enjoyment” (20). Further distinctions include the phenomenon of laughing on the inside that produces “the *feeling* of mirth or humor” (23) without the physical manifestation that accompanies either Duchenne or non-Duchenne laughter, the smile (declared as “the essence of humour” and “the highest laugh” by Critchley) (*On Humour* 111), and the laughter that accompanies

tickling and play, a physiologically expressed form of laughter, but one that is produced by bodily stimuli rather than by some sort of conceptual/linguistic catalyst. Taking all this into account, it quickly becomes clear that all laughter is not the same: it doesn't produce singular physiological responses, doesn't produce singular emotional responses, and isn't trigger by singular impulses.

Given the opaqueness that encompasses discussions of the terms humor and laughter, this project will attempt a different approach. Because I am interested in how appealing to laughter starts out as a rational move, but ends up bringing control and reason to their limits, my primary interest is in the effects of humor rather than the humorous object. So while we rationally try to create humorous appeals in order to produce laughter in an audience, an effect that, in theory, helps persuade the audience to go along with whatever we are trying to get them to go along with, this project's ultimate intervention is to show that these rational attempts are always haunted by laughter's excess. But to talk about the effect of laughter without talking about humor is to ignore that laughter does not exist without something resembling humor to inspire it. Humor, likewise, is not humor if there is no laughing response. So on the one hand, one purpose of this project is to shift rhetoric's focus from *what* the humorous object is to what the humorous objects' effect – laughter – *does*. But on the other hand, maintaining a theoretical distinction between humor and laughter remains useful and, ultimately, necessary. Even though both humor and laughter necessarily affect each other, and the boundary between the two terms is fluid enough to make distinctions incomplete and imprecise, the notions of object and effect are necessary in order to discuss humor and laughter as aspects of the rhetorical situation. Since rhetorical treatises are trying to help orators construct appeals by using the right humorous object at the right time in order

to produce laughter, some kind of conceptual autonomy has to be preserved in order for a discussion of humor and laughter in the rhetorical situation to play out. In other words, the challenge in using the terms humor and laughter is how to maintain enough of a theoretical distinction in order to talk about how they both produce different effects – humor produces the effect of laughter, ideally, and laughter produces the effect of interrupting the human subject – while at the same time not limiting either of these terms by suggesting their definitions are in some way stable or complete. In seeking a response to this challenge, I sought a different approach: rather than entering the epistemological debates surrounding what humor and laughter *mean* by trying to control the usage of these terms in a way that either sequesters humor from laughter or argues that their fluidity makes distinction impossible, this project will instead shift the emphasis toward what humor and laughter *do* by taking a performative approach. As such, the terms humor and laughter will be used throughout this project in a way that attempts to both honor the distinctness of each term's effects, while, at the same time, demonstrates that this distinction is never complete. Since laughter never emerges without some sort of catalyst, no matter what that catalyst itself might be, humor and laughter are never completely dissociable from one another; any attempts to bracket one from the other leaves both terms incomplete. Rather than create a new term or seek a new metaphor – acts that would only further complicate the already cluttered taxonomy of terminology surrounding these terms – this project will continue using humor and laughter in the spirit of their historic relationship of object and effect within the rhetorical situation, but will attempt to do so in a way that demonstrates their fluidity and their symbiotic relationship, while, at the same time, also observes the discrete productive possibilities of their rhetorical effects. In total, this project will approach humor and laughter

as concepts with discrete roles within the traditional view of the rhetorical situation and as fluid forces that call that traditional view into question.

This performance will unfold across the project's two parts, which are designed to work both independently and recursively. Part One, comprised of Chapters One and Two, will trace humor and laughter's historical treatment within the rhetorical tradition. Chapter One will explore how rhetoric, as the art of using language to create persuasive appeals, tries to advise rhetors on how to construct an object, humorous appeals, to create her desired effect, laughter. The fundamental aspect of this traditional rhetorical situation is that an essentially *human* subject is at its center. Rhetoric has long been viewed as a civilizing art that separates humans from other animals. When humans came out of the wilderness and moved into the city, they were not armed, as Nietzsche puts it, "with horns or with the sharp teeth of beasts of prey," but with language and the ability to use it rhetorically ("On Truth and Lies" 1172). In other words, civilized humans no longer needed to (exclusively) resort to physical force and violence to persuade each other; they could use their abilities to rationally control language to get things done. Similarly, humor and laughter have long been treated as uniquely human attributes. In the early nineteenth-century, philosopher William Hazlitt famously argued "Man is the only animal that laughs," and humor and laughter theorists from Henri Bergson to Sigmund Freud have consistently sustained this view in various forms (*Lectures* 2). However, Chapter One's primary intervention will be to challenge these traditional views that rhetoric and humor and laughter are essentially human. This chapter will align humor and laughter with Jacques Derrida's discussion of language's *force* as the future possibility that is essentially stitched into any writing, any act of speech, and even human consciousness – at the structural level. For Derrida, in order for any writing,

speech, or experience of being to “be” in the first place is to be always already interrupted or retroactively divided by the possibility of its future instantiations, by this force of signification. However, because laughter is not a signifying language, this chapter will argue that laughter produces effects by means of an *asignifying force* that is irreducible to reason and human control. Ultimately, Chapter One will show how humor and laughter, long considered the keystones of what it means to be human and not animal, are, in fact, the very things that make us question the category of the human. As such, humor and laughter can lead us to a rhetoric that is beyond reason, beyond signification, and beyond the human.

Chapter Two will bring this discussion of humor and laughter’s *asignifying force* to bear on the rhetorical tradition’s treatment of humor and laughter. This chapter will trace the approaches to humor and laughter in the works of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and Castiglione, and will argue that these texts take great care to advise rhetors how to rationally use humorous appeals to control laughter. But, simultaneously, these texts also reveal an understanding that the effects of laughter’s *asignifying force* are ultimately uncontrollable. For example, while Plato might want to ban certain forms of humorous writing from his *Ideal Republic* because laughter has the power to lead the subject away from the rational part of her soul, and Quintilian might want to offer an expansive, theoretical approach on the many ways an orator can construct humorous appeals to best accomplish her persuasive aims, and Cicero might want to actually *perform* examples of humorous appeals to demonstrate laughter’s powerful effects, all of these thinkers are cognizant – on some level – that laughter has within it an *asignifying force* that exceeds the rational control of a human subject. The task, therefore, has always been to account for as many of laughter’s potential effects as possible, while, at the same time, acknowledging that to appeal to laughter is to appeal to the

uncontrollable. Chapter Two will argue that these historical approaches all demonstrate an awareness of laughter's asignifying force that anticipates later poststructuralist questions of language's force, because these approaches do more than they say when it comes to their discussions of humor and laughter. These earlier approaches to humor and laughter are much more dynamic, much more fluid, and have a much more developed understanding of laughter's asignifying force than the history of rhetoric has previously acknowledged.

Following Part One will be short Interchapter, which performs this discrete yet fluid relationship between the humorous appeal as an object and the effect of laughter as an asignifying force. While Part One concentrates on how thinkers across the rhetorical tradition have tried to exert rational control over what they acknowledge is an uncontrollable force, Part Two will shift the focus from the rhetorical situation that creates humorous appeals to the interruptive effects of laughter's asignifying force, effects that dramatize the limits of an orator's abilities to exert rational control over humorous appeals. As its own section, then, the Interchapter honors the historical distinction between object (humor) and effect (laughter) as individual components of the rhetorical situation, while simultaneously leaving an opening for ongoing recursive movements between the two concepts. In other words, the Interchapter – as the pivot point in the project's formal center – performs the discrete yet simultaneously interrelated relationship between both humor and laughter and, respectively, between Parts One and Two: the individual concepts, humor and laughter, are both incomplete and imprecise without the other.

Part Two will situate laughter's asignifying force in three different humorous locations where its interruptive effect on the human subject can be observed. The three locations engage with Derrida's theories of performativity, Plato and Baudrillard's theories

of the image, and the Levinasian ethics of alterity. Chapter Three draws on Derrida's theories of performativity to explore how a performance by Lenny Bruce dramatizes the positive productive potentials of language's breaking force. In this performance, recorded after Bruce had already been arrested multiple times on obscenity charges, blacklisted, and banned from working anywhere in America outside of San Francisco, Bruce carries with him on stage the court transcripts from one of his ongoing obscenity cases. The premise of Bruce's act in this performance is that the court transcripts made by police officers stationed in the audience of his earlier shows are not accurate and, therefore, cannot convey the intended meaning of his performance to the courts. Bruce's claim throughout the comedic performance hinges on how the inaccuracies in the court transcripts differ from their more "accurate" form, and he argues that if he were allowed to perform his act in person before the courts, they would receive the full performative effect of his act, understand his intentions, and, ultimately, find him innocent of obscenity. Because this performance dramatizes how Bruce's comedy act gets reinscribed and reinvented in multiple contexts that produce a wide array of effects, some of the most significant of which are clearly unintentional and uncontrollable by Bruce himself, it provides a way to look at how language, in this case, humorous appeals in the form of jokes, is always already interrupted by its future instantiations and can never fully be contained in a given context, not even the context of the intentions of the human consciousness. As such, this performance shows us that humorous appeals – or any other persuasive appeals – don't emerge from a fully realized self-present subject and, therefore, gives us reason to question who or what is at the center of the rhetorical situation if it is no longer a stable human subject.

Chapter Four will then turn to traditional and postmodern forms of slapstick humor and will draw on Plato and Baudrillard's theories of the simulacrum to explore how these forms help us reimagine the image. Traditional humor theories generally view slapstick, whether it's found in Shakespeare, the Three Stooges, or Tom and Jerry, as funny because the audience understands that the performers aren't actually in pain. Because we know that Curly isn't really getting poked in the eye and Jerry is a cartoon cat, we can allow ourselves to take pleasure in these "fake" representations of pain and suffering. Forms of postmodern slapstick, such as those seen in the film *Jackass 3D*, complicate this historic view of slapstick comedy, because in *Jackass 3D*, the humorous appeal is not derived from a representation of fake pain and suffering, but from a celebration of real pain and suffering. This chapter will argue, however, that *Jackass 3D* doesn't capture a more authentic, real, form of slapstick comedy, but creates a sense of the real by means of enhanced images produced by cinematic techniques like 3D technology and high-definition film resolution and, as such, it functions as its own simulacrum, as an image without any relation to reality or a referent. This film shows us how the traditional distinction between an authentic original and a denigrated copy is upended in the era of the "hyperreal," when images are only exchanged for each other in a "real without origin or reality" (*Simulacra* 1).

Finally, Chapter Five explores a technique called soundboarding used to create prank phone calls used in radio broadcasts and explores how this technique provides a new way to imagine the ethics of alterity, or the Otherness of Levinasian ethics. Alterity is important to rhetoric because it offers a way to think about a poststructuralist ethics that is an alternative to the always-appropriative humanist or Enlightenment view of the subject. Traditional humanist ethical systems view the subject as one who goes out into the world and contacts

otherness, but those encounters are always in service of absorbing the other into the subject's own horizon and enriching the self. An ethics of alterity, however, offers a way to respond to the other not as something to be mastered and returned to the subject's own horizon, but rather as a radically unapproachable, absolute "Other," one that the subject is always moving toward and can never reach. Chapter Five will explore how these non-human, non-representation soundboard prank phone calls can help us to imagine such a non-appropriating encounter with a wholly non-present, non-human Other. In soundboarding, someone's recorded voice is chopped up into short clips, or citations, which are then assigned to buttons in a computer soundboard program where they can be triggered and grafted together to create the appearance of a real human interlocutor. The prank caller can then make a phone call to an unsuspecting victim and place the caller into conversation with this non-human Other. The resulting exchange typically breaks down in a variety of humorous ways, because the victim struggles to interpret the meaning of the soundboard-created other's utterances. Because the subject at the center of a soundboard created prank phone call is not human, these pranks offer a glimpse at an alternative to the traditional humanist view of the subject who, as Diane Davis writes, "is at the center of language, the master of his own speech, and that speech is an expression of man's consciousness" (*Breaking* 69). As rhetorical gestures that address the other as Other, these prank calls precede and exceed interpretation, and operate with an asignifying force that deals not in signified meaning, but in the address itself. In doing so, they provide us with an opening in which to imagine a different way to respond to the Other, a new way to think about an ethics of alterity, and a posthuman horizon for rhetoric.

Taken as a whole, the two parts of this project are recursive, and show us how the effects of laughter's asignifying force do more than they mean. Part One takes up rhetoric's traditionally rational approaches toward humor and laughter and argues that these approaches reveal an awareness that laughter's asignifying force threatens the very control the approaches seek. The uncontrollable effects of this asignifying force are then dramatized in Part Two's examples, which, in turn, let us reimagine the aims of the traditional approaches; the theoretical foundation laid in Part One is retroactively revisited by means of Part Two's demonstrations of laughter's asignifying force. Ultimately, because laughter is not language *per se* (not a signifying language, anyway, in the traditional conception of what constitutes a language), yet it still produces rhetorical effects, taking up laughter's asignifying force gives us a chance to expand the field of rhetoric in ways that further exceed reason, signification, and the human.

Part One: Loss of Control

Chapter One

Nonrational Seizures: Beyond Reason, Signification, and the Human

What is laughable is the submission to the self-evidence of meaning, to the force of this imperative: that there must be meaning.

- Jacques Derrida

Since its earliest origins, the discipline of rhetoric has defined itself as an essentially human art. In *A New History of Classical Rhetoric*, George Kennedy suggests that rhetoric, as “a specific cultural subset of a more general concept of the power of words and their potential to affect a situation in which they are used and received,” is a foundational attribute of what it means to be human (3):

Ultimately, what we call ‘rhetoric’ can be traced back to the natural instinct to survive and to control our environment and influence the actions of others in what seems the best interests of ourselves, our families, our social and political groups, and our descendants. This can be done by direct action – force, threats, bribes, for example – or it can be done by the use of ‘signs,’ of which the most important are words in speech and writing. (3)

In this origin of rhetoric story, Kennedy suggests that humans’ abilities to use systems of signs such as speech and writing – as opposed to being limited to using violent acts like force and threats – is what separates the human from the animal and, also, from our more primitive selves. In other words, rhetoric is how man civilizes himself. Friedrich Nietzsche speaks of this human/animal divide in terms of how the human intellect exhibits a capacity for illusions and dissimulation that sets it apart from other creatures in the animal kingdom:

As a means for the preserving of the individual, the intellect unfolds its principle powers in dissimulation, which is the means by which weaker, less robust individuals preserve themselves – since they have been denied the chance to wage the battle for existence with horns or with the sharp teeth of beasts of prey. This art of dissimulation reaches its peak in man. Deception, flattering, lying, deluding, talking behind the back, putting up a false front, living in borrowed splendor, wearing a mask, hiding behind convention,

playing a role for others and for oneself – in short, a continuous fluttering around the *solitary* flame of vanity. (“On Truth” 1172)

Since humans are “weaker, less robust” beings than animals (weaker and less robust than the more primitive, “animalistic” versions of ourselves, as well), the human struggle for survival must take a different form. When man came out of the wild, out of the fields, and moved into the city, he came armed not only with the primitive weapons of fight-or-flight survival, but with persuasive discourse, an exclusively human weapon for use in an exclusively human form of warfare. In other words, rhetoric in the civilized human society takes the place of violent action in the uncivilized animal kingdom. Not only did humans receive language, but we have learned to use it *rhetorically* to persuade each other to do things in ways that are not limited to simply imposing our will through force and violence. Even though we still often do so, we don’t *have* to kill one another to get things done. It is not just our language that makes us human, but also our ability to rationally control this language using rhetoric, that separates the human from the animal.

One way rhetoric delineates itself as essentially human is that it is a rational discourse used by humans, which are the rational animal. However, another way rhetoric is strongly tied to the human is through the concept of character, or *ethos*. Aristotle defines the art of rhetoric as simply “an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion,” and he identifies three species of *pisteis*, or appeals, which are available to the speaker: those “in the argument” themselves (*logos*), those “in disposing the listener in some way” (*pathos*), and those “in the character of the speaker” (*ethos*) (*On Rhetoric* 1.2.1-3). Of the three appeals, Aristotle clearly privileges *ethos*, because, “we believe fair-minded people to a greater extent and more quickly [than we do others] on all subjects in general and completely so in cases where there is not exact knowledge but room for doubt” (1.2.4). This

conception of ethos as grounded in moral character is essential to persuasion, because the ability to reproduce facts is not, on its own, enough to persuade an audience:

Even if we had the most exact knowledge, it would not be very easy for us in speaking to use it to persuade some audiences. Speech based on knowledge is teaching, but teaching is impossible [with some audiences]; rather, it is necessary for *pisteis* and speeches [as a whole] to be formed on the bases of common [beliefs]. (*On Rhetoric* 1.1.12)

Because audiences are comprised of humans, and humans are feeling, emotional creatures who will not be persuaded by facts alone, audiences need to also feel a connection with the speaker to be moved to action. In other words, sometimes the truth needs a little help.

Aristotle suggests ethos is primarily responsible for nudging the truth along:²

But since rhetoric is concerned with making a judgment (people judge what is said in deliberation, and judicial proceedings are also a judgment), it is necessary not only to look to the argument, that it may be demonstrative and persuasive, but also [for the speaker] to construct a view of himself as a certain kind of person and to prepare the judge. For it makes much difference in regard to persuasion (especially in deliberations but also in trials) that the speaker seem to be a certain kind of person and that his hearers suppose him to be a certain kind of person and that his hearers suppose him to be disposed toward them in a certain way and in addition if they, too, happen to be disposed in a certain way [favorably or unfavorably to him]. (2.1.2-3)

As such, Aristotle dismisses the idea that the technical speaker who merely exhibits an objective sort of “fair-mindedness” can achieve persuasion with those appeals alone; rather, he suggests that “character is almost, so to speak, *the controlling factor in persuasion*” (1.2.4, my emphases). Later, the Roman orator Cicero speaks with similar definitiveness of ethos’ importance to persuasion in *On Oratory*:

² One way to think about the importance of ethos to the history of rhetoric is to consider how Greek juries dealt with factual evidence in trials. Rather than privileging direct data – the cold, hard facts that dominate the outcomes of many popular crime shows today – Greek juries actually distrusted direct evidence because there was a suspicion that this kind of evidence might be the product of a bribe or faked in some way. Instead, confidence was placed in what the jury believed the individuals involved in the situation would have been likely to do given the reputation of their character, or their ethos (Kennedy in *On Rhetoric* 9).

For there is nothing [...] of more importance in speaking than that the hearer should be favorable to the speaker, and be himself so strongly moved that he may be influenced more by impulse and excitement of mind than by judgment or reflection. For mankind make far more determinations through hatred, or love, or desire, or anger, or grief, or joy, or hope, or fear, or error, or some other affection of mind, than from regard to truth, or any settled maxim, or principle of right, or judicial form, or adherence to the laws. (XLII)

For both Aristotle and Cicero, developing this strong sense of character – an essentially human trait – in the speaker is absolutely required for persuasion. Developing ethos plays a vital role for any speaker in any situation, because, we are inclined to go along with people we like more than people we do not. The traditional view of the rhetorical situation suggests that a stable human subject who presents a favorable ethos and can understand an audience comprised of other stable human subjects can learn to employ the right means of persuasion to produce her desired results. The essential component of this model is the “humanness” of the subjects participating: that they are essentially stable, determinable, and complete, and thus, they possess the capacity to control – and be controlled – by language.

Much as rhetoric has posited itself as a human art, theorists who have written about humor and laughter have likewise treated the capacity to both create humor and experience laughter as uniquely human attributes. In *Beyond Laughter: Humor and the Subconscious*, humor theorist Martin Grotjahn claims that laughter is something “essentially and exclusively human” (ix). While writing in the field of psychology, Grotjahn’s argument about laughter – that “Everything done with laughter helps us be human” – shares with rhetoric a similar foundational belief about what it means to be human (ix). From the nineteenth century humanist William Hazlitt, who argues, “Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps” (*Lectures 2*), to the contemporary poststructuralist philosopher and humor theorist Simon Critchley, who remarks, “Apparently there have never been cultures without

laughter,” (*On Humour* 66) most discussions on laughter have historically begun from the premise that laughter is some sort of a universal, human experience. For example, in “Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic,” Henri Bergson positions laughter firmly within the realm of human experience:

The first point to which attention should be called is that the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly *human*. A landscape may be beautiful, charming and sublime, or insignificant and ugly; it will never be laughable. You may laugh at an animal, but only because you have detected in it some human attitude or expression [...] Several have defined man as ‘an animal which laughs.’ The might equally well have defined him as an animal which is laughed at; for if any other animal, or some lifeless object, produces the same effect, it is always because of some resemblance to man, of the stamp he gives it or the use he puts it to. (2)

In *Humor: Its Origin and Development*, Paul McGhee makes a similarly explicit connection between humor and human nature:

It is impossible to determine when human beings first began to puzzle over the nature and functions of humor. It is likely, though, that they have pondered over humor for as long as they have sought to understand their own nature. One longstanding approach to defining ‘human nature’ has been to contrast human behavior and capacities with those of animals. For example, human beings have always been thought to be unique because they possess language abilities, highly developed thought capacities, and a sense of humor. (1)

In *Comedy: Meaning and Form*, Robert Corrigan’s explanation of what he calls, “the comic view of life,” invokes the spiritual side of the human experience. Here, the comic is posited as a celebration of what is heroic in the nature of the human spirit, as it suggests that no animal endures like the human:

All comedy celebrates humankind’s capacity to endure [...] The spirit of comedy is the spirit of resurrection, and the joy that attends our experience of the comic is the joy that comes from the realization that despite all our individual defeats, life does nonetheless continue on its merry way. (8)

And finally, in *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious*, Sigmund Freud identifies the use of wit as a way for humans to circumvent the psychic repression brought on by the restrictions of civilization:

We acknowledge to culture and higher civilization an important influence in the development of repressions [...] in consequence of it, what was once accepted as pleasurable is now counted unacceptable and is rejected by means of all the psychic forces. Owing to the repression brought about by civilization many primary pleasures are now disapproved by the censor and lost. But the human psyche finds renunciation very difficult; hence we discover that tendency-wit furnishes us with a means to make the renunciation retrogressive and thus to regain what has been lost. (147)

Through the human telling of jokes, or “wit-work,” taboo topics can be addressed in a socially acceptable manner. The energy previously used to repress the taboo thoughts is released by means of laughter (an “economy of psychic expenditure”), which helps us navigate our way around the repressive apparatus and, ultimately, “regain what has been lost” (180). Although for Freud, many human responses to repression call into question the limits of rational human control – the unconscious manifestations of dream-work and the conscious manifestations of neuroses, for example – yet there remains a decidedly “human” aspect to repression as it is born out of civilization’s requirements for humans to rationally control their desires, to resist following their id and acting on their more primitive, animalistic impulses.

In all of these accounts, humor and laughter are treated in the same fundamental manner: man is the animal that laughs, and only humans understand humor. In other words, humor and laughter define what it is to be human. However, these definitive claims, while having displayed lasting theoretical resolve, have recently started to be called into question from different disciplinary perspectives. For example, researchers Marina Davila-Ross,

Bethan Allcock, Chris Thomas, and Kim Bard have discovered that chimpanzees produce identifiable laugh types when responding to other laughing chimps:

The results of Part 1 and Part 2 of this study indicated that chimpanzees produce laugh-elicited laughter and that this vocalization differs in acoustic form and occurrence from their spontaneous laughter. The present work therefore provides empirical evidence that nonhuman primates replicate the expressions of their social partners by producing expressions that are distinct in their underlying emotions and their social implications. [...] The laugh responses of chimpanzees in this study furthermore show a striking similarity to conversational laughter of humans. (“Aping Expressions?” 1018)

Our closest relatives in the animal kingdom share our familiar experience that laughter can sometimes be “contagious.” Further research, however, suggests that examples of nonhuman laughter are not limited to great apes. For example, in “Beyond a Joke: From Animal to Human Joy?” Psychologist Jaak Panksepp suggests that a certain form of laughter in rats is connected to the development of emotional and social bonds:

When rats play, their rambunctious shenanigans are accompanied by a cacophony of 50-khz chirps that reflect positive emotional feelings. Sonographic analysis suggests that some chirps, like human laughter, are more joyous than others [...] We have shown that if rats are tickled in a playful way, they readily emit these 50-khz chirps. The rats we tickled became socially bonded to us and were rapidly conditioned to seek tickles. They preferred spending time with other animals that chirped a lot rather than those who did not. (62)

By being drawn to frequent chirpers more readily than infrequent chirpers, rats appear to exhibit, on some level, Aristotle’s sense of how we are drawn us to others from whom we receive a “friendly” feeling from their ethos: “[we are friendly to people like] those who are ready to make or receive a joke; for in both cases they are intent on the same thing as their neighbor, able to be kidded and kidding in good sport” (*On Rhetoric* 2.4.13). These studies pose a fundamental challenge to the traditional view of humor and laughter as being essentially human traits. The belief that man is the animal that laughs can no longer be

assumed with such black and white certainty. Rather, what these studies appear to suggest is that instead of making us human, laughter shows us that the line that separates the human from the animal is not as distinct as we would like to think that it is. As Critchley states, this boundary is much more fluid than we have previously imagined:

If humour is human, then it also, curiously, marks the limit of the human. Or, better, humour explores what it means to be human by moving back and forth across the frontier that separates humanity from animality, thereby making it unstable [...] Humour is precisely the exploration of the break between nature and culture, which reveals the human to be not so much a category by itself as a negotiation between categories. We might even define the human as a *dynamic* process produced by a series of identifications and misidentifications with animality. (29)

When we are laughing, we are not demonstrating some sort of essential humanness. Quite the contrary; we are at our most animal when we are in the throes of uncontrollable laughter, because laughter interrupts the human subject and shows us the limits of our rational control. We cannot stop laughter using reason alone; sometimes, laughter is in control. Though attempts to conjure laughter begin as rational pursuits – a rhetor tries to choose and construct the most appropriate appeals in order to control the appeals’ effects – when laughter results, it interrupts human control and reason, showing us the limits of any rational pursuit designed to control it.

These interruptive moments of uncontrollable laughter make us question the category of the human itself. Because laughter makes us explore, as Critchley says, the break “between nature and culture,” it also makes us question the category of rhetoric. Rhetoric pitches itself, classically and modernly, as a rational discourse that humans have access to and animals do not. However, challenges to this model are beginning to surface as well. Perhaps the earliest rhetorician to engage with the concept of a non-human rhetoric in a sustained manner is George Kennedy. Kennedy’s discussion of “animal rhetorics” helps us

explore how laughter calls into question the category of rhetoric because, for Kennedy, before rhetoric can even take place, a prior, already existent “energy, has to exist in the speaker,” since, “speech cannot take place without some force or motivation to articulate an utterance” (“Hoot” 4). This pre-rhetorical energy, however, is not restricted to human forms of communication: “rhetoric is manifest in all animal life and existed long before the evolution of human beings. Nature has favored the development of communication skills; although they have some energy cost, they are less costly than physical motion, such as fight or flight” (4). For Kennedy, the ability to use rhetoric is not something humans developed vis-à-vis the civilization process, but something that the animal kingdom utilizes as well, as a more energy efficient means of getting things done. In other words, Kennedy questions the proprietary claim humans have long made on the art of rhetoric; animals do these things, too. Diane Davis later picks up this thread and continues challenging the lingering belief in rhetorical studies that, “rhetoric, at the very least, requires an engagement with the symbolic. This engagement, while it defines the human (‘the symbol using animal’), is what nonhuman animals purportedly lack” (“Creaturely” 88). Davis furthers the discussion of non-human rhetorics toward a view that rhetoric’s fundamental possibility resides in the “always prior rhetoricity” that is stitched into any creature’s general, corporeal existence (89):

‘[R]hetoric’ is itself dependent on an always prior rhetoricity, an affectability or persuadability that is due not to any creature’s specific genetic makeup but to corporality more generally, to the *exposedness* of corporeal existence. To be affectable, persuadable, is to be always already affected, persuaded, which means: always already *responsive*. Rhetoric is not first of all an essence or property ‘in the speaker’ (a natural function of biology) but an underivable obligation to respond that issues from an irreducible relationality. (89)

For Davis, rhetoric begins at the level of corporeal existence itself, where to exist is to be always already affected with the ability to be persuaded, by future persuasive and

persuadable possibilities. The ability to respond rhetorically, to be exposed to persuadability, occurs prior to any distinction of genetic makeup, prior to questions of human and/or animal. So it's not as simple as noticing that some nonhuman animals display rhetorical abilities that many have long believed to be essentially human rhetorical abilities. In other words, the questions should not be limited to, "How can we discover how animals have rhetorical capacities that we thought were exclusively human, and what would those discoveries mean?" Davis turns this line of questioning back on the human itself: "It's at least as important for rhetorical studies to ask whether it's certain that *humans* display these capacities – or at least if we display them in all the purity that contemporary theories of rhetoric presume" (92). The questions these animal rhetorics raise are leading us toward a rhetoric that is less essentially human.

But if we challenge the traditionally human-centric concept of rhetoric, what happens to both the human and to rhetoric? In "Toward a Bestial Rhetoric," an article that also revisits Kennedy's concept of animal rhetorics, Debra Hawhee continues to explore the implications of non-human rhetorics for the human and for rhetoric. Hawhee identifies additional challenges animal rhetorics pose to traditional, anthropocentric views of rhetoric:

Kennedy's attention to animals yields three crucial challenges to rhetorical theory: first, it shifts attention from 'wordy' language to language rendered with calls, tones, facial expressions, and bodies. Second, it posits rhetoric as energetic intensity, a movement, or an urge to move others. And finally, the speaker or author takes a back seat to the audience. Or better said, the speaker is kicked to the curb. (82)

The parallels between laughter and animal rhetorics in Hawhee's account are striking, as they both pose similar challenges to rhetorical theory. First and foremost, the idea of a non-human, animal rhetor at the center of the rhetorical situation explicitly removes the human from the equation, replacing him or her with another creature entirely. But getting kicked to

the curb is precisely what happens to the human subject when it is in the throes of uncontrollable laughter. While the rhetor at the center of a humorous rhetorical situation might still be a human being and not some other, non-human creature, the human's sense of rationality and control is precisely what uncontrollable laughter interrupts. So while laughter kicks the human to the curb in a less literal way than an animal subject kicks the human to the curb, the same traits that have traditionally defined the human *as human* – reason, language, rhetoric, laughter – are precisely what uncontrollable laughter places at risk. Furthermore, because laughter is not, as Hawhee puts it, a “wordy” language, or is not a signifying language in the traditional sense, laughter shares more with non-human, animal languages expressed through “calls, tones, facial expressions, and bodies” than it does with “human” forms of linguistic expression. And because laughter has this non-linguistic rhetorical capacity to function as “energetic intensity,” the limits of laughter's rhetorical effects can never be fully contained in approaches that concentrate primarily on signification, such as those found throughout the rhetorical tradition. While early rhetoricians demonstrate remarkable dedication when accounting for as many different kinds of humorous appeals and their potential effects as possible, the energetic intensity of laughter will always exceed attempts to contain it within language alone, because laughter is not language operating in the traditional sense. In other words, just because you can't transcribe a laugh doesn't mean a laugh can still do things. It can become contagious and cause others to laugh, or it can take over the human subject, exceeding the subject's ability to maintain rational control over itself, or, if the laugh is coming at someone's expense, it can even insult or hurt someone. Laughter's “energetic intensity” might not be reducible to signification, but it is still capable of producing persuasive, rhetorical effects. The effects of which are immediately observable

the moment we lose ourselves in the throes of uncontrollable laughter and our essential humanness gets “kicked to the curb” by a laughter that *laughs us*.

Put simply, what these accounts all suggest is that laughter can lead us to a rhetoric that is beyond reason, beyond signification, and beyond the human. Laughter challenges rhetoric’s ability to define itself as a uniquely human art form, because laughter challenges what it means to be human. Laughter does this by exerting, in Kennedy’s term, an “energetic intensity,” or, to put it differently, by means of a certain *force*.

The Question of Force(s)

The question of force is especially apropos to the discussion of laughter. Much in the same way laughter can exceed the subject’s ability to maintain rational control of herself, Jacques Derrida envisions a certain force within the structure of language that likewise interrupts the self. However, there are many types of forces that produce many different effects. Derrida engages with one example of force by means of his intervention with J.L. Austin’s speech act theory. Austin’s use of the term force refers to the way in which some *performative* utterances actually produce effects that *do* things (Austin’s examples include utterances that name a ship, marry two people, or place a bet) while other *constative* utterances state facts and represent meaning (the sky is blue, for example), but his efforts to distinguish performatives from constatives ultimately rely on a stable delineation between “serious” contexts and “nonserious” contexts that proves impossible to maintain. Derrida’s intervention in this conversation is to demonstrate that the impossibility Austin struggles with results from the fact that writing and speech both contain – at the structural level, at the moment of their inscription or their utterance – a *breaking force* that can always be lifted from one context and placed in another, a chain of citing and grafting that can go on

infinitely and always produce new and different meanings. For Derrida, the always-iterable breaking force of “the mark in general” (written or spoken) is what allows for the possibility of writing or speech to exist in the first place:

If one admits that writing (and the mark in general) *must be able* to function in the absence of the sender, the receiver, the context of production, etc., that implies that this power, this *being able*, this *possibility*, is *always* inscribed, hence *necessarily* inscribed *as possibility* in the functioning or the functional structure of the mark. Once the mark is *able* to function, once it is possible for it to function, once it is possible for it to function in case of absence, etc., it follows that this possibility is a *necessary* part of its structure, that the latter must *necessarily be such that* this functioning is possible [...] Such iterability is inseparable from the structural possibility in which it is necessarily inscribed. (“Limited inc” 48)

For writing to be what it is, it must be iterable – i.e. it must be already interrupted – at the very moment of its inscription by its future instantiations, its future possibilities of attaching somewhere else in a different context. To dramatize this breaking force, consider the case of an actor in a play telling an offensive joke on stage. Even though that person acting as a character in a play is pretending to be someone else, and speaking made up lines for a made up person in a nonserious context, all that “nonseriousness” still cannot guarantee that the effects of that utterance will be contained within the nonserious context of the play. Just because you say “I was kidding!” after you insult someone with an offensive joke, the performative effects of your insult – what the joke *does* – can always exceed context and the speaker’s rational intentions.

However, Derrida’s interest in force becomes something different than it is for Austin. Even though he keeps Austin’s term, his refinement of the term brings him to a kind of force that is more closely in line with the “energetic intensity” of laughter. Derrida is not only interested in how language’s breaking force interrupts context, but in how force can also interrupt the context of the self as well, of presence, of the experience of being. This

conception of an *interruptive force* is another word for the future possibility that is – at the structural level – essentially stitched into the experience of human consciousness, just as it is with writing and speech. Presence and the experience of human consciousness are also interrupted by the same possibility for future instantiations that pierce writing and speech – at the moment of their being marked or uttered – at the structural level. Consider Derrida’s following example of what happens to a human subject when she makes a shopping list for herself:

*At the very moment “I” make a shopping list, I know [...] that it will only be a list if it implies my absence, if it already detaches itself from me in order to function beyond my ‘present’ act and if it is utilizable at another time, in the absence of my-being-present-now, even if this absence is the simple ‘absence of memory’ that the list is meant to make up for, shortly, in a moment, but one which is already the following moment, the absence of the now of writing, of the writer maintaining, grasping with one hand his ballpoint pen. Yet no matter how fine this point may be, it is like the *stigmé* of every mark, already split. (49)*

The experience of “being,” of having a sense of self, is not to be fully stable and complete. Rather, to “be” means to always already be interrupted by future possibilities, to always be able to be reinscribed into different contexts where what it means to be “you” can always become something different. In this way, to be “you” is to function like a language, to always already be broken free from where you are by the limitless possibilities of where you could always go. Derrida’s conception of this force that interrupts the self calls into question the same notion of a stable human subject that laughter challenges: just as we might believe that we are in control of laughter when laughter is really in control of us, the belief that we “are” who we think we are is only possible because we are always already exceeded – interrupted – by our future instantiations. So from this perspective, laughter’s capacity to interrupt the human subject does not reveal some incompleteness in the human subject or a

failure of human reason. Instead, laughter's interruptive effect on the human subject demonstrates that what it means to be human, what it means to "be," is to be always already interrupted from the very first instance of your being by future instantiations of yourself. Derrida's notion of presence, therefore, is not a continual unfolding of one unified experience, but rather a series of continually differing interruptions, always breaking from each other, never stabilizing into a wholly present *now*, and laughter dramatizes the effects of this interruptive kind of force.

Laughter functions with an interruptive force that interrupts subjectivity and makes us question what it means to be human and to use rhetoric, but laughter is yet another example of force. Since laughter does not exclusively use a system of signs to communicate meaning, it does not function in the same way as a *signifying* language. Diane Davis identifies laughter's force as residing not so much in what it signifies, or what it *means*, but in what it *does*. Laughter is not something we can control with reason, but rather something that interrupts rationality:

To engage in a laughter that has no stake in control is to set one's feet upon momentary lines of flight from the tyranny of meaning and from the violence of a community held together by that tyranny [...] it is about, in a flash, experiencing the flow, the excess beyond our control, beyond our (violent) grasp. (*Breaking* 68)

To experience laughter is to experience a certain loss of control, to surrender to effects that are beyond reason. Because of this, rather than *signifying* meaning, laughter functions with a sort of *asignifying force*, one that exceeds signification and rational control. To surrender to laughter is to let go of the traditional idea that being human "demands a self-identified agent who has the freedom to effect change and the reason to determine what needs to be done" (40). This posthumanist position of the subject, "that human beings are always already

functions of other functions,” poses fundamental risks to humanist perspectives that rely on a human controlling what needs to be done using reason (23). The asignifying force of laughter produces effects that interrupt human reason, showing us that the humanist subject can no longer be relied on to exert rational, intentional control on the rhetorical situation. With this, a new question arises: “Who, or what, becomes the author of language?” Davis suggests that to respond to this question is to encounter what she calls the “posthuman paradox”:

Human agency is problematic indeed in the face of this realization: if human beings are routinely and unceremoniously possessed by outside forces or ‘rhythms’ that have little to do with social norms (*nomos*), they can hardly fancy themselves in control either of their lives or the course of human events. This is the posthuman paradox: that we both make and/but are also (more so) *made by History*. (23)

Much as we “both make and/but are also (more so) *made by History*,” we also make and/but are also (more so) made by laughter. The rhetorical tradition, for example, has sought to design approaches to help orators use laughter for persuasive aims, but their efforts have been complicated by the fact that laughter uses us, too. Laughter is such a risky rhetorical appeal precisely because a rhetor can never fully control its effects. Consider, for example, Davis’ personal anecdote from her childhood when she tried, unsuccessfully, to fight back a laugh while in church:

My whole being wants desperately *not* to laugh, and yet it’s clear to me that my will is not in control; something else has hold of me – I wonder if it’s God. Despite my willpower, despite my squirming and my clenched teeth, I hear mySelf beginning to *lose it*; ‘I’ am beginning to ‘crack up,’ both literally (the stability of the ‘I’ is challenged when it becomes the *object* of this laughter’s force) and figuratively [...] My body has been *possessed* by the force of laughter: Despite my reason and my will, laughter bursts out. The battle is over: ‘I’ have been conquered. (22)

What this anecdote shows us is when the human subject is being laughed by laughter, the effects experienced are beyond the human; it is impossible for us to rationally rein in a laughter that is laughing us. Similarly, it is impossible for us to communicate the effects of the experience of being overcome by laughter using language. Sometimes, we don't even know why we are laughing and are often surprised when our laughter reaches such an uncontrollable intensity. People who have just "come down" from a fit of uncontrollable laughter often make comments such as, "I don't even know why I found that so funny!" or "I'm sorry, I don't know what came over me, I just couldn't stop laughing!" We typically don't rationally set out to discover and create the experience of uncontrollable laughter within ourselves. Instead, laughter often finds us, and takes us over when we least expect it to, and, sometimes this happens when we really do not want it to happen. Davis mentions, while we are historically appreciative of the "stability of the knowing smile and/or the controlled chuckle [...] [t]he instability of irrepressible laughter is an affront to our humanist sensibilities: we do not want to *crack up*. And we don't want to deal with a world that is cracking up and that cracks *us* up – often without our consent" (3). We want to believe that we are in control of our selves, but the asignifying force of laughter produces effects that show us that the control we want to have – that we have been historically conditioned to believe that we do have – is not essential. It is always capable of being interrupted by forces that show us that we are functions of other functions. As such, the experience of laughing uncontrollability is something that one must experience, that one must feel. Laughter's effects are not the results of signification alone and, therefore, cannot be communicated using signification alone; you can't explain to someone else what it feels like to laugh uncontrollably. Or, as Davis puts it, to experience the asignifying force of laughter (let alone

to take some enjoyment from this loss of control) “requires not only that one recognize that the universe will forever overflow our superimposed categories and distinctions but also that one *celebrate* the unstructurable excess” (57). All this cracking up, then, allows us to question what it means to be human and what it means to use rhetoric in a world where the human is no longer exclusively in control. The effects of laughter’s asignifying force provide us with “an invitation to break up with the force that breaks us up, to laugh with the Laughter that laughs language and technology and human beings, to explore another sensibility, another way or thinking (writing, reading) [...] to leap into the sweep ... and to say YES” (2). Laughter gives us reason to question the basis for how rhetoric, classically and modernly, conceives of persuasion: that a stable human subject controls language to produce effects of her own design.

Laughter’s asignifying force is irreducible to reason, interrupts the human subject, and operates beyond signification, such that it creates effects that challenge – or *shake* – structures which are founded upon reason and meaning. One way to think about the implication of this shaking is through the metaphor of a keystone. In architectural terms, a keystone is the last stone placed in the construction of an archway or a vault that serves the vital functions of locking all the other stones in place and allowing the archway or vault to bear weight. Functionally, the archway or vault cannot bear any weight – cannot function as the structure it is intended to be – until the keystone is set in place. Therefore, the keystone is what gives the archway or the vault its stability. It is what holds the structure in place and allows it to maintain itself as an archway or a vault. Laughter has always been used as a keystone to define what it means to be human; man is the only animal that laughs. But what happens if this keystone itself is not as stable as we think? What happens to the structure if

the keystone is already *shaking*? In “Force and Signification,” Derrida uses the metaphor of the keystone to call into question another structure that has traditionally been perceived as stable: the perceived stability of philosophical structures founded on reason. Derrida suggests that because the keystone is of such fundamental necessity to any structure, including the reason-centered structure of Western philosophy, were the keystone itself to prove unstable, the structure as a whole would reveal itself as much more precarious than it appears:

Structure is perceived through the incidence of menace, at the moment when imminent danger concentrates our vision on the keystone of an institution, the stone which encapsulates both the possibility and the fragility of its existence. Structure then can be *methodically* threatened in order to be comprehended more clearly and to reveal not only its supports but also that secret place in which it is neither construction nor ruin but lability. (6)

We rely on the keystone to maintain stability and structure, yet because this one stone is so important to the whole structure’s stability, if something were to destabilize this keystone the entire structure would be at risk. Much as laughter has been perceived as the keystone to the human, reason has been perceived as the keystone to philosophy, the foundational element that internally defines what philosophy is and externally excludes what philosophy is not. But Derrida sees laughter as a keystone that shakes philosophy’s obsessive adherence to reason. In “From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism Without Reserve,” he describes the obsessiveness of this adherence by invoking the metaphor of “slumber” (252):

To bear the self-evidence of Hegel, today, would mean this: one must, in every sense, go through the ‘*slumber* of reason,’ the *slumber* that engenders monsters and then puts them to sleep; this *slumber* must be effectively traversed so that awakening will not be a ruse of dream. That is to say, again, a ruse of reason. The *slumber* of reason is not, perhaps, reason put to sleep, but *slumber* in the form of reason, the vigilance of the Hegelian logos. Reason keeps watch over a deep *slumber* in which it has an interest. (252, my emphases)

In this metaphor, we see an example of Derrida playing with the form of writing itself to perform what is beyond the “sayable” in this theory. In other words, to speak of what is beyond reason is to exceed the reasonable designs of a signifying language itself, meaning language must be employed in such a way that it does more than it is able to simply say and mean. Or, as Davis puts it, “Our finitude is tied to our emeshedness in language – we may not leave language to study it or ourselves from some other place, some metalinguistic spot” (*Breaking* 77). Derrida’s repetitious use of the image of slumber in this instance lulls the reader toward the feeling of the monotonous state of *slumber* by breaking every first year composition instructor’s advice to always vary your word choice. As the prose repetitively *slumbers, slumbers, slumbers* along toward the numbing, languid, sleepy *slumber*, Derrida’s point – that philosophy’s blind adherence to reason has created a sort of intellectual hibernation that we can’t wake from – is delivered through a sort of force that produces the feeling of “the slumber of reason” rather than by simply defining what the slumber of reason means. In doing so, he performs his critique of philosophy in general, and, more specifically, the Hegelian dialectic, as an indolent and uncritical darkness which lulls thought to sleep through the opiated anodyne of reason.

But in this performance, we also begin to see the foreshadowing of what forces can awaken us from this repetitive slumber. One path to an awakening comes from nothing other than the shaking, asignifying force of *laughter*. Derrida sees laughter as a weapon of potential resistance and a means of escape from philosophy’s blind adherence to reason and from Hegelianism’s consumptive power, a power so strong that it “extends its historical domination, finally unfolding its immense enveloping resources without obstacle” (251). Hegelianism’s negative dialectic is akin to a black hole that draws all forces, both interior

and exterior, both those that accept the constraints of philosophy and those that resist it, into its orbit. However, because laughter is an asignifying force that neither accepts nor denies reason, but moves within and, simultaneously, beyond it, Derrida suggests laughter may provide momentary flashes of escape from the gravitational pull of Hegelianism:

[I]t is necessary, in order to open our eyes [...] to have spent the night with reason, to have kept watch and to have slept with her [...] For at the far reaches of this night something was contrived, blindly, I mean in a discourse, by means of which philosophy, in completing itself, could both include within itself and anticipate all the figures of its beyond, all the forms and resources of its exterior; and could do so in order to keep these forms and resources close to itself by simply taking hold of the enunciation. *Except, perhaps, for a certain laughter*" (252, my emphasis).

To put it another way, what philosophy is able to do is to "complete itself" by not only identifying all that constitutes its inside, the figures that lie unchallenged "within itself," but by also laying claim to "the figures of its beyond" in a way that allows philosophy to take hold of those as well, even if they are only to be peripherally and eternally banished as outliers. This divide is maintained in the movement of the dialectic where negation is "sucked in by Hegel's discourse," an effect of such power that almost nothing can escape: "*Except, perhaps, for a certain laughter*" (252). Derrida identifies, "privileged moments that are less moments than the always rapidly sketched movements of experience," when laughter's instantaneous eruption flashes forth like an exploding camera bulb, triggered from within the depths of the slumbering philosophical night, illuminating a path of escape: "quickly, furtively, and unforeseeably breaking with it, as betrayal or as detachment, drily, laughter breaks out" (252). When the asignifying force of laughter breaks out, the dialectic is temporarily compromised, and absolute meaning is rendered fallible: "Laughter alone exceeds dialectics and the dialectician; it bursts out only on the basis of an absolute renunciation of meaning" (256). In its furtive flashes and flickering instants, laughter doesn't

appear in order to negate the dialectic, because “in doing so [the dialectic] would start to work again,” but rather to overflow the structure of negation itself in the form of a “laughter that literally never *appears*, because it exceeds phenomenality in general, the absolute possibility of meaning” (256). In these instants, “the burst of laughter is the almost-nothing into which meaning sinks, absolutely,” (256). If Hegelianism, then, is a discourse accompanied by a “complicity without reserve,” that ““takes it seriously’ up to the end, without objection in philosophical form,” Derrida celebrates “a certain burst of laughter [which] exceeds it and destroys its sense, or signals, in any event, the extreme point of ‘experience’ which makes Hegelian discourse dislocate *itself*” (253). Just as laughter has long been a keystone that defines what it means to be human (the human is the only animal that laughs), it is also a keystone that defines philosophy’s strict adherence to reason and meaning (philosophy is that which does not laugh). In other words, laughter cannot be a part of the strictly rational philosophical discourse, so philosophy defines itself by excluding laughter. This is why Derrida argues that laughter is, and must be, *absent* from Hegelianism, because “[i]n the system’ poetry, laughter, ecstasy are nothing. Hegel hastily gets rid of them: he knows no other aim than knowledge” (256). This absence of laughter, Hegel’s “no other aim but knowledge,” is what Derrida ultimately finds humorous: “What is laughable is the *submission* to the self-evidence of meaning, to the force of this imperative: that there must be meaning” (256). Even though philosophy has long privileged meaning as if it were the only effect, meaning is just one effect of language, one possible effect among many others. And what asignifying forces like laughter demonstrate, by producing effects that exceed reason and meaning, is that these excesses are conditions of possibility for anything resembling meaning to ever be possible in the first place.

Laughter has long been the keystone that has essentially defined what it means to be human; humans are the animals that laugh and the animals that can use rhetoric. But laughter is a *shaking* keystone; it produces effects by means of an asignifying force that is irreducible to reason and meaning and shows us the limits of the human and the limits of rhetoric. The effects of laughter's asignifying force shakes the foundation between the human and the animal and kicks the human subject's longing for rational control to the curb. When we are laughing uncontrollably, we share more with the asignifying communication of animal rhetorics than we do with signifying "human" forms of communication. The keystone that the human has been built upon is on shaky ground, showing us how laughter can lead us toward a rhetoric that is beyond signification, beyond reason, and beyond the human.

In Chapter Two I will bring this discussion of laughter's asignifying force and its implications for a rhetoric beyond the human to bear on the rhetorical tradition and show how these earlier rhetoricians had a much more developed understanding of laughter's asignifying force than history has acknowledged. Rhetorical treatises across the tradition of rhetoric might appear to maintain a belief that human subjects can control the effects of laughter. After all, these approaches offer countless suggestions to this end, suggestions that rhetors should follow to best construct the right humorous appeal for the right audience in the right situation. But what these approaches also reveal is an understanding, through their fluid, dynamic, performative approaches to humor and laughter, of laughter's asignifying force, of the unknowableness of laughter's origins, and of the impossibility of ever actually being able to pin down what a speaking subject can expect laughter to do at any given time. These historical approaches all demonstrate an awareness of laughter's asignifying force that anticipates later poststructuralist questions of language's interruptive force, because these

approaches do more than they say when it comes to their discussions of laughter. In this spirit, I hope to begin rhetoric's discussion of humor and laughter again – from rhetoric's very beginning – for the first time.

Chapter Two

Hang on to Your Ethos: Humor and Laughter in the Rhetorical Tradition

As for rhetoricians, though they do indeed put up a false front by their specious alliance with the philosophers, nevertheless it is clear that they too belong to our party, as is shown by many indications, but especially this one: besides many other trivial topics, they have written so much and so meticulously about how to make jokes [...] they think so highly of folly as to hold that oftentimes an argument which cannot be refuted in any other way should be glossed over with laughter – unless someone imagines that it is not the prerogative of Folly to provoke horselaughs with funny sayings, and to do it by the book at that.

- Desiderius Erasmus, *In Praise of Folly*

Plato: The Soul Out of Control

Today, rhetoric's interest in Plato and his dialogues stems from how they do more than they say; they often perform the philosophical paradoxes Plato is interested in. We can join in a dialogue with the texts themselves in a way that models the dialogues that are occurring within the texts. In other words, the very form of Plato's texts, how they are constructed to do what they do, challenges the historical understanding of what they mean. Plato's treatment of humor and laughter across his oeuvre dramatizes this ability of his texts to do more than they say. While we clearly see the most extreme negative reaction to certain approaches to humor and laughter in Plato, the drastic steps he suggests to contain and control laughter reveal Plato's deep appreciation for the effects of laughter's asignifying force as something that interrupts the human subject and, as such, is a threat to the rational soul.

Plato distrusts laughter because he believes it functions in excess of reason and truth by intoxicating the listener, turning her soul away from its rational part and toward its less virtuous part ruled by appetites and desires. Plato believes that logos should be the essential persuasive appeal because only logic can root out its enemies: the emotional types of

persuasion that place rational control at risk. Plato's suspicion of laughter is a species of his larger suspicion of the corruptible power of the persuasive arts in general, because these practices all function like drugs that can negatively interfere with the virtuous soul's drive toward the truth. Such an example is persuasive oration, which negatively effects the soul by causing disorienting emotions to well up within the listener. For example, in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates compares the effect of hearing Phaedrus recite Lysias' speech to the bewildering, drug-like effects of desire. In sensual language, he writes, the effect is "enough to make me beside myself," noting, "Phaedrus [...] you seemed to me to be positively beaming with delight at the speech as you read it [...] and I joined in the ecstasy with your inspired self" (234d1-d7). While Plato admits there is a noble type of desire that leads "us by reason towards the best and is in control, its control over us has the name of restraint," he fears the type of irrational desire that "drags us irrationally towards pleasures and has established rule within us, its rule is called by the name of excess" (227e3-238a3). Persuasion becomes excessive when the speaker is not using reason as the organizing principle in her speech, but is instead appealing through other, less rational means. In those instances, speech acts like an affliction similar to love in both the speaker and the audience that cannot be controlled: "For the ones who suffer it agree themselves that they are sick rather than in their right mind, and that they *know* they are out of their mind but cannot control themselves" (231d1-d4). Given the importance Platonic philosophy places on moderation, temperance, and self-control, any form of excess is "neither an admirable one nor one worth the acquisition," and therefore should be systematically marginalized (238a6-8).

Laughter is an example of such an excess, because a soul in the throes of laughter is a soul overwhelmed by non-rational forces. It is not surprising that when Plato takes up

laughter in several of his dialogues, he does so in a cautionary manner, although his actual engagements with laughter are sometimes explicit and other times more abstract. For example, in the *Philebus*, Plato addresses laughter directly in the context of his discussion of psychic pleasures. The psychic pleasures, including “anger, fear, longing, grief, sexual desire, spite and so on,” are unique in that they derive more from feelings of pain than of pleasure (47d). For example, in the case of spite, which Plato associates with laughter, the soul is clearly in pain, yet in certain malicious circumstances, “it’s demonstrable that the spiteful man is *pleased* at his neighbor’s misfortunes” (48b). To fully understand why “the nature of what we find comical” is malicious, the pleasure we take from spite must also be considered along with self-ignorance and weakness (48b). Because even though most people are self-ignorant and believe they are more virtuous and wise than they really are, laughter only comes at the expense of those who are weak, not those who are strong. As such, there is an amoral exploitive sense to this malicious kind of laughter:

[I]f you describe as comical those who are not only deluded but are also weak and unable to retaliate when mocked, you will be right. As for those who are able to retaliate, however, and are strong, if you call them frightening or dangerous, you couldn’t describe them more accurately. You see, self-ignorance accompanied by strength is not just disgraceful, it’s dangerous too: anyone who comes into contact with it, or anything like it, is threatened. But the nature of ignorance in weak men made us classify it as comical. (49b-c)

In other words, we might find it funny to kick someone, to tell a joke at someone’s expense when they are down, but only if we know they are so weak we could still kick them if they stood back up. If they weren’t weak, however, the joke wouldn’t be funny, because the person on the receiving end of the joke might get half a notion to retaliate, and they might be strong enough to make the situation not funny for anyone. Because laughter in these kinds of situations only occurs at the expense of the weak, Plato sees this use of the comic as morally

suspect and spiteful. Thus, for Plato, the effect of laughter's asignifying force, its ability to interrupt the rational part of the soul, is a signal, an ethical tipping of the hand if you will, that the one who laughs with this edge of cruelty has allowed the irrational side of her soul to take precedent over the rational side in an unjust pursuit of pleasure over knowledge. Laughter is therefore part cause and part effect, in the sense that it takes a soul lacking a particular kind of self-control to make the unjust decision to seek out less than ethical pleasures such as laughter, and once those pleasures are realized and the soul laughs uncontrollably, the soul's loss of rational control is exposed for all to see. Therefore laughter both causes the soul to seek out unjust pleasures and then becomes the effect of those overwhelming pleasures once they are realized and the soul reveals its unjustness through laughter.

At other moments in the *Philebus*, however, Plato makes more opaque references to how laughter hinders the rational side of man and negatively impacts the pursuit of the good life.³ He writes of pleasures in general:

There's no end to the trouble they make for us: with their frenzied irrationality they disturb the souls we inhabit; they prevent the conception of our kind and, if a child of ours is born, they invariably spoil him utterly by making him lazy and hence forgetful. (63d1-e2).

It should not be assumed, however, that Plato is so extreme that he is somehow anti-pleasure across the board. There are positive forms of pleasure, but they must always be enjoyed as a

³ Seeking "the good life" here can be thought of in context with the Greek term *eudaimonia*, which is often translated as happiness. This is not happiness in the sort of joyful, celebratory sense that we imbue the word with, but rather a sense of contentment that arises when what is worth striving for is satisfied. For Plato, this is achieved through the pursuit of reason. Because man is the only animal with the potential for reason and the capacity for philosophical knowledge (animals are purely sensual, and gods, while not mortal, are purely rational yet lie beyond human potential), the human being will be most fulfilled by maximizing this potential for philosophical knowledge.

small part of the larger, rational pursuit of knowledge. For example, the *pure* pleasures, or pleasures that are unaccompanied by pain, are ideal for Plato because they do not produce any negative effects. However, with the exception of the acquisition of knowledge – Plato’s pleasure *par excellence* – these pure pleasures are extremely rare. Almost all other pleasures comprise some combination of pleasure and pain, and since pain can never be desirable, Plato rules out most of these “mixed” pleasures because they are in some way corrupt and tainted. However, he does find mixed pleasures important enough to create a taxonomy that seeks to determine which mixed pleasures are the least detrimental to the pursuit of the good life and which should be categorically avoided. His analysis reveals that mixed pleasures differ in kind and also in intensity, and the intensity experienced is relationally linked to the corresponding pain that the pleasure satisfies, a point Plato underscored by means of an analogy to physical sickness: “don’t those who are gripped by fever and so on suffer more from thirst, cold and all the usual physical complaints? Aren’t they more familiar with lack? Don’t they get greater pleasures from replenishment?” (45b5-9). The more intense the pleasure, the more it has the potential to place the pursuit of the good life at risk, and the greater threat Plato sees in it, because such an overwhelming experience of pleasurable satisfaction interrupts the rational mind’s quest for knowledge by creating an ongoing desire for that feeling. Consider the following depiction of a pleasure so intense that it completely overwhelms the person under its effects:

[H]e is stirred up by the far greater pleasant element, sometimes even to the extent of leaping about! His face goes all sorts of colours, his body adopts all sorts of postures, his breathing is just as variable; *the pleasure drives him completely wild and makes him cry out in his frenzy!* [...] [T]hanks to these pleasures he is described by himself and others, as ‘almost dying with delight’; and *the more uncontrolled he is, the more wholeheartedly he devotes himself to continuous pursuit of them.* He calls them the greatest of pleasures,

and he counts that man most fulfilled who spends his whole life with as many of them as possible” (47a3-9, my emphases).

Plato does not explicitly state that the experience described above is the experience of a human subject overcome with laughter. Rather, he provides this example to describe what generally happens when pleasure greatly outweighs its corresponding pain in a mixed pleasure. However, it appears clear that whatever stimulus triggers the reaction described above, the resulting effect is most certainly uncontrollable laughter: the depiction of the body contorting, the irregular breathing, and the crying out in frenzy could not be mistaken for anything else. In this section of the dialogue, the *a priori* ethical decisions a soul makes to seek either pleasure or knowledge is Plato’s pressing concern, but when the soul chooses incorrectly, the resulting effect – uncontrollable laughter – can be read as a “tell,” so to speak, or the bodily reveal that the soul has chosen the path that leads away from the pursuit of the good life. What is important here is that Plato’s focus expresses a rhetorical concern, meaning that he is not concentrating exclusively on what *caused* this excessive pleasurable state to occur – what the object of the pleasure *means* – but on the *effects* of certain types of pleasure – which in this case, is a soul experiencing uncontrollable laughter – and what those effects themselves *do*. Uncontrollable laughter here is clearly doing something *outside* of the realm of rational control: it is betraying the soul’s sense of subjective control by operating outside of that soul’s rational grasp, which is precisely why Plato fears it and seeks to devise means to more completely control it.

A final note helps us shed light on how deeply laughter is intertwined with the issues of self-control and moderation in Platonic thought and why he proposes ways to moderate and regulate its effects in the idealized society he theorizes in the *Republic*. Plato is clearly very skeptical of pleasure, yet he concedes that the topic needs to be taken up seriously

because it is an essential part of the human experience. As he states in the *Laws*, “human nature involves, above all, pleasures, pains and desires, and no mortal animal can help being [...] in total dependence on these powerful influences” (732e3-5). Plato accepts a certain amount of pleasure because to deny humans their sensual side is to deny them their complete nature. But he wants to find the best way to properly subordinate the irrational side that seeks pleasure to the rational side that pursues knowledge. As a result, he makes a brief statement, only one-sentence, that appears to allow for a few mixed pleasures of a particular sort: “In addition to these [pure pleasures] you should include in the mixture the pleasures which a healthy, self-controlled man has, and in general all those pleasures which accompany every kind of virtue” (*Philebus* 63e3-6). The idea here seems to be that a certain allotment of mixed pleasures is required if the good life is to be possible, and while he does not define what these acceptable mixed pleasures are specifically, we can guess that things like eating and drinking and the pleasures derived from necessary daily activities are what Plato might have in mind here. And again, while he does not call it by name, it can also be surmised that this exception would cover a certain form of polite laughter, assuming that it was undertaken with self-control and every other kind of virtue that is consistent with the pursuit of the good life. These exceptional pleasures might be thought of as negligibly mixed in that they allow for pleasure, but the pleasure actually results from acts of self-control; I can enjoy one beer provided I don’t have six more and lose control, or I can enjoy a chuckle at a joke provided I don’t allow myself to succumb to frenzied, irrational laughter. Again, Plato’s approach to pleasures in general and laughter in particular is not entirely anti-pleasure and anti-laughter. Plato’s focus, however, is that living the good life is the most pleasurable pleasure a human can experience, and the lower, irrational pleasures only interrupt the soul’s assent toward this

higher, virtuous life. It must be underscored that Plato does not fear pleasures and laughter; he fears *uncontrollable* pleasures and *uncontrollable* laughter.

In Plato's discussion of the *kallipolis*, or the ideal city he seeks to create in the *Republic*, he offers approaches to control these uncontrollable forces that risk overwhelming the rational side of the soul and, therefore, pose a risk to society at large.⁴ In particular, Plato is especially concerned about laughter's negative effects on the educational system because its pleasurable effects could teach students to follow the less virtuous parts of their souls. Because of this, Plato believes that laughter must be regulated, and even censored in some circumstances, as part of his overall educational reform. Such a reformation seeks to ensure that the city's "best natures" (*Republic* 519c) are turned toward a life of self-control and not away from it, and citizens are best trained to appreciate "the virtue of reason" (518d). Plato's most controversial legacy in rhetoric's historical conversation of humor and laughter is his infamous call to censor certain humorous writings. Because education in music and poetry begins with the stories children are told when they are young and impressionable, Plato looks to these stories to find the earliest examples of writing that could corrupt innocent souls. What he finds are that many of the stories told to young people are rife with tales of gods and heroes acting in ways that are less than virtuous, such as being overcome by uncontrollable laughter. Plato's solution to this problem is to censor certain stories to ensure

⁴ Rational control is at the heart of Plato's argument in the *Republic*. He argues that the just life will lead to the greatest human happiness rather than the unjust life and determines that the just soul requires cultivation through a closely monitored educational system. Cultivating just souls requires providing the polis access to the form of the good, because the "form of the good is the most important thing to learn about [...] the majority believe that pleasure is the good, [but] the more sophisticated believe that it is knowledge" (505a6-b2). Therefore, being able to control pleasures in a rational way is essential to living the just life.

that they do not make such improper inferences to gods and heroes losing their rational selves. For example, he writes:

Then, if someone represents worthwhile people as overcome by laughter, we won't approve, and we'll approve even less if they represent gods that way [...] Then we won't approve of Homer saying things like this about the gods:
*And unquenchable laughter arose among the blessed gods
As the saw Hephaestus limping through the hall.* (388e9-389a4)

These references to gods or heroes laughing uncontrollably imply that gods and heroes are susceptible to behavior that lacks virtue, a representation that Plato finds unacceptable. Plato also warns that young people “mustn't be lovers of laughter either, for whenever anyone indulges in violent laughter, a violent change of mood is likely to follow,” (388e5-7). In other words, young people are impressionable, so they must be shielded from depictions of gods and heroes behaving unjustly because those depictions might turn the young toward the non-rational path. Plato offers censorship as a solution: “Whenever anyone says such things about a god, we'll be angry with him, refuse him a chorus, and not allow his poetry to be used in the education of the young” (383b9-c1). In other words, in Plato's idealized city, the rulers will “supervise the storytellers” and “select their stories when they are fine and beautiful and reject them when they aren't [...] many of the stories they tell now, however, must be thrown out” (377b8-c3). Because laughter can take a person out of her capacity to behave moderately and reasonably, laughter poses a serious threat to Plato's theoretical city, which relies on the rational control of behavior at all levels.

Because laughter can overwhelm reason to such a powerful degree, interrupting the rational part of the soul by leading it toward the less just parts ruled by appetites and desires, laughter places Plato's entire philosophical approach at risk. As such, he takes drastic efforts to cast laughter out of his Ideal Republic. Therefore, Plato does not offer suggestions for

how to control appeals to laughter in the same way later rhetoricians will, because rhetoric, like laughter, is more interested in appealing to unreason, to passions and emotions in a way that Plato finds unacceptable. However, Plato's extreme efforts to censor appeals to laughter reveal his appreciation for the interruptive effects of laughter's asignifying force and its never completely controllable effects, and later rhetoricians, even in their more practical, persuasive efforts, will not completely overlook his objections.

Aristotle: Between the Buffoon and the Boor

Aristotle's differences with Plato on persuasion in general and laughter as a specific persuasive tool are in many ways reminiscent of the larger differences between Aristotelian and Platonic thought. More so than Plato, Aristotle is interested in rhetoric as an art because he sees persuasion's ability to exert practical influence as something with positive potential for society. Aristotle places emphasis on the speaking subject's presentation of a favorable character, or *ethos*, before the audience as a crucial aspect of persuasion, and he sees the ability to conjure laughter as a useful tool in constructing the positive *ethos* he seeks, because laughter provides multiple avenues for a speaker to endear herself to an audience. Aristotle clearly defines positive uses for laughter that exceed Plato's much more restrictive philosophy toward the subject, and he provides speakers with advice to help them rationally control some of laughter's most beneficial effects. Yet, Aristotle also maintains a strong sympathy with Plato's view that some of laughter's effects can actually do more harm than good, particularly when appeals to laughter are misused by a rhetor, where they can harm her *ethos* rather than bolster it. In addition, Aristotle still holds to Plato's position that laughter is often born from feelings of derision. In the *Poetics*, for example, Aristotle defines comedy as "an imitation of men worse than average," meaning that the main way we are inspired to

laugh is by looking down at representations of less than admirable subjects (1.5.33).

However, while he sees in laughter some of the same dangers that trouble Plato, Aristotle's rational approaches to laughter serve as the starting point for all rhetorical approaches to humor and laughter that follow. Aristotle attempts to help orators control laughter's effects, but he realizes these appeals are a risk because laughter can produce effects that exceed the rational control of the orator. Therefore, Aristotle attempts to walk a fine with regards to laughter: he offers practical advice on how to conjure laughter in a way that maximizes the benefit, while minimizing the risk to a rhetor's ethos.

Even though Aristotle doesn't call into question the "essence" of laughter – what it is – as explicitly and directly as will be seen in Cicero, Quintilian, and Castiglione, humor and laughter are crucial to his larger discussion of how pleasantries affect a speaker's ethos. In connecting humor so diametrically with ethos, Aristotle is also forwarding the notion that appealing to humor is an essentially human art, and he seeks to advise rhetors on how to learn to use humor effectively, or at the very least, to learn how not to misuse it. The primary reason we can assume that Aristotle's discussion of the forms of wit and the many uses and effects of appeals to laughter lacks the specificity of later rhetoricians' work on the subject stems from the fact that Aristotle's primary text on comedy has been lost. While the *Poetics* is Aristotle's treatise that focuses on tragedy, he composed a companion book on comedy that did not survive antiquity.⁵ Only snippets of passing statements that directly refer to

⁵ Scholarly debate surrounds one particular text that, perhaps, has roots in Aristotle's more expansive thoughts on comedy. In 1839, a tenth century manuscript called *Tractatus Coislinianus* was discovered and published in Paris. This manuscript was claimed by its discoverer to be derived from Aristotle's lost book on comedy. Prominent Aristotelian scholar Jacob Bernays quickly and forcefully discredited this opinion, as he suggested that the new publication "was the product of an ignorant and yet pedantic and persistent compiler" (Janko 3). This view prevailed for a century and a half until Richard Janko submitted the

humor and laughter remain, tucked within the lines of the *Poetics*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, and his more general rhetorical treatise, *On Rhetoric*. Even though his treatise on comedy has been lost, humor and laughter still play an important, if subtle, role in Aristotle's larger rhetorical project on how a speaker successfully persuades an audience by presenting a favorable ethos.

By means of his connection of appeals to humor with ethos, Aristotle's approaches to humor and laughter suppose a rational human speaker in control of the rhetorical situation. Humorous appeals present great opportunity for an orator to present a favorable ethos, yet there is always a risk to the orator who attempts to conjure laughter, and Aristotle's brief encounters with humor and laughter demonstrate the paradoxical nature of attempting to rhetorically control the uncontrollable, because laughter produces effects that can exceed the orator's rational attempts to control them. For example, he comments in the *Rhetoric* on the natural connection between laughter and pleasures: "since laughter is among pleasurable things, necessarily laughable things (human beings and words and deeds) are also pleasurable" (1371b29). Because pleasures can be beneficial to an orator, Aristotle advises rhetors on the means to better create this "friendly" feeling between the speaker and the audience, because the more friendliness the audience feels toward the speaker, the more likely they are to yield to the speaker's attempts at persuasion. He explains, "[we are friendly to people like] those who are ready to make or receive a joke; for in both cases they are intent on the same thing as their neighbor, able to be kidded and kidded in good sport" (1381a13). However, Aristotle also forwards the idea that one effective way a speaker can create this

original manuscript to rigorous linguistic and historical analysis and ultimately came away with a contradictory opinion; in *Aristotle on Comedy: Towards a Reconstruction of Poetics II*, Janko argues that the *Tractatus Coislinianus* is derived largely from Aristotle's original ideas (Janko 1).

bond of friendliness with the audience is to use appeals to laughter in an attacking, aggressive manner that demonstrates superiority over one's adversaries. Plato had earlier identified as problematic the kinds of laughter that arise from "the spiteful man [who] is *pleased* at his neighbor's misfortunes," (*Philebus* 48b), a position that established Plato's derogatory view of the sorts of pleasures laughter produces. Interestingly, Aristotle agrees with this derogatory position in *Nicomachean Ethics* when he admits that laughter should still be censored in some instances: "For since a joke is a type of abuse, and legislators prohibit some types of abuse, they would presumably be right to prohibit some types of joke too" (1128a30). Again in the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle goes on to expand on the idea that the sort of laughter which results from demonstrating superiority over others is troublesome when he writes, "The cause of pleasure to those who give insult is that they think they themselves become more superior by ill-treating others" (1378b6). Therefore, this tactic can have a potentially damaging effect on a speaker's ethos, because she runs the risk of committing the form of abuse that Aristotle elsewhere suggests is an offense worthy of legislative prohibition. Yet in the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle argues that even though their roots may spring from less than admirable sources, there are still positive effects that can result from a speaker's use of these aggressive types of appeals to laughter. He claims that because being "given to rivalry" is a part of the human experience, "it necessarily follows that it is pleasurable to criticize one's neighbors" (1371b27) and, along with things like love and friendship, he also identifies revenge and winning as pleasurable, noting, "there is an imagining of superiority for which all have desire either mildly or strongly" (1370b13). There is something inherently pleasurable about putting down our rivals so long as an orator is able to rationally parse out friends from foes. By connecting the laughter that arises from

aggressive attacks on one's adversaries with his topics of pleasure, Aristotle's brief encounters with humor and laughter articulate the ethical complications that face orators when they attempt to appeal to laughter for persuasive ends. On the one hand, conjuring laughter – even if it is done in an aggressive spirit – can actually improve an orator's ethos. But because laughter produces effects that exceed the control of the orator, that same appeal can go wrong in a way that harms the speaker's ethos. But this possibility for failure is one effect that is always present in appeals to laughter; the possibility that laughter can produce effects that harm a speaker's ethos is definitionally stitched into every appeal to humor that a speaker employs, and this possible risk has to be such a foundational part of appeals to humor if successful appeals are ever to occur.

Aristotle identifies a similar kind of theoretical paradox orators face when appealing to humor in his discussion of the differences between the buffoon and the boor. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, he describes how these two subjective categories are negative effects of appeals to laughter and argues that a speaker should always seek to avoid being identified as either:

The buffoon cannot resist raising a laugh, and spares neither himself nor anyone else if he can cause laughter, even by making remarks that the sophisticated person would not even be willing to hear made. The boor is useless when he meets people in these circumstances. For he contributes nothing himself, and objects to everything, even though relaxation and amusement seem to be necessary in life. (*Ethics* 1128a32-1128b4)

The suggestion here is that a speaker can avoid being negatively labeled a buffoon or a boor if she can rationally control her appeals to laughter. Aristotle advises speakers that they should try to control the amount of their appeals to laughter so as to strike an appropriate balance, somewhere comfortably between the obnoxious buffoon and the lifeless boor.

There are people who, by nature, are born either boors or buffoons, but Aristotle also

suggests that a speaker should be able to control the *appearance* of buffoonery and boorishness in the eyes of her audience:

Those who go to extremes in raising laughs seem to be vulgar buffoons. They stop at nothing to raise a laugh, and care more about that than about saying what is seemly and avoiding pain to the victims of the joke. Those who would never say anything themselves to raise a laugh, and even object when other people do it, seem to be boorish and stiff. Those who joke in appropriate ways are called witty, or, in other words, agile-witted, since those sorts of jokes seem to be movements of someone's character, and characters are judged, as bodies are, by their movements. (1128a5-13)

Aristotle seems to be implying here that by appealing to laughter in appropriate amounts, a speaker can fall comfortably in the middle ground between buffoon and boor. But the manner in which Aristotle provides advice on how to navigate what he readily admits are subjective and not completely determinable categories reveals the challenge that laughter's asignifying force presents to a rhetor's rational abilities to control it: Aristotle is interested in determining the how, when, and how often appeals to laughter should most effectively be employed by an orator to improve her ethos, but he doesn't systematically quantifying these approaches, because he ultimately knows he can't. There is no context that can contain laughter's effects any more than any other context. Aristotle knows that laughter is a powerful tool for the orator, and he desires to aid orators' understanding of the appropriate uses of laughter. But his approaches also reveal a cognizance that the effects of laughter's asignifying force are ultimately beyond the rational control of the human. Aristotle's approaches, while subjective and not tightly systematized, still constitute rhetoric's earliest attempts to provide orators with practical advice in the use of humor as a rhetorical appeal, and their subjective nature points to an understanding that laughter's asignifying force produces effects that matter far more than the meaning of any particular joke. In the few references to humor and laughter that we have, Aristotle's approaches reveal a rhetorician

fully aware that advising orators on how to use appeals to humor is an important, but inherently risky, endeavor.

Cicero: The Performative Force of Appropriate Humor

Cicero's larger rhetoric project is interested in how an orator can become a certain kind of person. Published in 55 BCE, *On Oratory* seeks to answer the question, "What constitutes the perfect orator?" In answering this question, he presents what he finds to be most consequential in the writings of Aristotle, Isocrates, and other ancient rhetoricians to his contemporary readers in a more pleasing form, devoid of the lifeless technicalities often found in rhetorical handbooks. The form of this presentation – the dialogue – allows *On Oratory* to maintain a dynamic relationship with the contemporary reader about the nature of the perfect orator and, specifically, how such an orator should appeal to audiences using humor. But more importantly, the dialogue format allows Cicero's discussion of humor and laughter to actually perform laughter's asignifying effects. Rather than simply providing advice for how an orator can appeal to an audience using humor, the characters in Cicero's dialogues – by means of their discussions on how an orator can control laughter's effects – actually employ laughter's asignifying force to make their theoretical claims.

Cicero takes up laughter's unknowable, uncontrollable qualities more directly and thoroughly than Plato or Aristotle and foreshadows the treatment of laughter's asignifying force that Quintilian and Castiglione will engage with further. Whereas Plato clearly feared laughter's uncontrollable persuasive effects on the human soul, and Aristotle hinted at its usefulness through his more prescriptive approaches that advise speakers on how to manage humorous appeals in persuasion, Cicero confronts laughter as an actual force and attempts to answer some foundational questions about its nature: What is it? From where does it

originate? Does it become an orator to wish to excite laughter? To what degree should the orator develop this ability? These questions create a tension within Cicero's project: on the one hand, he is asking questions about the nature of humor and laughter as essentially human phenomena. But on the other hand, as Cicero explores these questions, he does so always with an eye toward laughter's rhetorical effects and how these effects exceed the limits of the rational human. His findings produce some of rhetoric's first clearly articulated comments on laughter's asignifying force, while also bringing into sharper relief the paradoxical effects laughter presents an essentially human orator who attempts to bring those effects under control. Cicero extends Aristotle's project of suggesting techniques for how an orator can appeal to this force most effectively while also minimizing its possible negative effects, but the manner in which Cicero articulates his theory – he tells jokes, puns, and humorous stories peppered with cheeky wit – simultaneously performs the uncontrollable effects of jokes, puns, and humorous stories. Ultimately, what is significant about Cicero's treatment of humor and laughter is that the effects of his humorous performances are borne out by the participants of Cicero's dialogues, creating an effect within the text that dramatizes how laughter's asignifying force ultimately exceeds the constative claims of any treatise on humor and laughter.

Cicero engages with the mystery of laughter's fundamental nature directly. His efforts to both suggest practical approaches for orators who wish to use humor as a rhetorical appeal as well as his more abstract musings on laughter's essence work in concert to perform a theoretical approximation of laughter's asignifying force. In Book II, which contains Cicero's sustained discussion of humor and laughter, the question "*What is laughter?*" is

responded to by Caesar in a manner that reveals an understanding that laughter produces effects that exceed the rational control of the orator:

‘What laughter itself is,’ by what means it is excited, where it lies, how it arises, and bursts forth so suddenly that we are unable, though we desire, to restrain it, and how it affects at once the sides, the face, the veins, the countenance, the eyes, let Democritus consider [...] I should not be ashamed to say that I am ignorant of that which not even they understand who profess to explain it. (II.LVIII)

In this description, Caesar clearly views laughter as an interruptive force with the power to overtake the human subject. It can overwhelm the body – “the sides, the face, the veins, the countenance, the eyes” – without the body’s authorization. Its explosive effects, how it, “bursts forth so suddenly that we are unable, though we desire, to restrain it,” suggest that laughter’s asignifying force produces effects that the human cannot control. And whatever this force *is* – “that which not even they understand who profess to explain it” – is ultimately unknowable, even by Cicero. However, Cicero does not stop at the idea that laughter’s nature is beyond human understanding or control. Quite the contrary: when Caesar makes this statement, he is about to begin his treatise on how an orator should best control appeals to laughter to produce effects of her own design. In other words, Cicero’s attempts to bring rational control to laughter’s uncontrollable effects depart from this perspective that laughter’s effects are ultimately uncontrollable.

Cicero might begin by acknowledging the limits of controlling or understanding laughter, but he still endeavors to provide orators with suggestions that may aid their use of humorous appeals. For example, consider this introduction to his section on jests, when Caesar speaks at length about the various forms of jests and their various uses: “Let us now consider briefly the sorts of jests that chiefly excite laughter. *Let this, then, be our first division*, that whatever is expressed wittily, consists sometimes in a thought, sometimes in

the mere language, but that men are most delighted with a joke when the laugh is raised by the thought and the language in conjunction” (II.LXI, my emphasis). In this example, Caesar not only defines what it is that “chiefly excites laughter,” but also places this definition into a larger taxonomy of definitions. His broader analysis shows exhaustive attempts to address the wide range of concerns an orator might encounter when appealing to jests, and other forms of humorous appeals. A partial list of particulars suggests that careful consideration must be taken by an orator when attempting to carry out humorous appeals. He warns of “the caution that must be principally observed in joking,” provides advice on using the ridiculous appropriately so as to “distinguish the orator from the buffoon,” suggests that facial contortions and mimicry should be used “cautiously, if ever we do attempt it, and but for a moment,” and warns that indecent language should be avoided because it is “a disgrace not only to the forum, but to any company of well-bred people” (II.LVIII). He also defines a detailed list of various sorts of jokes. There are those produced by incongruity “when we expect one thing and another is said,” those produced by a “slight change in a word [...] [or] by the alteration of a letter,” those produced by confusion, “when you seem to understand a thing literally, and not in its obvious meaning,” and those produced “from some allegorical phraseology, or from a metaphorical use of some one word, or from using words ironically” (II.LVIII-LXIX). Caesar also offers advice the types of humorous appeals that are more likely to produce positive effects. He approves of “Ironical dissimulation [...] when you say something different from what you think,” endorses using “any part of another person’s words in a different sense from that which he intended,” suggests sarcasm is appropriate when it “is jested upon in the same strain in which he has attacked another,” approves of self-deprecating jokes “which carry a concealed suspicion of ridicule,” and champions any from

of interrupted expectation in humor, including the “union of discordant particulars” and granting “to your adversary what he wishes to detract from you” (II.LXIX-LXX). Clearly, through Caesar’s granular attention to detail in his account of the many ways in which and orator could conjure laughter in her audience, Cicero is intent on parsing the use of humorous appeals into quite specific applications that both define how these appeals are most likely to succeed – the occasions when humor should be used and how to construct the best forms of humor during those occasions to produce the most appropriate laughter – as well as when appeals to humor and laughter are most likely to fail – which forms are the most risky because they either reflect poorly on the orator’s ethos or are prone to being misunderstood by the orator’s audience. What these lengthy attempts to theorize the persuasive uses of humor and laughter demonstrate is rhetoric making its first sustained effort to engage with the nearly limitless possible effects of laughter. By suggesting such a copious amount of approaches for how an orator can appeal to laughter – a force Cicero acknowledges is ultimately unknowable and, therefore, unexplainable – Cicero’s dynamic text reveals both a theoretical appreciation of laughter as an asignifying force beyond reason, while also acknowledging – through Caesar’s detailed advice – that laughter produces undeniable persuasive effects that are, ultimately, too useful to be ignored.

These numerous efforts to account for laughter’s persuasive potential are summarized in the chapter’s conclusion in a way that bookends the theoretical paradox that permeates Cicero’s overall engagement with humor and laughter, a paradox that he does not shy away from but seeks to amplify. In his article “Persuasive ΓΕΛΩΣ : Public Speaking and the Use of Laughter,” Dimos Spartharas suggests as much: “The irrational and elusive nature of laughter is also confirmed in Cicero’s *De Oratore*,” where Cicero can be seen to both “insist

chiefly on a typology of the techniques that cause laughter and [...] dismiss the possibility of a systematic examination of its nature, because laughter is an intrinsically elusive phenomenon” (386). Upon finishing his lengthy and detailed remarks on humor’s appropriate uses, Caesar leaves his audience with the following closing remarks:

But I think that I have divided these matters [approaches to using humor and laughter] into too many heads already; for such as lie in the force and meaning of a word are commonly easy to settle and define; but in general, as I observed before, they are heard rather with approbation than laughter. Jokes, however, which lie in the subject and thought, are, though infinite in their varieties, *reducible under a few general heads*; for it is by deceiving expectation, by satirizing the tempers of others, by playing humorously on our own, by comparing a thing with something worse, by dissembling by utter apparent absurdities, and by reproving folly, that laughter is excited. (II.LXXI, my emphasis)

This decisive list of the ways in which laughter is excited might seem to reflect a sense that the approaches Cicero just outlined are stable, knowable, and controllable – “reducible under a few general heads.” Yet recall that this section begins with Caesar stating of laughter, “I should not be ashamed to say that I am ignorant of that which not even they understand who profess to explain it” (II.LVIII). In other words, the bookends surrounding Cicero’s approaches to humor laughter dramatize the paradoxical efforts of attempting to control laughter’s asignifying force. Cicero’s attempts to theorize how humorous appeals can be used most effectively as persuasive tools starts from the premise that laughter is not only something that cannot be controlled by the human subject, but it cannot even be fully comprehended by human reason. Therefore, by first testifying on laughter’s innate incomprehensibility, Cicero sets up his later approaches to be undertaken with caution, for if no one can predict with any certainty the effects that such an unknowable force will impart on an audience, how can an orator ever completely control its use? Even though laughter’s asignifying force may be uncontrollable and unknowable from the get go, the spirit of

Cicero's approach – and those of Quintilian and Castiglione after him – is to seek to account for as much as possible. In other words, Cicero's section on humor and laughter in *On Oratory* performs the theoretical paradox of its subject matter: laughter's asignifying force is included within Cicero's rational approaches to humor and laughter, yet it also, simultaneously, exceeds their rational designs.

However, Cicero's approaches not only reflect the limitations inherent in attempt to theorize appeals to humor and laughter. His manner of further accounting for laughter's many effects – which, by his own admission cannot be accounted for fully – is to perform appeals to that force from within his approaches to controlling it. Some scholars and historians have even argued that Cicero's pertinacious telling of jokes in this section owes as much to Cicero's desire to show off his witticisms as it does to dramatize his own rhetorical advice. Regarding Cicero's notable propensity to display his own wit, H. Bennett writes, "he had tasted the power of humor, had tasted the ecstasy of swaying a crowd to sympathetic laughter; for this intoxication produces a pathological condition that is well-nigh incurable. Cicero, indeed, did not struggle against it" ("Wit's Progress" 193-4). In some instances, the jokes Cicero tells perform a meta-rhetorical purpose, then, in that they call attention to the fact that the effects of jokes produce uncontrollable effects in both the audience and in the orator. For Cicero, one such effect is that he becomes overtaken with his love for laughter and for creating laughter in others. For example, Caesar cites Crassus' defense of Curius (Caesar is in dialogue with Crassus and Antonius in this section) to argue that an orator must learn to recognize how often to appeal to humor, and what types of appeals to use, given the natures of the orator's audience:

His whole defense in the cause of Curius, in opposition to Scaevola, was redundant with a certain pleasantry and humor; but of those sharp short jests it

had none; for he was tender of the dignity of his opponent, and in that respect maintained his own; though it is extremely difficult for men of wit and facetiousness to preserve a regard to persons and times, and to suppress what occurs to them when it may be expressed with most pungent effect. (II.LIV)

Caesar's point is that the ability to show this kind of restraint is an essential skill for orators to possess; they must learn to recognize when they are going overboard and make efforts to limit their overuse of wit, especially the "sharp jests" that produce the "most pungent effect." However, orators who are prone to witticisms often have difficulties reigning in their humorous charms, especially when an opportunity to really unleash the full force of their wit presents itself. To further illustrate this point, Caesar tells a joke that uses this very rhetorical advice (advice he attributes to the Roman poet Ennius) as its setup and punchline:

Accordingly, some jesters put a humorous interpretation upon the well-known words of Ennius; for he said, as they observe, *That a wise man can more easily keep in flame while his mouth is on fire, than with-hold 'bona dicta,' good words;* and they say that *good words* mean *witty sayings*; for sayings are called *dicta* by an appropriate term. (II.LIV)

Given Cicero's historical reputation as an excessive joke teller, this section makes a unique gesture: Cicero, himself an orator who loves to be witty, sets out in this section of *On Oratory* to provide advice to other orators about knowing how to rein in the use of witticisms, yet to make this point, he tells a joke, thus demonstrating his own wit. In other words, by having Caesar perform this advice in this manner, Cicero is dramatizing the very difficulty that orators face when attempting to reign in their use of wit. Because it's one thing to advise someone how not to do something, and it's another to actually resist doing it yourself: do as I say, not as I do. But by using humor in this way in the midst of giving advice on controlling the use of humor, Cicero is performing one of the risks that humor and laughter present an orator and demonstrating that the effects of laughter's asignifying force can actually interrupt both the audience and the orator. Because if, as Bennett suggests, "the

ecstasy of swaying a crowd to sympathetic laughter [...] produces a pathological condition that is well-nigh incurable,” an orator’s ability to control such an emotion lies beyond her rational control. In this account, appeals to laughter are risky, not only because their effects on an audience are unknowable and uncontrollable, but also because the effects of the audience being swayed to sympathetic laughter can, in turn, produce effects that exceed the orator’s control of herself. What is rhetorically significant about this section, and Cicero’s overall engagement with humor and laughter, is that it performs laughter’s asignifying force in a way that dramatizes how this very force exceeds human reason. Cicero’s account of how to control laughter’s effects actually produces effects that demonstrate how the effects of laughter’s asignifying force are ultimately beyond an orator’s control.

Cicero uses the dialogue format to further demonstrate how laughter is something that *happens*, meaning to understand what laughter “is” is to feel its effects rather than simply hearing those effects explained. Since the asignifying force of laughter produces effects that lie beyond signification, advising orators on how to appeal to laughter requires Cicero to not only describe these appeals, but also to perform them in a way that dramatizes their effects. Caesar often turns to his audience and cites their past uses of humor to illustrate the kinds of approaches he is describing. For example, when describing “the most common kind of joke, when we expect one thing and another is said; in case our own disappointed expectation makes us laugh,” (II.LXIII) Caesar states that some such jokes are produced by varying “a single word,” (II.LXIV) and he quotes Antonius to dramatize this point:

In the case of Caelius, that joke of yours, Antonius, was assuredly of advantage to your cause; when, appearing as a witness, he had admitted that a great deal of money had gone from him, and as he had a son who was a man of pleasure, you, as he was going away, said, ‘See you the old man, touch’d for thirty minae?’ (II.LXIV)

While somewhat opaque to the contemporary reader, one can assume that this joke suggests the reason the old man has no money is because of his profligate son. In another section where Caesar is explaining how some jokes lie “in expression, when you seem to understand a thing literally, and not in its obvious meaning,” he quotes from Crassus to demonstrate what he means (II.LXIV):

Of this kind was you answer lately, Crassus, to one who asked you *whether he should be troublesome if he came to you some time before it was light*; and you said, *You will not be troublesome*: when he rejoined, *You will order yourself to be waked then?* To which you replied, *Surely I said that you would not be troublesome.* (II.LXIV)

A final example is from Caesar’s description of certain kinds of jokes that are “rather trifling” and typically only fit for “actors in farces; but sometimes it finds a proper place with us, as even one who is not a fool may express himself like a fool in a humorous way” (II.LXVIII). To demonstrate this form of humorous appeal, Caesar directly appeals to Antonius’ experience: “as Mancianus congratulated you, Antonius, when he heard that you were accused by Marcus Dronius of bribery in your censorship: *At length*, said he, *you will have an opportunity of attending your own business*” (II.LXVIII). In all of these examples, Caesar’s repeated attempts to appeal directly to his audience – to the other interlocutors in the dialogue who have requested that he “tell us what you think on jocoseness in general, lest, by accident, any part of eloquence, since that is your object” – by using his audience’s own experiences as examples demonstrates Cicero’s larger point: what is important about humorous appeals is not their constative meaning, but their performative effects (II.LVII). Jokes cannot be conveyed with logic alone, or, as Simon Critchley puts it, “A joke explained is a joke misunderstood” (*Humour 2*). Therefore, Caesar has a better chance of accomplishing his larger goal if he can actually dramatize “jocoseness” in the minds of his

interlocutors, if he can make them *feel* the approaches he is describing rather than by simply explaining it. A joke explained remains within the realm of reason and meaning, but jokes both reside within meaning and reason *and* in excess of them.

A final note on how Caesar's joke telling dramatizes laughter's asignifying force: many of these jokes Caesar tells are incomprehensible for modern audiences. The passing of two millennia clearly has a detrimental effect on a joke's punchline, and for the contemporary reader, many of Cicero's examples leave us with the unsatisfied feeling of just not "getting it." As Critchley explains, jokes don't travel well for numerous reasons, one of which is translation: "Anyone who has tried to render what they believe to be a hugely funny joke into a foreign language only to be met by polite incomprehension will have realized that humour is terribly difficult to translate, perhaps impossible" (67). However, rather than demonstrating that some sort of absolute context anchors jokes, what these "failures," these inabilities for jokes to be translated or explained shows us is how humorous appeals are interrupted by their own future possibilities at the moment of their inscription. Jokes can fail in many ways and they can succeed in many ways. But these successes and failures are all possibilities that are stitched into the joke at the moment the joke is written, spoken, or conceived in the mind. It is this limitless future possibility that pierces the joke at the moment of its conception or inscription or utterance that allows a joke to ever come off as successful. The fact that we don't understand some of Caesar's jokes today is no different an experience than someone sitting in the forum listening to Caesar and not getting one of his jokes. Time, translation, and culture are no more stable than any other context. So even though 2,100 years is a long time, and these jokes must be translated from the dead language of Latin into contemporary English, and all the cultural references and subtle local nuances

of ancient Rome are completely foreign to us, all these contextual factors – while they certainly play a role when it comes to whether or not we can understand Caesar’s jokes in 2013 – do not prove that those jokes are anchored in one context any more than they are in other. Jokes are just as capable of failing or succeeding in the comedy club tonight as they are when they get translated into different languages and transported across thousands of years of history, because laughter produces limitless possible effects, and these effects are definitionally stitched into any appeal to humor at the moment of its creation. At both the theoretical and practical levels, then, Cicero’s treatment of humor and laughter dramatizes the paradoxical challenge orators face when attempting to use humorous appeals. The expansiveness of his approaches reveal rhetoric’s first earnest attempt to theorize a force that is fundamentally untheorizable. And through the performances of humorous appeals in his dialogues, Cicero dramatizes laughter’s asignifying force as something that exceeds signification; its effects have to be felt and not only explained.

Quintilian: The Absolutely Indispensable Excitement of Laughter

In *The Praise of Folly*, written almost fifteen hundred years after Quintilian’s death, Desiderius Erasmus makes a joke about the ambitious scope of Quintilian’s approaches to humor and laughter: “And Quintilian, who is clearly the prince of rhetoricians, has a chapter on laughter that is longer than the whole Iliad” (82). Erasmus’ joke, while perhaps only mildly amusing to a niche group of people, is accurate in its suggestion that Quintilian took his approaches to humor and laughter seriously. So seriously, in fact, that a large percentage of Book Six in his expansive twelve volume exposition on oratory, *Institutio Oratoria*, is concerned with humor and laughter. In this text, Quintilian, a trial lawyer who also founded his own rhetorical school devoted to developing the orator into a “good man, speaking well,”

provides the rationale for a rhetorically based education centered on reading and speaking (*Institutio* 12.1.1). Quintilian was not simply interested in helping orators become more persuasive; he was interested in helping his students become better people as well. George Kennedy suggests that the text is “a system of training for what [Quintilian] calls the *orator* from the cradle to retirement, if not the grave. It thus combines the subjects taught by the elementary teacher and the rhetorician in a way which is unique among Classical works” (“Estimation” 132). Quintilian’s concern with the moral duties of the orator have implications that extend to the general citizenry, and his claim “nothing is unnecessary to the art of eloquence” reflects the broad scope his work embodies (*Institutio* 1.P.5). The ability to inspire the “excitement of laughter,” (6.3.22) for example, is seen as an “absolutely indispensable” (6.3.102) skill for the orator, a claim Quintilian defends through his expansive approach to articulating its various types and explaining its many uses. Therefore, Quintilian’s treatise arguably devotes more energy to humor’s productive possibilities than any other rhetorical text of his time. While not written in the dialogue form used by Cicero and Castiglione, Quintilian’s approaches to humor and laughter represent traditional rhetoric’s most earnest attempt to actually account for as many of humor and laughter’s potential rhetorical effects as possible. However, Quintilian’s detailed efforts both to define what laughter is and to demonstrate how an orator can learn to control laughter’s effects for persuasive means simultaneously reveals an acute attentiveness to what is uncontrollable and unknowable about laughter. Quintilian’s ambitious efforts to provide advice on how to use humor – efforts that, again, are unparalleled in the tradition of rhetoric – also include the most engaged and literal reflections on the impossibility of his own efforts. Therefore, Quintilian’s project shows us – on a theoretical level – how conflict occurs within any

attempt to theorize laughter. Because of the care Quintilian takes to create a practical, utilitarian handbook for use by aspiring rhetors, and because of the diligence he takes in his attempts to grasp so many of laughter's possible effects, his approaches become all the more interesting when they also bring to light the impossibility of ever completely controlling the effects of laughter's asignifying force. Quintilian's openness to the subject at hand and the seriousness with which he explores laughter's uses and effects allows his text to encounter the effects of laughter's asignifying force in ways that dramatize the very theoretical impossibility Quintilian sets out to articulate.

Quintilian's chapter on laughter begins by articulating his main aim, which is to provide other aspiring lawyers with tools to employ laughter's effects in the courtroom:

I now turn to a very different talent, namely that which dispels the graver emotions of the judge by exciting his laughter, frequently diverts his attention from the facts of the case, and sometimes even refreshes him and revives him when he has begun to be bored or wearied by the case. (6.3.1)

While it appears that Quintilian might be setting out to create a discipline specific taxonomy on humor and laughter mainly applicable to lawyers working in the context of the courtroom, this assumption is quickly dissolved when it becomes clear that for Quintilian, to talk about humor and laughter in *any* context is to talk about humor and laughter in *every* context. For example, when he begins to articulate the challenges inherent in appealing to humor and laughter in the narrow context on the courts, his analysis of these specific challenges quickly takes on a much more generalized scope, as he encounters the unknowable aspect of the audience's emotions:

The chief difficulty which confronts the orator in this connection [the courtroom] lies in the fact that sayings designed to raise a laugh are generally untrue (and falsehood always involves a certain meanness), and are often deliberately distorted, and, further, never complimentary: while the judgments formed by the audience on such jests will necessarily vary, since the effect of

a jest depends not on the reason, but on the emotion which is difficult, *if not impossible*, to describe. (6.3.6-7, my emphasis)

Quintilian's strategy here is to begin his discussion on how to use appeals to laughter from the perspective that laughter is an emotion that is "difficult, if not impossible" to describe. In other words, before he even begins providing advice on how an orator uses this "very different talent" of exciting laughter to create persuasive appeals, Quintilian confronts the very impossibility of the efforts that will follow. Putting a finer point on why the effects of laughter make appeals to humor risky persuasive approaches, he writes:

I do not think that anybody can give an adequate explanation, though many have attempted to do so, of the cause of laughter, which is excited not merely by words or deeds, but sometimes even by touch. Moreover, there is great variety in the things which raise a laugh, since we laugh not merely at those words or actions which are smart or witty, but also at those which reveal folly, anger or fear. Consequently, *the cause of laughter is uncertain*, since laughter is never far removed from derision. (6.3.7-8, my emphasis)

Continuing on, Quintilian further refines his understanding of laughter as ultimately unknowable by dramatizing how the explosive effects of its asignifying force can interrupt the human subject's rational control:

Now, though laughter may be regarded as a trivial matter, and an emotion frequently awakened by buffoons, actors, or fools, it has a certain *imperious force of its own which is very hard to resist*. It often *breaks out against our will* and extorts confession of its power, not merely from our face and voice, but convulses the whole body as well. (6.3.8-9, my emphases)

Reading the above statements, and taking them at face value, one almost expects Quintilian to end this chapter abruptly by throwing up his hands, turning the page, and moving on to more stable, controllable topics suitable for a rhetorical treatise. For if we don't know what laughter is, and we don't know what causes it, and we have no way of predicting its effects on an audience because the audience is not in complete control of laughter's effects either, what could we possibly gain by further attempting to understand how to use this force for

persuasive purposes? Such an effort would seem to be paradoxical in its intent and futile in its capacity to produce useful results. When presented with this challenge, Quintilian accepts its apparent impossibility, yet he still continues in his attempts to account for what appears to be unaccountable. He does this for the same reason others in the rhetorical tradition have continued down the same path: because, when successful, laughter's effects are simply too persuasive for a rhetorician to give up on. To provide a modern example from a different discourse, it's as if we know there's something fundamentally dangerous about nuclear power, something we don't even really understand (can we really comprehend, for example, that some forms of nuclear waste take one million years to break down, given that that figure is eight-hundred-thousand years longer than human beings have even existed on earth?), yet the power produced by nuclear fusion is so profound and so remarkable that we simply can't help but try our best to harness it and try to contain its many effects, even though some of those effects can be catastrophic if attempts at containment fail. The dangers of a joke that bombs pale in comparison to the effects of a reactor meltdown or radioactive waste leaking into the groundwater; however, the logic being followed in both cases is the same. If laughter didn't have such profound power over an audience, if it wasn't the factor that "frequently turns the scale in matters of great importance," (6.3.9) Quintilian and the rest of the rhetorical tradition might simply give up on laughter as too much trouble to deal with, saying to those thinking of appealing using its unpredictable effects, "Good luck. You're on your own." But this is not the case. Just as Quintilian finishes his remarks on "whatever the essence of humor may be," another statement steeped in unknowingness, he immediately presses forward with his first notable distinction in his classification: "I will insist on this much, that it [laughter's potential for success] depends mainly on nature and opportunity"

(6.3.11-12). In this way, laughter is directly connected to Quintilian's larger rhetorical project, which seeks to develop orators with a moral, smart, adaptable disposition. In other words, for Quintilian, laughter is not just a part of becoming a better persuader; laughter is an essential part of his larger rhetorical project of developing a certain kind of human being. And this is why it is so risky: laughter not only produces effects that the orator can't persuasively control, but the effects of its asignifying force can also interrupt the development of the orator on a more fundamental, human level. It is from this position that Quintilian begins his lengthy and challenging attempts to theorize appeals to humor and laughter, apparently knowing full well that whatever the essence of those appeals may be is never completely theorizable.

Despite his acknowledgement of the impossibility of ever knowing for certain what laughter is and where it comes from, Quintilian spares no effort when it comes down to offering advice to his readers on the uses of humor. His approaches are generous, detailed, and he spares no effort in trying to account for as many possibilities as he can. These detailed and thoughtful approaches for how to control what is admittedly uncontrollable, however, reveal the fruitfulness of Quintilian's overall treatment of humor and laughter; rather than ignore the impossibility of controlling appeals to humor, Quintilian's approaches instead amplify the paradoxical nature of any attempt to apply reasonable strategies to emotional responses. In "Quintilian on the Art of Emotional Appeal," Richard Katula speaks to the richness of Quintilian's text and its continuing relevance to the human experience: "As the rush to understand the workings of emotion in the human mind and in human interaction continues, classical treatises on rhetoric remain valuable because they offer practical advice on the art of making emotional appeals. Quintilian's *Institutes of Oratory*, in particular Book

VI, provides one of the most thorough of such accounts” (14). An example of this thoroughness can be seen when Quintilian makes overtures to “The essence [...] of the subject we are now discussing [...] the excitement of laughter,” as if this excitement is something natural, something human, that can be studied and understood in its entirety (6.3.22). He argues of laughter:

[It] has the *same primary division* as other departments of oratory, that is to say, it is concerned with things and words. The application of humor to oratory may be divided into three heads: for there are three things out of which we may seek to raise a laugh, to wit, others, ourselves, or things intermediate. (6.3.22-23, my emphasis)

Here we see Quintilian developing an approach that gives the appearance of stability, as he seems to be accounting for laughter’s “essence” by dividing its use into three distinct categories: we can laugh at others, ourselves, or things. Quintilian continues to refine his categorization, further breaking it down into finer and finer specifics, while also acknowledging his system’s historical debt to Cicero’s own work on humor and laughter.⁶

Of the three original heads, he provides more details on how they are to be used:

In the first case we either reprove or refute or make light of or retort or deride the arguments of others. In the second we speak of things which concern ourselves in a humorous manner and, to quote the words of Cicero, say things which have a suggestion of absurdity. [...] The third kind consists, as Cicero also tells us, in cheating expectations, in taking words in a different sense from what was intended, and in other things which affect neither party to the suit, and which I have therefore styled intermediate. (6.3.23-25)

⁶ Quintilian certainly shows a reverence toward Cicero’s work on the subjects of laughter and oratory, and his writing reveals that Quintilian sees his own work as an extension of Cicero’s. He acknowledges that Cicero, unlike Demosthenes who avoided all appeals to humor, might have been guilty of “being unduly addicted to jests, not merely outside the courts, but in his actual speeches as well,” although he admits that his own view, “Personally, I regard him as being the possessor of a remarkable turn of wit,” may be unduly influenced by his own “exaggerated admiration for the prince of orators” (6.3.2-3). He places the blame for history’s regarding of Cicero as “being unduly addicted to jests,” not on Cicero himself, but on the publisher of Cicero’s, who should have “shown more judgment in selecting than zeal in collecting” Cicero’s many jokes.

These categories appear to break down neatly into divisions that account for jokes about others, jokes about us, and jokes about everything else. As his approach marches on, however, the details of Quintilian's taxonomy become more and more complex and difficult to follow, and at times it seems that the inclusion of a graph or chart of some kind would be helpful to keep straight the divisions and subdivisions Quintilian is rapidly creating. The effects of this complication become increasingly intense when he begins specifying – in great detail – the “universal” aspects that impact all appeals to humor including audience, context, intent, the reputation and status of the speaker, and the manner and number of appeals to humor a speaker should use. Few stones are left unturned in this process; however, what is significant about this section is that Quintilian concentrates much more intently on what *not* to do when appealing to laughter – how to avoid failure – than on what an orator *should* do to make his or her appeals successful. By looking closely at what appears to be Quintilian's detailed effort to reliably articulate various approaches for using humor to persuade, we see an acknowledgement of laughter's effects as being uncontrollable. In effect, Quintilian is saying, “Yes, humor is very useful, but also very risky. To avoid the words of its effects, avoid these approaches in particular.” A partial list of what to avoid includes the following:

Much depends on the occasion on which a jest is uttered [...] Our jests should *never* be designed to wound, and we should *never* make it our ideal to lose a friend sooner than lose a jest [...] But in the courts as elsewhere it is *regarded as inhuman* to hit a man when he is down [...] It is *most unbecoming* for an orator to distort his features or use uncouth gestures [...] *No less unbecoming* are ribald jests [...] As for obscenity, it *should not merely be banished* from his language, but should never even be suggested [...] *he must not display* his wit on every possible occasion, but *must sacrifice* a jest sooner than sacrifice his dignity [...] Insolence and arrogance are likewise *to be avoided, nor* must our jests seem unsuitable to the time or place, or give the appearance of studied premeditation, or smell of the lamp, while those directed against the unfortunate are, as I have already said, *inhuman* [...] Sarcasm that applies to a number of persons is *injudicious* [...] A good man will see that everything he

says is consistent with his dignity and the respectability of his character; for we pay too dear for the laugh we raise if it is at the cost of our own integrity [...] above all *doubles entendres* and obscenity, such as is dear to the Atellan farce, *are to be avoided*, as also are those coarse jibes so common on the lips of the rabble. (6.3.28-47, my emphases)

Taken at face value, the exhaustive material covered in this section might continue to give the appearance that an orator can reliably and rationally control appeals to humor, provided the orator does not use appeals to laughter in “inhuman” ways. Therefore, Quintilian clearly pays more attention to what a speaker should avoid in this section than on the ways in which appeals to laughter can be successfully used. This gesture bears significance to Quintilian’s overall efforts in this chapter, because it reveals an awareness on Quintilian’s part that laughter’s rhetorical effects can always escape the intentions of the speaker. This gesture to create a taxonomy of what not to do bears a resemblance to Plato’s approach to censoring poets when they represent the gods being overcome with laughter. Quintilian, like Plato, seems to be suggesting that the surest way to avoid the unwanted effects of certain types of appeals to laughter is just to avoid those appeals entirely; the idea that laughter’s effects can ever be fully controlled is revealed as impossible.

Quintilian’s explicit acknowledgement of laughter’s capacity to produce uncontrollable effects, however, is not limited to his remarks at the beginning of his section on humor and laughter. On several occasions within his detailed treatise, Quintilian reflects on the curiously elusive “essence” of laughter. These moments where Quintilian pulls back from his rational approaches to reflect on laughter’s ability to exert an interruptive, asignifying force on the human subject are the moments where Quintilian confronts how laughter brings us to the limit of reason. The effect of these scattered references further dramatizes the theoretical paradox Quintilian is writing within. For while we are in the midst

of his expansive approaches on how to construct humorous appeals to control laughter's effects, it at times seems that Quintilian has forgotten all the talk about laughter's unknowability that he began the chapter with, because his writing on advising orators in using humor is so confident and thorough. Yet allusions to laughter's uncontrollable effects are sprinkled in here and there amidst this seemingly stable collection of approaches, continuing to remind the reader (and, perhaps, Quintilian himself) of the impossibility of ever totally accounting for all of laughter's effects. For example, immediately following the long passages cited above on the different kinds of appeals to laughter that should be avoided, Quintilian notes how laughter exceeds rational understanding: "It is, however, a difficult task to indicate the sources from which laughter may be legitimately derived or the topics where it may be naturally employed. *To attempt to deal exhaustively with the subject would be an interminable task and a waste of labour*" (6.3.35, my emphasis). And then, almost immediately following this theoretical stepping back, this acknowledgment of the "interminable task" and the "waste of labour" it would be to deal exhaustively with humor on a strictly rational level, Quintilian again shifts directions and continues to provide a detailed list of advice on appealing to laughter:

[W]it always appears to greater advantage in reply than in attack [...] the narration of a humorous story may often be used with clever effect [...] But in all such cases the whole narrative must possess elegance and charm, while the orator's own contributions to the story should be the most humorous element [...] wit [...] may be employed in two ways, according as we are the aggressors, or are replying to our opponents [...] jests may be produced by the addition or removal of the aspirate, or by splitting up a word or joining it to another [...] jests which turn on the meaning of things are at once more pointed and more elegant [...] But such jests may be drawn not merely from the names of men, but from animals as well [...] The comparison may also be drawn from inanimate objects [...] the practice of combining different types of jest is very common, and those are best which are of this composite character [...] Contraries give rise to more than one kind of jest [...] Are not a large number of jests made by means of *hyperbole*? [...] Is not even the most

severe form of irony a kind of jest? [...] Cicero also employed *metaphor* to serve his jest [...] He also employed *allegory* [...] And everything is laughable that is obviously a pretense. It is easy to make fun of folly, for folly is laughable in itself; but we may improve such jests by adding something of our own [...] Another method of making light of a statement is to suggest a reason [...] Of retorts, there are a number of forms, the wittiest being that which is helped out by a certain verbal similarity [...] There remains the prettiest of all forms of humour, namely the jest which depends for success on deceiving anticipations or taking another's words in a sense other than he intended [...] Indeed the essence of all wit lies in the distortion of the true and natural meaning of words [...] Best of all is when pretense is met by pretense [...] But the most agreeable of all jests are those which are good humoured and easily digested [...] Sometimes it may be a good joke to speak of oneself [...] Sometimes you may get out of a tight corner by giving a humorous explanation of your embarrassment. (6.3.14-100)

Given the scope of his efforts to provide advice to orators on how to use humor for persuasive effects, presented only in part here, Quintilian's earlier comment that exhaustive efforts undertake to systematize laughter's effects would be "a waste of labour," is all the more paradoxical. But these moments in Quintilian's treatise where withdraws from the more utilitarian nature of his handbook and alludes to how laughter's asignifying force is capable of producing effects that are beyond reason occur when he confronts the impossibilities of his own system, comes up against its limitations, and grasps the full challenge inherent in ever trying to control appeals to laughter. While Quintilian's treatise does not dramatize laughter's uncontrollable effects like Cicero and Castiglione's dialogues do, Quintilian still honors laughter's uncontrollability by repeatedly undermining the absolute authority of his own approaches to controlling it. Quintilian's treatise on humor and laughter is both an earnest attempt to provide orators with useful advice for how to better conjure laughter in an audience and a demonstration of the impossibility of ever being able to completely control those efforts. Quintilian's treatise, then, performs a sort of theoretical paradox that reflects how humor and laughter function within signification, within reason,

and within the human (appeals to humor can be structured to produce laughter in the service of persuasion), and simultaneously produce effects that exceed these same distinctions.

Quintilian's expansive treatise on humor and laughter is an ambitious attempt to account for a staggering amount of possibilities for laughter's effects that is unparalleled in the history of rhetoric. He defines a plethora of options that an orator could consider when he or she wants to successfully appeal to laughter, but he also identifies the appeals to laughter that an orator should use with extreme caution or avoid entirely because they can produce effects that interrupt his larger rhetorical project of developing a moral human being. Following the earlier lead of Aristotle and Cicero, Quintilian is after appropriateness in every circumstance, especially when it comes to humor and laughter. However, appropriateness is difficult to define and, therefore, to theorize, because the concept of balance indicates an uncertain mixture between two distinct poles, equal parts "this" and "not this," combined to perfection. Quintilian turns to a cooking metaphor in an effort to articulate this concept:

When, therefore, we speak of the salt of wit, we refer to wit about which there is nothing insipid, wit, that is to say, which serves as a simple seasoning of language, a condiment which is silently appreciated by our judgment, as food is appreciated by the palate, with the result that it stimulates our taste and saves a speech from being tedious. But just as salt, if sprinkled freely over food, gives a special relish of its own, so long as it is not used to excess, so in the case of those who have the salt of wit there is something about their language which arouses in us a thirst to hear (6.3.19)

The conundrum with a concept like "not used to excess" is that it implies that there exists somewhere a static boundary around a universal "excess" that everyone honors equally. But if this were the case, to stay with Quintilian's cooking metaphor, no salt shaker would ever be seen on a dining room table, for the cook – if he was worth his salt – would have objectively prepared the food to be salted appropriately and not to excess. This is, of course, not the way cooking works. You can't just say, "salt appropriately," and have that stand

definitively. The same goes for humor and laughter. And as Quintilian lays out his detailed advice for how to appeal to laughter appropriately, he continually acknowledges the challenge he faces, how difficult it is to just “salt appropriately.” At this chapter’s beginning, sprinkled through its body section, and at the chapter’s conclusion, Quintilian never strays too far from the limitations of the very approaches he is offering. In this way, Quintilian’s chapter on humor and laughter internally performs the very theoretical contradiction that it engages with. Consider how this passage that closes Quintilian’s chapter bookends the sentiments expressed in the chapter’s beginning:

Such I have either learned from others or discovered from my own experience to be the commonest sources of humour. But I must repeat that the number of ways in which one may speak wittily are of *no less infinite variety* than those in which one may speak seriously, for they depend on persons, place, time and chances, which are numberless. I have, therefore, touched on the topics of humour that I *may not be taxed with having omitted them*; but with regard to my remarks on the actual practice and manner of jesting, I venture to assert that they are absolutely indispensable. (6.3.101-102, my emphases)

In this final passage, we see both an acknowledgement of the impossibility of ever fully comprehending the “infinite variety” of laughter’s effects as well as an assertion that efforts to rationally control these effects “are absolutely indispensable” for the orator as well as the good man, speaking well that Quintilian’s overall project seeks to develop. Of course, there are rules that can be followed that can help an orator along in her efforts to be just the right amount of funny at just the right time for just the right audience, and there’s nothing to say that by following these rules an orator won’t have some success appealing to laughter. Sometimes these approaches will work just as they are intended. But what is notable about Quintilian’s approach to humor and laughter is that it internally questions its own abilities to do what it sets out to do. It continually returns to the fact that laughter can produce rhetorical effects outside of the orator’s control as well as threaten the humanness of the orator herself.

In this way, Quintilian's chapter on humor and laughter, by continually recognizing and calling attention to the various effects of laughter's uncontrollable, unknowable, asignifying force, performs its very own impossibility in a way that is unique within the rhetorical tradition, an achievement Kennedy proclaims is central to Quintilian's legacy within the discipline of rhetoric: "The nature of Quintilian's originality in rhetorical theory may well be illustrated in his treatment of humor in the third chapter of the sixth book" ("Estimate" 141).

Castiglione: Laughter, Ladies, and Living the Good Life

Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier*, first published in 1528, extols the gentlemanly virtues glorified during the Renaissance and aims to produce the perfect courtier: a self-contained man of virtue. In addition to being a courtesy book, *The Courtier* attempts to justify the lifestyles of Italy's small courts by articulating a social position for the courtier as the rightful successor to the noble medieval knight. Castiglione's courtier is an amalgamation of the brave warrior and the thoughtful scholar who embodies the values of the classical hero. The highest virtues Castiglione suggests a noble gentleman should possess are discretion, decorum, nonchalance, and gracefulness, although the manner in which these qualities should be cultivated can strike a rather insincere chord with modern sensibilities. An air of snobbery and self-obsession exudes from Castiglione's fantastical accounts of the ruling class' whimsical exploits. This solipsism is made all the more unpalatable to the modern reader because it presents the court as a social island, completely removed and detached from what we can assume were much more wretched existences being lived just down the hill by destitute villagers (*Courtier* 1-4). Erasmus, in one of *The Praise of Folly's* most caustically humorous excerpts, derides the shallow lives lived by courtiers and their fellow court members:

Now what shall I say about the great lords at court? Although most of them are utterly obsequious, servile, vapid, and degraded, nevertheless they would have us think they are the crème de la crème [...] But if you examine their whole style of living more closely, they are nothing but playboys [...] They sleep till noon. Then some hired flunky of a chaplain, ready and waiting at their bedside, runs through a hasty mass while they are still half asleep. Then off to brunch, which is hardly over before it's time for lunch. After that, dice, chess, drawing lots, buffoons, fools, strumpets, games, crude jokes. Meanwhile, one or two snacks. Then dinner. Afterwards, a round of drinks, and not just one either, by heaven! And in this fashion, without ever feeling the weary burden of living, they let slip by them whole hours, days, months, years, ages. (108-9)

What is significant about these indictments is that they call attention to the peculiarities found in the rhetorical situation of the court and raise questions about what Castiglione's purpose is when he seeks to instruct a courtier on how to appeal to humor and laughter appropriately. For while Castiglione's project provides advice on how discretion, decorum, nonchalance, and gracefulness can be cultivated to create a noble, perfect courtier (much in the same way Aristotle wants to cultivate a favorable ethos in orators), there is an overwhelming feeling at times that his counsel's endgame is nothing more noble than putting the courtier in a favorable position to continue to acquire favors from the noblemen who assure the courtier's libertine pastimes at the estate. However, there remains a strong connection between laughter and the human in Castiglione in that the courtier's ability to use appeals to humor appropriately not only helps him gain favors in the persuasive context of the court, but more significantly, helps him nurture the essential air of nonchalance that is required of a perfect courtier.

Structurally, *The Courtier* resembles Cicero's *On Oratory* and the Platonic dialogues in that it recounts conversations that took place at the specific time and place, in this instance, a long weekend at the Court of Urbino in the early years of the 16th century. Therefore, *The Courtier*, like Cicero's *On Oratory*, captures a *performance*; Castiglione's demonstrations of

how a courtier should learn to control appeals to humor and laughter before the court are presented in dramatic fashion, spoken through witty, charming conversations between courtiers and the other members of the courts.⁷ In fact, the performances in Castiglione's text are so lively, so playful, that the book itself sheds much of the "handbookish" qualities found in the earlier rhetoricians' approaches to humor and laughter. Castiglione, like earlier rhetoricians, wants to offer advice to courtiers on how humor can be used to affect the audience in a favorable manner. Castiglione's goal is to produce a courtier with an air of nonchalance, or an effortless presentation of his eternally appropriate ethos. In turn, a courtier who successfully internalizes Castiglione's approaches to using humor and laughter will increase his chances of achieving this desired air of effortlessness. However, the power of Castiglione's argument in this courtesy book lies much more in its performance than in its theorization. The effects of Castiglione's approaches to humor and laughter, both when they are being discussed in theory or performed in practice by Castiglione's cast of characters, are actually borne out in the responses of the interlocutors. In other words, what we see in Castiglione is theory in action; we see the effects of laughter play out in the responses of human interlocutors. In this way, Castiglione's text not only concludes this chapter by bringing the interruptive effects of laughter's asignifying force to the surface in a dramatized manner, it also foreshadows the moves that Part Two of this project will make, when laughter's asignifying force will be observed in action.

⁷ If Plato had ever articulated the personalities and professionals that would comprise an Ideal Party List, it would read like the cast of characters Castiglione assembles in *The Book of the Courtier*. Poets, extemporizers, courtiers, musicians, dancers, literary pundits, cardinals, sophisticates, authors, generals, Dukes, Duchesses, diplomats, politicians, sculptors, medalists, beauties, buffoons, versifiers, warriors, mimics, and singers gather to pontificate on the good life (23-9).

Castiglione's concept of nonchalance (*sprezzatura* in Italian) is foundational to both his conception of what a perfect courtier *is* and how this courtier should appeal to humor. To be nonchalant for Castiglione is to exude an ethos of effortless appropriateness at all times and at all occasions that "conceals all artistry and makes whatever one says or does seem uncontrived and effortless" (*Courtier* 67). Yet, Castiglione's conception on nonchalance is intrinsically paradoxical, because nonchalance's effortlessness must be diligently *practiced*. As Harry Berger Jr. explains in *The Absence of Grace: Sprezzatura and Suspicion in Two Renaissance Courtesy Books*, in order to come across as nonchalant, a courtier must demonstrate "the ability to show that one is not showing all the effort one obviously put into learning how to show that one is not showing effort" (296). In order to deal with this paradox, Castiglione contradicts nonchalance with the concept of "affectation," which he maintains a courtier must "steer away from [...] at all costs, as if it were a rough and dangerous reef" (*Courtier* 67) because of how "incompatible it is with gracefulness and how it robs of charm every movement of the body or of the soul" (87). However, the effects of nonchalance extend beyond the courtier's interpersonal relationships to his more abstractly defined reputation, his way of being; nonchalance is a disposition, but one that requires work to achieve. Castiglione's concept of ethos is presented as more expansive than the way earlier rhetoricians conceive of ethos, in that the best courtier makes a favorable appearance on whatever court he is planning to visit *before* he ever sets foot on the property. It is an ethos that transcends physical subjectivity and exists, more or less, as whispers on the wind that are less reducible to stable notions of time and space. Therefore, the expansive effects of the courtier's reputation should produce an almost legendary mystique around him, and because of this, the courtier Castiglione seeks is an amalgamation of impossible perfection.

Note in the following list of desired traits Castiglione's numerous uses of absolutes that the perfect courtier should embody:

[He] should be neither too small nor too big [...] However, if one is forced to choose between the two evils, then it is better to be on the small side than unduly large [...] well built, with finely proportioned members [...] his first duty is to know how to handle expertly *every* kind of weapon. For [...] often differences arise between one gentlemen and another and lead to duels [...] it is of the highest importance to know how to wrestle [...] He should *always* show readiness and courage [...] be an accomplished and versatile horseman [...] he should put *every* effort and diligence into surpassing the rest just a little in *everything*, so that he may *always* be recognized as superior [...] above all, he should accompany his *every* act with a certain grace and fine judgment if he wishes to earn that *universal* regard which *everyone* covets [...] hunting [...] is a suitable pursuit for a courtier [...] should know how to swim, jump, run and cast the stone for [...] such sports can help to build up a good reputation, especially with the crown which the courtier *always* has to humour [...] another noble sport which is very suitable for the courtier to play is tennis [...] the courtier sometimes [should] descend to calmer and more restful games, and to escape envy and enter pleasantly into the company of all the other by doing *everything* they do; although he should *never* fail to behave in commendable manner and should rule *all* his actions with that good judgment which will not allow him to take part in *any* foolishness. Let him laugh, jest, banter, romp and dance, though in a fashion that *always* reflects good sense and discretion, and let him say and do *everything* with grace. (61-4, my emphases)⁸

Obviously, the courtier who could demonstrate this laundry list of disparate skills and talents would clearly have shown a discipline and dedication in practicing their craft. But the perfect courtier must not only possess such mastery across this broadest expanse of human activities, but he must also perform these abilities in a way that obfuscates his own mastery of them. It is not enough for the courtier to be a person of unparalleled human excellence; a perfect courtier must also excel at not making a show of this excellence. For example,

⁸ A note on the looming air of privilege that taints Castiglione's text for the modern reader: in the activities listed above that a courtier is expected to master, he should always remember to "refrain from mixing with the common people, or at least to appear among them only on the rarest occasion" when demonstrating his excellence (119-120). This is one of the few references to humans who are other than nobility in the entire text.

Castiglione sees true art as “what does not seem to be art; and the most important thing is to conceal it, because if it is revealed this discredits a man completely and ruins his reputation” (67). Because the courtier is the living embodiment of this conception of “true art,” Castiglione insists on his ability to always conceal his own art. Therefore the courtier, by behaving with a non-affected, nonchalant style, will always give the appearance of effortless casualness and moderation in all his actions, saying and doing “everything with grace” (64). Because nonchalance involves such a performative dimension – to be nonchalant is to be so practiced that you obscure your own practice – it is a concept that is impossible to grasp with theory alone. Therefore, the way into Castiglione’s approach to the nonchalant use of appeals to humor is to trace the force of the performances captured in *The Courtier*. In this way, Castiglione’s *impossible* theoretical approach – impossible because it centers on a “perfect” courtier’s ability to master the paradoxical concept of nonchalance when using humorous appeals – actually reveals *infinite possibilities* in its performance of actual appeals to humor and laughter. Castiglione’s text internally dramatizes how laughter’s asignifying force is irreducible to reason; it succeeds more by producing the kinds of effects he aspires toward than it does at defining what those effects are and how they can be rationally controlled.

Given that the primary rhetorical situation for Castiglione’s courtier is the lively and celebratory context of the court and not the more serious and stoic context of the forum or the legislature, the opportunities for the courtier to cultivate laughter are numerous. But even though the court, as Erasmus notes, is a more debauched rhetorical context than the forum or the legislature, Castiglione still tries to define a similar sense of balance in his approaches to humor and laughter that are reminiscent of Quintilian, Cicero, and Aristotle’s approaches.

This balanced behavior of the members of the court as a group takes its cues from the courtier himself, as he “must always be adapted to those and with whom he is talking [...] in such a way that, without even being tedious or boring, he is always a source of pleasure” (151). For example, consider Castiglione’s articulation of how the members of the court should strive for a balance between decorum and free-spiritedness when in the presence of a Duchess:

[E]veryone was allowed to talk and sit, make jokes and laugh with whom he pleased, though such was the respect we had for the wishes of the Duchess that the liberty we enjoyed was accompanied by the most careful restraint [...] So for these reasons in her company the most decorous behavior proved compatible with the greatest freedom, and in her presence our games and laughter were seasoned both with the sharpest witticisms and with a gracious and sober dignity. (43)

In this example, the court’s capacity to enjoy “the sharpest witticism” and “the greatest freedom” is authorized through the somewhat paradoxical means of demonstrating “the most decorous behavior” and “the most careful restraint.” By behaving with nonchalance, or a perfect balance of grace and decorum, the courtier not only controls his own behavior, but consequently, by setting the nonchalant tone that other court members will follow, he also controls the larger rhetorical situation of the court as a whole. In the case described above, for example, the free enjoyment of games and laughter would not be possible were the courtier not exuding his nonchalant mix of grace and decorum, a performance that ratifies the atmosphere as being agreeable and open to merriment. Consider a further example of how this balance is achieved, as Castiglione – like Cicero, Quintilian, and Aristotle before him – specifically warns the courtier against crossing the line into buffoonery:

For to cause laughter is not always fitting for the courtier, nor should he do so after the manner of fools and drunkards, or stupid clowns and buffoons. And though it appears that people like this are in demand at the Courts, they do not

merit the name of courtier but each should be called by his proper name and judged for what he is. (159)

This perspective suggests that buffoonery is not necessarily a negative quality – buffoons warrant a place at court – but a courtier is not a buffoon, and, as such, must always control his appeals to laughter in a balanced manner, as when he uses forms of imitation:

[W]e must be prudent and pay considerable attention to the place and timing and the kind of people to whom we speak, and not descend to buffoonery or go beyond bounds [...] For to be sure it would not be right for a gentleman to pull faces, to weep and laugh, mimic voices and wrestle with himself [...] But what we must do is to make use of this kind of imitation casually and subtly, remembering always our dignity as gentleman, eschewing vile words and indecorous acts [...]. (159-160)

Considering these examples, the persuasive powers Castiglione places in the courtier exceed reason and meaning because their effects are felt more than they are understood. You don't *know* that the balance between “the most decorous behavior” and “the greatest feeling” or between “dignity as a gentleman” and “descen[t] to buffoonery” is being achieved as much as you *feel* the effects of it. Because these effects are felt more than they are conceived of rationally, Castiglione turns to performing appeals to humor to dramatize laughter's numerous effects and to provide the aspiring courtier with a broader understanding of the risks inherent when appealing to humor.

Castiglione demonstrates laughter's persuasive power through witty banter between court members as they discuss issues ranging from sports and games and speech and writing to the art of painting and the need for laughter. Given the playboy nature of Castiglione's court, the discussions surrounding how the courtier should use his charm to “win universal favour with lords, knights, and ladies” provide ample opportunities to view the effects of appeals to humor and laughter (124). The effects of the various appeals to humor in this section dramatize the larger point that laughter is a powerful way to talk about rhetoric

because the effects of laughter are so unmistakable. We really *feel* the effects of appeals to laughter, whether they succeed and result in laughter, or fail and result in confusion or even offense. Laughter, as an emotional response, is beyond reason, and what we see in these performances is how Castiglione's concept of nonchalance, a concept that is beyond reason given its paradoxical foundation, can produce a response that is also beyond reason, the effect of laughter. For example, consider this exchange where Bernardo Accolti, poet and extemporizer, Gaspare Pallavicino, a noble and one of the youngest participants in the conversations, and Emilia Pia, a companion of the Duchess of Urbino and "a model of virtue and gaiety," are engaged in a conversation about the use of blasphemous and obscene jokes in court (28). The exchange begins in a way familiar to other approaches to humor and laughter in the rhetorical tradition; it attempts to define an approach – in the form of a set of rules – for how a courtier could use humor to achieve desired results in an audience. What is unique about this exchange, however, is that in their attempts to follow their own advice and practice the rules laid out in their approaches, the interlocutors actually produce the effects of laughter in themselves, effects that exceed the designs of the approaches they are discussing. Bernardo begins with a call for how the courtier should avoid blasphemous jokes and obscene language:

We should also avoid irreligious jokes, for these can turn an attempt at wit into blasphemy, and then we find ourselves growing more and more ingenious in the way we blaspheme [...] This is an abominable thing; and therefore those who wish to appear amusing by showing little reverence for the Almighty ought to be driven out of good society. The same holds for those whose speech is obscene and foul, who show no respect for the presence of ladies, and who are constantly searching for witticisms and quips merely for the pleasure of making them blush for shame. (175)

Bernardo first lays out his theoretical approach to jokes of these natures in a familiar way: the best way to control the effects of these kinds of jokes is to not tell these kinds of jokes (or, in

the case of obscene or foul jokes, don't tell them when ladies are present). However, Bernardo then tells the following foul joke to demonstrate his point, and in doing so, he dramatizes the very dangers he is trying to avoid because he tells a joke that supposedly shows no respect for ladies in the presence of a lady, Emilia Pia. The joke is foul, but funny, and is told as such:⁹

For example, earlier this year in Ferrara, in the presence of many ladies at a banquet, there happened to be a Florentine and a Sieneese who, as you know, are usually at odds with each other; and in order to taunt the Florentine, the Sieneese said: 'We have married Siena to the Emperor, and we have given him Florence as the dowry.' And he said this because at the time it was reported that the Sieneese had given a certain amount of money to the Emperor and he had taken Siena under his protection. Then, without hesitating, the Florentine retorted: 'Siena will first be ridden' (meaning this in the French sense, though he used the Italian word) 'then the dowry will be settled at leisure.' (175)

After telling the joke, Bernardo immediately attempts to explain why it was inappropriate: "As you see, the joke was very clever, but as ladies were present it was also indecent and unseemly" (175-6). The young Gaspare Pallavicino then speaks an objection to Bernardo's claim, arguing, "Women take pleasure in hearing nothing else, and yet you want to deprive them of it. And as for me, I have found myself blushing for shame far more because of words said by women than by men" (176). A brief, witty tit-for-tat follows between Bernardo and Gaspare:

Bernardo: I am not speaking of women of that sort [...] but of virtuous women whom every gentleman should honour and respect.

Gaspare: You would need to discover a very subtle way of recognizing them, seeing that most times those who appear the best are in fact the worst.

⁹ Another particularly funny joke, albeit a bit corny, is as follows: it's "the story of a miser who in desperation after he had refused to sell his grain for a good price, and then seen the price tumble, hanged himself from a rafter in his bedroom; however, a servant of his heard the noise, ran in to see his master hanging there and quickly cut the rope, saving him from death. Subsequently, after the miser had recovered, he insisted that the servant pay for the rope" (176-7).

Bernardo (laughing): If it were not for the presence of our signor Magnifico, who is universally recognized to be the protector of women, I should undertake the task of refuting you; but I do not want to usurp his place. (176)

When these two gentlemen's debate about the appropriateness of uncouth humor in the presence of women subsides, an actual woman, Emilia Pia, weighs in. Emilia's argument shares in the witty, jesting spirit of Bernardo and Gaspare's exchange, as she enters the discussion laughing, yet her claim problematizes the topic at hand, which is how to control the appropriate use of particular forms of humor. Emilia states:

Women have no need of a defender against a critic of so little authority. So leave Gaspare to his perverse opinion, which is caused more by the fact that he has never found a woman to look at him than by any frailty that exists in women themselves, and continue with your discussion of pleasantries. (176)

More than just joining in the jocular banter of the moment, Emilia's dismissal of Gaspare's opinions by aligning his views with his lack of appeal to women, is, at the same time, a dismissal of the conversation's stated attempts, which are to define how a courtier can appropriately control the effects of particular appeals to humor. Because not only is Emilia unoffended by Bernardo's joke – told to dramatize how jokes of that sort should not be told among women because women will take offense – she throws the offending spirit of the joke back at her two “protectors,” deftly displaying her own abilities to “bust chops” or “break balls” right along with the boys. Castiglione uses these performances to dramatize how laughter produces effects that cannot be contained rationally and, therefore, are impossible to completely theorize.

Because the leisurely context of the Court of Urbino offers occasions to observe court members performing their approaches on using humor and laughter, Castiglione's approaches to humor and laughter in *The Book of the Courtier* demonstrate how laughter's effects exceed the theoretical. On the one hand, Castiglione's approaches bear resemblance

to the earlier approaches of Quintilian, Cicero, and Aristotle in that they are designed to provide advice to an aspiring courtier on the nonchalant use of laughter:

[A]lthough all jokes are meant to provoke laughter, yet in this respect they produce varying effects. For there are some which are characterized by a certain modest humour and grace, others which have a hidden or obvious sting, others slightly indecent, some which provoke laughter as soon as they are heard, and others which do so the more they are thought about, others which cause blushes as well as laughter, and still others which arouse a show of anger. But at all times attention should be paid to the disposition of those who are listening, for jokes can often make those who are suffering suffer still more, and there are some illnesses that only grow worse the more they are treated. So if the courtier, in his witticisms and pleasantries, has regard for time and person and his own rank, and does not indulge in them too frequently (since it can be very tedious to be joking day in and day out, and in all one says to no purpose) then he may be called an amusing man. (186-7)

The underpinning of this passage might seem to indicate that controlling appeals to humor and the effect of laughter are achievable aims. If the courtier minds “the disposition of those who are listening,” shows “regard for time and person and his own rank,” and “does not indulge in them too frequently,” then the courtier can achieve the distinction of being “called an amusing man.” In other words, a simple, balanced, appropriate approach to humor and laughter, executed with nonchalance, will yield desirable results. However, Castiglione’s text itself is more dynamic than that. For example, in this passage we can also see Castiglione mention “various effects” that appeals to laughter produce, from the successful effect of laughter to the less desirable effects of “blushes” and “anger.” These affective responses to appeals to humor reveal an awareness that laughter’s effects lie beyond reason. In other areas of *The Courtier*, Castiglione makes similar statements that attest to laughter’s impossible to understand nature. Consider the following testament to laughter’s unknown origin, a statement that bears an almost word for word resemblance to Cicero’s earlier thoughts on the same subject:

So you can see that laughter is most agreeable to everyone and the one who inspires it at the right time and place deserves praise. But what laughter is, and where it is to be found, and how it sometimes takes possession of our veins, our eyes, our mouth and sides, and sometimes seems about to make us burst, being uncontrollable no matter how hard we try, I shall leave to Democritus to explain; who, even if he should promise to find the words, would not be able to. (155)

What we see in Castiglione here is another example of the paradox that the rhetorical tradition's approaches to humor and laughter seem to hinge upon. On the one hand, these approaches all make efforts to provide orators with advice on how to use humor and laughter for the most favorable persuasive results. Yet these same approaches also acknowledge the various effects of laughter's asignifying force. Sometimes humorous appeals to laughter produce the effect of laughter just as the speaker wanted, other times unwanted effects are produced, and, sometimes, laughter's asignifying force produces effects that interrupt subjectivity itself, effects that dramatize the limitations of rational efforts to control it. Castiglione, like the rest of the thinkers in the rhetorical tradition, attempts to account for as many of humor's potential effects as he can, but at the same time he acknowledges the impossibility of these attempts.

In other words, the paradox that these approaches in Chapter Two both acknowledge and struggle with is that laughter has such potential as a tool of persuasion if only its effects can be controlled. However, persuasion is not the only reason humor and laughter are so important to the history of rhetoric. In each of these approaches, we also see humor and laughter being explicitly connected to what it means to be a rational human. Yet the rational human is precisely what is called into question by the interruptive effects of laughter's asignifying force. In Plato, for example, laughter's ability to turn the soul away from its rational part and toward the part ruled by appetites and desires is precisely what makes him

fear it so much. And even though later rhetoricians see more positive, productive potential in laughter's effects as a persuasive tools, each of these later approaches continue to come back to Plato's initial fears to some degree. Because the effects of laughter's asignifying force can exceed rational human control, they pose a threat to the development of a favorable ethos in a speaker (Aristotle), the creation of a perfect orator (Cicero), the cultivation of a good man speaking well (Quintilian), and the nurturing of the perfect courtier (Castiglione). In other words, the rhetorical tradition tries to provide approaches that a rational, human subject can follow to control laughter's effects, but that control is constantly being placed at risk by the very effects of those approaches.

Interchapter

I wonder what happened, betwixt and between.

- John Hartford

At this point, while we are simultaneously not quite where we once were and not yet where we will once be, I'd like to take a brief moment to reflect upon this indeterminate space, this betwixt and between, that divides the two parts of this project. While it may appear that we have just finished the rhetorical tradition's historic approaches to humor and laughter and are now moving forward toward postmodern locations where laughter's asignifying force can be observed in action, I would like to offer a different, and, perhaps, somewhat paradoxical possibility. Even though the signifying operation unfolds linearly, positing this word before that word, placing one lexical foot in front of the next to create the appearance of meaning as a logically ordered production, this Interchapter attempts a challenge of this rational imperative. In other words, this moment calls attention to the necessarily porousness of the boundary between Parts One and Two.

For while it is, of course, physically impossible to actually be in two places at the same time, there is no way one could physically encounter both Parts One and Two of this project simultaneously. In other words, to experience a project of this sort is, on one level, to start at one point in time and move forward. Because we have so much practical experience encountering signification in this manner, however, this kind of encounter with signification has been reified as if it were the only way to proceed, as if starting from the beginning and ending at the end is "The" way to meaning. However, since this project seeks to explore how laughter – as a kind of *asignifying* force – exceeds rational control and signification, it seems

apropos to suggest that there may be another way to proceed, another way to arrive at another kind of meaning.

With this suggestion in mind, I would like to invite the reader to approach both where we have just been and where we are now going not as discrete locations contained within the signifying operation of this project, but as fluid locations that must, to an extent, exist simultaneously. Just as the humorous object necessitates the effect of laughter to make it a humorous object as opposed to any other kind of object, and laughter necessitates the humorous object in order to catalyze its signifying force, Parts One and Two of this project necessitate each other. Part Two explores the effects of laughter's signifying force as it interrupts subjectivity, exceeds context, and troubles the boundary between the human and the non-human. In other words, without Part Two's dramatization of how humorous appeals are always already interrupted by the future possibilities, the nearly limitless effects of laughter's signifying force, there would be no way that any humorous appeal, such as the kind Part One attempts to control, could ever succeed. So while Part One concentrates on how thinkers across the rhetorical tradition have tried to exert rational control over what they acknowledge is an uncontrollable force, suggesting ways an orator can best construct humorous appeals to produce desired effects, Part Two will shift the focus of the humorous rhetorical situation to the interruptive effects of laughter's signifying force, effects that dramatize the limits of an orator's abilities to exert rational control.

Therefore, by standing on its own while simultaneously being haunted by the effects of its surrounding parts, this Interchapter – always already betwixt and between – seeks to honor the historical distinction between object (humor) and effect (laughter) as individual components of the rhetorical situation, while simultaneously leaving an opening for ongoing

recursive movements between the two concepts. In other words, the Interchapter – as the pivot point in the project’s formal center – performs the discrete yet simultaneously interrelated relationship between both humor and laughter and, respectively, between Parts One and Two: the individual concepts, humor and laughter, are both incomplete and imprecise without the other.

Part Two: No Talk, All Action

Chapter Three

I Didn't Do It, Man, I Only Said It: The Performative Force of *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film*

A stripper in a burlesque joint gets on stage and says, 'Here it is boys, let's da da da,' it's cool. But let her do that in the public park on the way home and her ass is in jail. And the reason for that is the people in the park didn't ask for that. In other words, you can yell fire in a crowded theater if you're on stage, but don't do it off stage. The theatre is make believe, that's where it's at.

- Lenny Bruce

In October of 1961 the stand-up comedian Lenny Bruce was arrested for the first time in San Francisco for uttering the word “cocksucker” on stage. Over the next four years, more arrests followed – he was busted in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, and Sydney, Australia. In the Australian case, Bruce’s charge was blasphemy. His account of the Crucifixion, ““We Jews killed Christ, and if he comes back, we’ll kill him again!”” was deemed an attack on both religion and on the individuals who practice it, meaning Bruce’s performance “breached both the law of man and the people’s faith” (qtd. in Collins and Skover 13). In his U.S. cases, however, the First Amendment protected Bruce from charges of blasphemy, but it did not protect him from a related crime, obscenity¹⁰. In the 1957 Supreme Court case *Roth v. United States*, Chief Justice William Brennan wrote the majority opinion that defined the parameters for what defines obscenity and how it differs from protected speech:

There are certain well-defined and narrowly limited classes of speech, the prevention and punishment of which have never been thought to raise any constitutional problem. These include the lewd and obscene [...] It has been well observed that such utterances are no essential part of the exposition of

¹⁰ The First Amendment states: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

ideas, and are of such slight social value [...] that any benefit that may be derived from them is clearly outweighed by the social interest in order and morality. (qtd. in Collins and Skover 31)

In short, the general effect of this ruling was that prosecutors only needed to succeed in defining a text as “obscene” for the offender to be found guilty of obscenity (31). There is an important distinction here between the charges of blasphemy and of obscenity: Where blasphemy is interpreted as “a real or imagined *attack*” against religion in general, or against specific religious individuals, the charge of obscenity relates to “the *words* [...] and not the parties against whom they were directed” (qtd. in Collins and Skover 14, my emphases). In other words, blasphemy presumes a sort of *force*, an attack directed against religious persons or things, whereas obscenity argues that the *meaning* of the words themselves is vulgar and without social value. In Bruce’s case, it is not, for example, too much “fucking” that gets him into trouble; his use of the word itself would appear to be enough for the courts to find him guilty of obscenity.

The issue of force versus meaning occupies an historic location in the tradition of rhetoric. The discussion originates with Plato and his privileging of speech over writing. Plato places speech in the advantaged position over writing because he aligns speech with presence and writing with absence. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato describes speech as superior to writing because he believes the idea, “the living, animate speech of the man,” is more at risk in writing, which “would rightly be called a kind of phantom” (267a7-10). In other words, speech is seen as the expression of the human soul’s intentions, whereas writing is merely an image, a representation. Plato’s fear is that, unlike speech, where clarifying questions can be asked of the speaker if confusions occur, writing has no one to respond for it. Orphaned from the voice of their author, when they are written down, “every composition trundles

about everywhere in the same way, in the presence both of those who know about the subject and of those who have nothing at all to do with it” and, in the event misunderstanding occurs, writing, “always needs its father to help it; for it is incapable of either defending or helping itself” (275e1-6). In this traditional communication model, as Jacques Derrida will come to call it, writing is seen as merely a subservient technology that, “*extends* the field and the powers of locutionary or gestural communication” (“Signature” 3) in such a way that it “will never have the slightest effect on either the structure or the contents of the meaning (the ideas) that it is supposed to transmit” (4).¹¹ Writing is a tool in this model that can, at best, function like a painting, a representation that can “stand there as if alive,” but is, in and of itself, lifeless (*Phaedrus* 275d6). It does not add to, or contribute to, or in any way influence what it represents, and if you ask a written text a question, it will always respond in the same manner, “they preserve a quite solemn silence” (275d7). In short, writing’s limited function in the traditional communication model is to represent meaning.

While the traditional communication model and its orientation toward meaning has long dominated the conversation in rhetoric, a parallel history exists that questions what language does in addition to communicating meaning. In *The Future of Invention: Rhetoric, Postmodernism, and the Problem of Change*, John Muckelbauer claims that the traditional view of the rhetorical situation and its orientation toward stability and meaning has long

¹¹ Derrida's intervention intends to demonstrate that, in fact, the same risks that have been long associated with writing also apply to speech/gesture and all other forms of communication. In short, Derrida’s claim is that all language – speech, gesture, writing – along with all experience, including the experience of being itself, is structured like writing. Writing is not a subservient tool to speech/gesture that carries “a continuous and homogenous reparation and modification of presence in the representation,” but is rather a “break in presence” (“Signature” 5). This breaking force occurs at the moment of inscription of any form of communication, suggesting that all language forms are structurally susceptible to the same risks Plato wanted to only apply to writing.

dominated the conversation in rhetoric. He notes that “the domain of rhetoric has traditionally been limited to very particular concerns,” a limitation that creates a “managerial rhetoric,” wherein, “speakers turn to rhetoric only after they have decided upon the proposition that they will advocate,” leaving rhetoric itself as merely a “supplement to the proposition,” whose sole purpose is the accurate transmission of propositions meaning (*Future* 16). But Muckelbauer also identifies a parallel history in rhetoric that challenges the supremacy of this view and questions what else language does beyond simply communicating meaning:

[A]t least in its classical incarnation, rhetoric seems largely indifferent to signification and to the processes of either producing or interpreting a meaning [...] If signification seems inclined toward meaning, understanding, and indeterminacy, rhetoric seems inclined toward what we might call an ‘asignifying’ dimension of language, focusing on forces, actions, and effects” (“Rhetoric, Asignification” 239).

Muckelbauer’s project, therefore, is to turn rhetoric’s focus back to its earliest sophistic interests as an art of persuading by means of a *force* that isn’t necessarily reducible to meaning and reason. He writes, “although this point is frequently overlooked in contemporary scholarship, rhetoric’s traditional emphasis on persuasion means that it is not identical to practices that emphasize the central role of understanding, practices that we might refer to as ‘communicative’” (*Future* 17). To illustrate this point, Muckelbauer examines these “acts of communication” alongside what he calls “acts of persuasion.” An act of communication is what he terms a *signifying operation*, meaning that it “attempts to transmit its proposition through understanding [and] endeavors to reproduce, as accurately as possible, the proposition in the mind of its audience [...] as if it were, above all, an identifiable content that can be reproduced” (17). Above all, an act of communication’s objective is “to identically reproduce this meaning, to ensure that the content of the

proposition is grasped or understood” (17). Acts of communication, therefore, privilege meaning, and create the impression that the meaning they communicate is determinable, complete, and stable. An act of persuasion, however, is what Muckelbauer terms an *assignifying operation*, meaning it does not attempt to “identically reproduce the proposition as a meaning in the mind of the audience [...] [but] to give it a certain force” (17).

Assignifying operations, then, refer to “the dimension of language that is irreducible to questions of meaning and understanding” (13) and an act of persuasion does not necessarily rely on meaning to make its proposition compelling, but instead effects persuasion based on “its capacity to exert a compelling force, its ability to evoke particular responses in specific audiences” (17). In other words, an act of persuasion is not interested in what the proposition *is*, but rather in what the proposition *does*.

Although there might appear to be a clear distinction between communication and persuasion in these two models, this should not be assumed. Muckelbauer cautions against bracketing off communication from persuasion, or vice versa, and argues, “it is crucial not to imply a rigid, either/or separation between them,” because communication and persuasion, “exist in close proximity” to each other (18):

Of course, these two dimensions of language aren’t mutually exclusive (I most likely want my audience to understand what it is that I want them to do, though not necessarily). It may even be the case that these two dimensions of language actually require each other (certainly, much traditional rhetoric assumes that I should understand what I am trying to accomplish). But the fact that these two dimensions exist in close proximity does not indicate that they are the same. (“Rhetoric, Assignification” (239)

Persuasion, for example, frequently employs “the movement of understanding as one of its strategies,” and, for a speaker or writer, “some element of understanding is always necessary in order to initiate a persuasive act,” if for no other reason than the speaker or writer must

present a convincing enough ethos before an audience if a desirable response is ever to be provoked (*Future* 18-19). In other words, contemporary rhetoricians interested in asignifying operations are neither looking to replace the traditional communication model nor to move language's asignifying force into a privileged position in relation to language's role in signifying meaning and understanding.¹² Rather, in a field that remains predominately devoted to epistemological concerns, the intention is to shift the focus of the discussion in rhetoric back toward questions of force and effects, questions that highlight Muckelbauer's depiction of a "[t]raditional rhetoric [that] is not principally an art of communicative understanding, but an art of provoking responses and effects" (19).

The Lenny Bruce Performance Film, a recording of Bruce's second to last performance from August 1965, provokes questions of language's asignifying force and how the myriad effects of that force can at times be unintentional and uncontrollable. Between 1961 and 1965, Bruce's stand-up comedy performances produced significant legal consequences that had taken their toll on the man himself; he was simultaneously being tried

¹² Diane Davis and Bradford J. Vivian have written on various aspects of rhetoric's asignifying force. Davis calls attention to the importance of the often overlooked "*non-hermeneutical dimension*" of rhetoric, a dimension "that has nothing to do with meaning-making, with offering up signification to comprehension" ("Addressing Alterity" 192). For Davis, this dimension deals not in the aspect of language that "opens itself up to interpretation," a position she equates with J.L. Austin's constative speech act and Levinas' concept of the "said," but rather in the "saying," the dimension of language that "necessarily unsettles what is congealed in the already-said" and, in Austin's terms, "indicates a performative" (192-193). Vivian likewise moves away essentialist notions of the human subject in asking whether it would be possible to conceive of rhetoric without first appealing to an essential subject. Vivian doesn't intend to replace one ontology of the subject with another, as a mere inversion of the system would again do nothing to disrupt the organizing principles of the system itself, but he intends to *move* towards a conception of the subject in such a way that it no longer governs the entire scene and system of the rhetorical process, but rather becomes a "rhetoric beyond representation - one no longer organized, that is, by the representation of moral truth or transcendental reason nor representative of an ideal conception of human being, however explicit or implicit it may be" (*Being Made Strange* 13-14).

on obscenity charges in Chicago and New York and narcotics charges in Los Angeles; he was defending himself in court after firing his legal team; he was bankrupt, addicted to heroin, and was banned from performing anywhere in the United States outside of San Francisco. (Collins and Skover 459-470). In the performance the film captures, Bruce carries the legal documents relating to his New York case on stage with him, reading from them at length throughout the performance and stopping frequently to riff on the many ways he feels the courts have received the inaccurate meaning of his act. The performance is a greatest hits of sorts, in that it is always looking backwards; it's a stand-up act that repeats previous stand-up acts and takes up how those repetitions have been received in various contexts. By reading the speech act and performance theories of J.L. Austin through Derrida's later interventions, this paper will show that this film not only demonstrates how language's asignifying force breaks from all contexts and inspires effects that clearly *do* many things in excess of accurately communicating meaning, but, because the primary force at issue in this performance is laughter, this text also joins an ancient debate within the history of rhetoric regarding the pitfalls and potentials of laughter's particular persuasive effect on an audience. *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film* extends this debate by taking up laughter as a specific example of language's asignifying force. Rhetoric's historical interest in laughter has largely focused on how a subject's ethos is shaped by appeals to laughter: wit used in appropriate amounts can help a speaker seem more urbane and appealing, but wit used excessively, or the use of inappropriate means like obscenity to achieve laughter, can paint the orator as a buffoon, or worse. In other words, it has long been suggested that a stable subject can be trained in the deployment of humorous appeals in such a way that s/he can control the effects of laughter in a given rhetorical situation. However, *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film*

shows us how laughter interrupts subjectivity from the get go. The traditional notion of a human subject at the center of the rhetorical situation is not as stable it may seem, and, therefore, the control such a subject exerts over the rhetorical situation is in fact rather tenuous. Whereas rhetoricians have long sought to advise orators on how to appropriately employ appeals to humor in an effort to control laughter's effects, Bruce's performance demonstrates that laughter's uncontrollable, asignifying force is irreducible to control by the human speaker.

Throughout this performance, Bruce believes that his act has been erroneously defined as obscene because the definitions are based on inaccurate transcripts made by court appointed police officers assigned to watch his act and then present their written transcriptions before the court. Consider this bit where Bruce first describes the circumstances behind his repeated busts:

And I figured out after four years why I got arrested so many times. You see what happens ... it's been a comedy of errors. Here's how it happens. I do my act at, perhaps, 11 o'clock at night. Little do I know that at 11 a.m. the next morning, before the grand jury somewhere, there's another guy doing my act who's introduced as Lenny Bruce (in substance). 'Here he is, Lenny Bruce! (in substance).' A peace officer who is trained for, to recognize clear and present dangers, not make believe, does the act. The grand jury watches him work and they go, 'That stinks!' But I get busted! And the irony is I have to go to court and defend his act!

The dilemma described here by Bruce is that the police officers on the beat aren't trained to transcribe stand-up acts and, thus, the transcriptions made of his act, and the performances given in court by police officers posing as Lenny Bruce, "in substance," cannot communicate the accurate meaning of his act to the grand jury. Bruce's argument throughout the film seems to be that if he were granted an opportunity to perform his act before the courts, in person and in his own words, the accurate meaning of his act would be conveyed to the

justices and they would understand that the act is neither obscene nor devoid of any redeeming social value. In other words, Bruce wants to change the context from the non-serious, “make believe” world of the nightclub to the serious, “real” world of the courtroom in an effort to communicate the accurate meaning of his act. Former *Rolling Stone* editor Ralph Gleason writes in the liner notes to the posthumous album *The Real Lenny Bruce*:

He desperately tried to get the various courts to allow him to do his routine for the judges so that he could be judged for what he actually did and not for what some cop on the beat thought he did, but the courts would never permit him. [*The Lenny Bruce Performance Film*] ... was designed originally to be a substitute for an in-person performance in court. Lenny wanted to enter the film of his show as evidence in his own defense but he could never get that accepted either (4).

In this film, then, Bruce is making his case on stage that he should be granted an opportunity to make his case before the court, and, in doing so, he is effectively performing his own defense before the nightclub audience who pose as the grand jury, “in substance.” This creates a unique rhetorical dynamic within the text. As a stand-up comedy performance, Bruce’s act is, expectedly, a form of *epideictic* rhetoric as it seeks to entertain an audience by way of assorted jokes, bits, characters, and anecdotes. But because it concurrently functions as a defense of his earlier arrest-provoking performances, this performance can also be considered an example of *forensic* rhetoric, which is conspicuously atypical for a stand-up act. What results is a comedy performance given in a surprisingly unfunny manner, a non-serious context harboring unexpectedly serious themes. Bruce’s comic genius is still a powerful force at times, but these moments feel more like lightening flashes in an otherwise somber sky where his lamentations on representational failure often come across as erratic, uneven, tangential, and awkward.

The idea of there being one context where language is serious and another context where language is non-serious is a foundational concern for J.L. Austin in *How to Do Things With Words*. In this text, Austin's primary intervention is to shift commonly held assumptions about language in analytical philosophy away from ideas where "the business of a 'statement' can only be to 'describe' some state of affairs, or to 'state some fact', which it must do either truly or falsely," (1) (statements that he labels "constatives") and toward a broader consideration of speech acts "in which to *say* something is to *do* something; or in which *by saying* or *in saying* something we are doing something" (statements he calls "performatives") (12). One of the steps Austin takes in his effort to understand why performative utterances sometimes succeed and sometimes fail is to attempt to distinguish serious speech from non-serious speech. In order for serious speech to occur, he believes the "circumstances, including other actions, must be appropriate," and the speaker "must not be joking, for example, nor writing a poem," (9) or, as Bruce puts it in *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film*, "you can yell fire in a crowded theatre if you're on stage, but don't do it off stage." Language that is spoken on the stage or in a poem, Austin claims, is "*parasitic* upon its normal use" and should be excluded from consideration when trying to isolate pure performative utterances from constative utterances: "Our performative utterances, felicitous or not, are to be understood as issued in ordinary circumstances" (22). Yet even as Austin undertakes rigorous efforts to define a clear distinction between serious and non-serious contexts, his text in many ways works against the limitations he wishes to define. For example, when he uses slang expressions like "cock a snook" (119) and self-deprecating humor like, "Of course, this is bound to be a little boring and dry to listen to and digest; not nearly so much so as to think and write" (164) to make his points about the need to sequester

jokes, poetry, and plays from serious communication, he is in effect using performative utterances to make constative claims. Considering *How To Do Things With Words* was originally delivered as a series of lectures, Austin's text ultimately performs its very purpose; it becomes about what it *does* and not necessarily about what it *says* (119).¹³ Ultimately, Austin's openness toward his own methodology leads him to accept that there is a little bit of the constative and a little bit of the performative in any utterance: "we found sufficient indications that unhappiness nevertheless seems to characterize both kinds of utterance, not merely the performative; and that the requirement of conforming or bearing some relation to the facts [...] seems to characterize performatives" (91).

Bruce's performance in *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film* illustrates the challenges inherent in attempts to bracket off "ordinary circumstances" and delimit between serious and non-serious speech. Because if it were really acceptable to yell "fire" in a crowded theatre as long you are on stage, the issue of Bruce's legal predicaments would appear to be nonexistent; he is using "non-serious" speech (as a stand-up comedian, he is, by definition, "joking") in circumstances that are not "ordinary" (as a performer on a stage in a nightclub). By this logic, Bruce's staged performances would appear to occupy a space that would limit the ability of his words to *do* much beyond the make believe world they are encapsulated within. But this is clearly not the case. Bruce's utterances clearly *do* things, even from the stage. They make some of us laugh, but they also offend some of us, which, in turn, affects Bruce's ability to earn a living, threatens his rights as a free citizen, and so on. Austin raises

¹³ Austin's self-effacing awareness of the polemical qualities within his work - that it dislodges the value of true/false tests sacred to analytical philosophy - is a position Shoshana Felman takes up with vigor in *The Scandal of the Speaking Body* through her analysis of the *Don Juan* myth where she promotes in Austin's work the very deconstructions Derrida will later make to it in "Signature, Event, Context": "In fact Austin, like Don Juan, is not simply an unbeliever, he is an iconoclast, a destroyer of fetishes" (42).

a point about how constative and performative utterances relate to American law that is curiously germane to Bruce's situation:

It is worthy of note that, as I am told, in the American law of evidence, a report on what someone else said is admitted as evidence if what he said is an utterance of our performative kind: because this is regarded as a report not so much of something he *said*, as which it would be hear-say and not admissible as evidence, but rather as something he *did*, an action of his. (13)

One of Bruce's more enduring one liners shares a similar sympathy: in response to an arrest for saying "cocksucker" on stage, Bruce appealed to the arresting officers by saying, "I didn't do it, man, I only said it." While Bruce is correct that he didn't do anything other than say the word on a stage, what his case will repeatedly bear out is that his words will be interpreted by the courts as something he *did*, not merely as something he *said*. These performative effects of Bruce's performance – both intentional and otherwise – demonstrate laughter's asignifying force as being irreducible to questions of meaning and understanding.

The bulk of *The Lenny Bruce Performance* consists of Bruce reading from the court's transcripts ("People of New York versus Lenny Bruce and Howard Solomon, April 3, 1964") and then retelling the mistranslated jokes, correcting inaccuracies along the way. His retellings are taken on good faith to be more accurate representations of his earlier performances than the transcriptions made by the police officers in his audience, in part because surrendering to Bruce's supposed expertise on the matter is vital for the audience to have access to the performance's most humorous moments, which rely on the disparity between what "they say" Bruce said and what "Bruce says" Bruce said. For example, consider Bruce's bit about the beat cop who is assigned to "go steal his act" and then re-perform the act before the court. The dialogue is between the *judge* and the beat cop:

'Alright officer ...'

'I don't remember the whole act, your honor, but I made these notes ...'

Let's see now, uh, uh, Catholic, asshole, shit, uh, let's see, and uh, in the park, and, tits and shit and Catholics and Jews and shit. That's about all I remember, it's, that's about the general tenor of the act.'

'Those are the words that he used, did he, is that all of it?'

'No, your honor, it's, you know ...'

'But he used those words,'

'Yeah, yeah, he said shit a lot of times.'

The judge's act of focusing on the words alone appears to illustrate Austin's definition of a constative utterance as one that truly or falsely states a fact: the courts are focusing on the meaning of the word "shit" defining it as obscene, determining if Bruce actually said the word, and, ultimately, defining Bruce's performance as obscene based on his use of the word. But I suggest this scenario is more complicated than this. Even though the court's determination that both the word and the performance are obscene seems to happen at the constative level, the reasons behind why any of this matters to the court is because of the words' effects. The effects of obscenity are what the court wants to curtail, but, based on the conditions of the *Roth* ruling described above, they seem to be taking a constative approach to what might be more accurately described as a performative problem. Similarly, Bruce's act of focusing on the meaning of the words in his act is reflected in his search for a context where he can perform his act without the deprecating effects of translation and, therefore, can – in his mind at least – communicate the accurate meaning of his act to the court. By contrasting what he believes the accurate meaning of his act is with what the judge thinks the accurate meaning of his act is based on the versions transcribed in the court documents, Bruce does succeed in provoking his nightclub audience to laugh, as many of depictions in the court's transcriptions are absurdly funny. But in doing so, he also maintains that by changing the context of his performance he will somehow ensure the faithful reproduction of its content. Both of these positions – the court's focusing on the definition of the words

themselves and Bruce's focusing on the context those words are spoken in – reflect the traditional communication model's notion of a pure, present meaning that can be accurately communicated through language. But it is precisely this faith in the traditional model of communication that *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film* challenges. Through its formal reliance on repetition, what Derrida calls the citational power of language, or its "essential iterability (repetition/alterity)," *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film* offers a unique reconsideration of Derrida's intervention in the constative/performative conversation opened up by Austin ("Signature" 9).

Derrida identifies that writing (and all language, as well as experience, "even the experience of being") carries within it, in "the very structure of the written text," a force "that breaks with its context, that is, with the collectivity of presences organizing the moment of its inscription," and, "by virtue of its essential iterability, a written syntagma can always be detached from the chain in which it is inserted or given without causing it to lose all possibility of functioning, if not all possibility of 'communicating'" (9). No context can assuredly communicate Bruce's intended meaning more than any other context because of the breaking force inherent within the structure of *all* communication. One detail from Bruce's performance adds a layer of rather humorous irony to this conversation: nowhere does there exist a definitive recording of the contested earlier performances Bruce is defending. In *The Trials of Lenny Bruce*, Ronald Collins and David Skover's exhaustively researched book on Bruce's legal predicaments, the authors reveal that, "The police's Microfon recording [of the performances at issue in *The People of the State of New York – against – Lenny Bruce, Howard L. Solomon, and Ella Soloman*] was largely inaudible" (228). Bruce makes light of this detail in the film when he jokes, "We have a tape recording here, the tape recording is

inaudible. However, we made an accurate transcription.” This line is one of Bruce’s funniest in the performance, but it also illustrates how this unique performance calls attention to the radical absence of both receiver and sender, a notion that Derrida's deconstruction of the traditional writing model revolves around. The court is concerned with whether or not Bruce, for example, uttered the word “cocksucker” at a particular place at a particular time, as was the case when he was charged with violating, “Municipal Police Code Sections 176 and 205 (unlawful presentation of an ‘obscene, indecent, immoral, or impure’ performance) and California Penal Code Section 311.6 (knowingly speaking ‘lewd or obscene’ words ‘in any public place’ [...])” for uttering the phrase, “the club was overrun with cocksuckers” during a performance at Ann’s 440 in San Francisco on Tuesday, October 4, 1961 (Collins and Skover 47-53). If it is determined that he did say the word, and the word “cocksucker” is defined by the court as an obscene word, Bruce’s use of that word in that particular performance, at that particular place and time as noted in the transcripts, can be understood by the courts as an act of communicating an obscene meaning, and Bruce can be found guilty of obscenity. Again, because of the *Roth* Supreme Court ruling that set the standard for what constitutes obscenity in 1965, prosecutors needed only to succeed “in branding a book, movie, play, or performance ‘obscene,’ that was typically the end of the matter – off to the holding-tank with the moral offender” (Collins and Skover 31, my emphasis). Bruce is acutely aware of the penal codes he is being charged of violating in the film. Recall that at the time of the filming, he has taken to defending himself in court, and, as he reads from the transcripts, he makes occasional mention to the codes he is being charged with violating. For example, in a bit where he points out that the courts had interpreted his gesture of benediction as a gesture of masturbation, Bruce directly refers to the law on the books:

“Cause there’s a part of [inaudible] penal code test that says, ‘And goes substantially beyond the customary limits of candor and description or representation.’ So not only did the guy describe, represent, he said jack off, but he did it.”¹⁴

Considering Bruce’s familiarity with the law – that if prosecutors can prove that he uttered words understood to have obscene meanings he can be found guilty of obscenity – it is understandable that Bruce would take such a keen interest in how the words of his act are being represented to the courts. Bruce is the one who will pay the price if he loses the case, so if communicating meaning is the name of the game, it is reasonable that he would want to take the game directly to the court. However, Bruce and the court are both emphasizing the position that the words of his act can somehow identically reproduce the meaning of his act. The iterative form of this performance, however, demonstrates that both the court’s and Bruce’s wishes for a stable context where meaning can always be accurately represented and communicated are unsound. The “illimitable” number of contexts in this performance dramatize Derrida’s break with Austin on the issue of serious versus non-serious speech (“The ‘non-serious,’ the *oratio obliqua* will no longer be able to be excluded, as Austin wished, from ‘ordinary’ language”) (18) and, therefore, illustrate the disillusion of the boundary between the courtroom and the stage: “This citationality, this duplication or duplicity, this iterability of the mark is neither accidental nor an anomaly, it is that (normal/abnormal) without which a mark could not even have a function called “normal”” (12). In other words, if the mark is always breaking from context, the context can be no

¹⁴ Bruce appears to take particular offense to this part of the transcript, because such accusations, if true, would harm his standing in the eyes of his more sophisticated female audience members: “I would never make gestures of masturbation, cause, I like ... I, I’m concerned with my, image, in that, I, I know it offends chicks. And I, you know, it frightens them, it’s ugly to them, and, Dorothy Killgallen is not going to see some crotch grabbing hooligan. I would just never do anything like that. It’s offensive.”

more fully present than the text it seems to surround. Bruce's iterative performance illustrates the inherent problem of attempting to fix a stable meaning to Bruce's words in a particular context at a particular moment in time, and it reminds us that meaning is just one possible effect of language's citational drift. Even though meaning isn't always successfully communicated, if this drifting didn't occur, as Derrida suggests, what we understand as "meaning" would never be possible:

By no means do I draw the conclusion that there is no relative specificity of effects of consciousness, or of effects of speech (as opposed to writing in the traditional sense), that there is no performative effect, no effect of ordinary language, no effect of presence or of discursive event (speech act). It is simply that those effects do not exclude what is generally opposed to them, term by term; on the contrary, they presuppose it, in an asymmetrical way, as the general space of their possibility. (19)

Despite the limitlessly repeatable nature of language, the "possibility of disengagement and citational graft which belongs to the structure of every mark, spoken or written, and which constitutes every mark ... can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable," both the courts and Bruce insist on viewing his performance as an act of communication and want to, therefore, control how the meaning of the performance is received ("Signature"12). But what ultimately proves quite serious about this atypical comedy performance is that it demonstrates how the non-serious realm of the stage is, in fact, a structural necessity for the serious realm of the court to exist.

In its idiosyncratic demonstration of language's essential iterability, *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film* makes explicit language's non-representational elements, or its asignifying force. In the following bit, Bruce describes one such non-representational element unique to stand-up performances, "marking time." In this bit, the courts have

extracted a piece of Bruce's act and defined it as obscene, but the piece they extracted was, in Bruce's estimation, not supposed to be considered a part of his official act:

Here, I'll give you an example of the bits that were found, the utter obscenities. Ok, for example, 'Eleanor Roosevelt and her display of tits, first performance, transcript of third performance at page 27.' What I, alright, now dig, from an hour show this went one second. And it's really weird, what I was doing, I was *just marking time*, because there were so many policeman in the audience that night ... Interpol, state police, federal heat, you know? – that what I said was, ah, ah, ah ... oh. I said, I was talking about ... nenes, you know, and the fact that the tittie, perhaps, is repugnant to the people, it's not the word. Because Las Vegas, that's the entertainment capital of the world, and the attraction's not a Monet exhibit, it's tits and ass.

Bruce states that he “was just marking time” when he made the purportedly obscene reference in his initial act. Comedians “mark time” for various reasons: to wait for laughter from a previous joke to subside, to control audience distractions (hecklers, people getting up to go to the bathroom, etc.), to take a drink, to remember the next bit, to settle down after a joke that bombs, and so forth. In other words, marking time means the comic is “riffing,” or improvising until the moment is right to get back to the performance's scripted material. In the case of the bit cited above, Bruce is apparently marking time to work his more suggestive material around the presence of the “Interpol, state cops, federal heat” that were in the audience so as to not allow them the opportunity to gather more legal ammunition to be used against him in court (a strategy that clearly backfires). “Just marking time,” then, implies that the words Bruce utters during that time period are not part of the official act. They are off the record utterances spoken between official parts, much in the same way a stage actor might break character during a power outage in the middle of a play and chat informally with audience members only to return to her official role within the play once the power is restored. These utterances spoken when marking time are, therefore, not intended to signify part of a performance's “bona fide” meaning. For example, they are not utterances that

would be included as part of a play's official script for sale in a bookstore, but are merely ad-libbed improvisations not to be considered along with the formal, composed material created for the performance. Yet even though such utterances might not be part of the intended meaning the performer sets out to communicate, the words spoken while marking time still produce effects and provoke responses. These effects and responses are possible, in part, because of the non-representational nature of stand-up comedy; even though Bruce wants to sequester the official part of the act from the part where he is just marking time, the form of a stand-up performance blurs the line between the scripted and the unscripted parts of the performance much more than in the aforementioned example of a theatre play. Bruce's treatment of marking time in *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film*, then, is a particularly vivid example of how the non-representational elements of language make acts of communication not as easily determined as we might think, no matter what context they are presented in. For Bruce, his words still produce effects and provoke responses from the court despite their unofficial "just marking time" status in the performance, and in spite of whatever Bruce's communicative intentions may be.

Implicit in the act of charging Bruce, or anyone else, with obscenity is a belief in the existence of a stable and complete subject who intends to communicate obscene meaning to an audience. In Bruce's case, he must be, as Judith Butler states, "isolate[d] [...] as the culpable agent" of the obscene utterances in order for him to pay the price for their being uttered in the first place, "as if the speaker were at the origin of such speech" (*Excitable* 39). Yet *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film* calls into question such notions of a stable, intentional subject with respect to Bruce's status as expert witness when he attempts to defend his own act. The traditional communication model would argue that Bruce, as the

speaking subject, would possess an authentic, personal connection to the legitimate meaning of his previous performances, yet this position is called into question several times by none other than Bruce himself, who often stumbles and stammers when trying to recollect his own bits. For example, he begins to retell a mistranslated bit from the court's transcript to correct its inaccuracies, yet can't remember what it was he originally said:

'St. Paul giving up fucking.' Ok, now, what I said there, that's how the bit is reported, what I said ... I forget, it's been so long since I did the bit, I said, ah ... oh, it's a celibate, I said, it, it ... how the hell'd I do that? How celibacy was introduced? See, I forget the bit. Um ... uh ... It's weird, cause I didn't know that was a bit, they, they put that form there, and then I forget where it started.

Though it may seem like a mere hitch in Bruce's performance, this forgetting actually demonstrates the structural necessity that governs all language use: no self-presence authorizes our utterances. As Derrida suggests by way of the "shopping list for myself" example: "*At the very moment* 'I' make a shopping list, I know ... that it will only be a list if it implies my absence, it if already detaches itself from me in order to function beyond my 'present' act ... The sender of the shopping list is not the same as the receiver, even if they bear the same name and are endowed with the identity of a single ego" ("*Limited Inc a b c* ..." 49). In other words, the Lenny Bruce in *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film* is not the same Lenny Bruce cited in the court transcripts, nor the same Lenny Bruce infamously branded "Dirty Lenny" by the media, nor the same Lenny Bruce who was born Leonard Alfred Schneider in 1925. Because for both the addressor and the addressee of an utterance, language is always breaking from its context, always capable of being lifted from one place and put into another where it will still function, even as it doesn't "communicate" the same meaning, showing that just as "no context can entirely enclose it," neither can a speaking subject ("Signature" 9). Bruce doesn't have to remember his performance correctly for it to

communicate a different meaning in a new context; in fact, Bruce's forgetting of his initial bit in this retelling - the "forgetting where it started," and the fact the he "didn't even know it was a bit" – is precisely what inspires the bit's laughter; it's what makes it funny. The laughing response, here, demonstrates a recognition that all language, all experience, "even the experience of being," carries within it, as Derrida states, a force "that breaks with its context, that is, with the collectivity of presences organizing the moment of its inscription" (9). It is the court that defines Bruce's utterances both as a bit ("*they* put that form there") and as obscene, and it is Bruce who then says that the court's definitions are incorrect, yet both parties appear to remain insistent on the transmission of accurate meaning through an act of communication. What this particular performance demonstrates, however, is at the moment of the performance, be it this filmed reproduction or the "original" performance under debate, language was (and is) already breaking from context and becoming part of a larger, endless citational chain: Bruce gives a prior performance where a transcript is made by police, the words from this act are lifted from their original context where they take on new meaning in a new context, in a court of law. The words are then lifted again from the transcripts by Bruce and placed in a new context, back on a different stage, where they are preformed before a different audience, filmed by Magnuson, and eventually archived on DVD; they are then viewed by me, lifted once again and transcribed in this paper, where they are read by whoever is reading this, and on and on and on. Through the unique way this performance demonstrates language's essential iterability, it shows us that that no context can guarantee Bruce's intended meaning more than any other context because of the breaking force inherent within the structure of *all* language at the moment of its inscription. In addition, this performance demonstrates how language's breaking force not only applies to

contexts and *addressees*, but also to *addressors*, as Bruce's own subjectivity is called into question by way of how the multiple iterations of his act are differently received not only by the courts, but by Bruce himself.

Rhetorically reading the "edges" of *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film* further highlights the serious/non-serious and constative/performative tensions at work throughout this singular performance and begins to bring this discussion full circle. Barbara Johnson, in the translator's introduction to Jacques Derrida's *Dissemination*, notices a rhetorical technique - a "fading in and out" - in many of Derrida's essays: "The beginnings and endings of these essays are often the most mystifying parts [...] It is as though the borderlines of the text had to be made to bear the mark of the silence - and the pathos - that lie beyond its fringes, as if the text had first and last to more actively disconnect itself from the logos toward which it still aspires" (xvii). I suggest that a similar rhetorical technique frames *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film*. The first words that appear on screen during the film's opening credits are, "This is not a documentary. This is a performance." This is a significant beginning for this film, one that underscores its importance to rhetoric, because it frames the text in terms of the discussion on acts of persuasion versus acts of communication. Were we to consider this film as a documentary, it would be expected to function as an act of communication that seeks to, in Muckelbauer's words, "transmit the truth as a content" using various forms of "signification, identical reproduction, [and] an emphasis on understanding" (*Future* 18). But instead, the opening asks us to consider the film as a performance, that is, as an act of persuasion that seeks to "incite a response" (18). The "fading in" of this film thus serves as an invitation of sorts, an offer from the filmmaker to read this film as an asignifying operation rather than a signifying operation. Similarly, at the end of the film, Bruce's

performative actions help punctuate the theoretical themes raised throughout the film. As his act draws to a close, Bruce does not exit the stage by walking off into the wings as would be expected of a stand-up comedian. Instead, he weaves his way through the audience toward the club's side doors that open onto Broadway Street. Once the doors open, Bruce positions himself at the threshold between the nightclub and the city streets outside, taking a few moments to play at the edges of the tenuous boundary between the stage and the real world, a theoretically illusory boundary that has, nevertheless, inflamed tumultuous effects in his personal life. He banters jestingly with passers by:

Hello there. How are you? ...
You've been in trouble haven't you? A few times? ...
Hello, the lady with the balloon. You're with the red balloon, I assume? ...
Young lady with the marijuana eyes ...

He puts on a sleazy accent, perhaps playing up his infamous alter ego "Dirty Lenny":

You like a filthy show? ...
Come on ...
Gotta girls, everything ...
Oh, you lika girls? ...
You want a girl for the night? ...

The pithy, lighthearted conversations all appear one sided as it is impossible to hear what any of the passers by are saying. Like the shadows projected on the wall of Plato's cave, the people walking through the San Francisco night are seen only as flickers of light against the open club door, yet, like the world outside the cave in Plato's allegory, they are understood as existing in the serious world. They are not on stage performing with Lenny Bruce and are not even part of the audience watching the staged performance. They are simply so-called real people walking down a city street. However, this strange coda to an already unusual performance raises some critical theoretical questions: does Bruce's act of addressing passers by (not, technically, from the stage anymore, but still while speaking into a microphone,

while engaged in a comedy performance, and while being filmed) somehow implicate them into the performance? Do they suddenly pass from the serious realm into the non-serious realm through the force of a performative speech act? Or does Bruce's dalliance at the nightclub's threshold emphasize that - in Derridian terms - the outside is the inside, and that the force of his performance cannot be bracketed off to the non-serious context of the stage? At the beginning of this performance, Bruce states, "the theatre is make believe, that's where it's at." However, by physically standing at the boundary between the nightclub and the street in the last moments of his performance, Bruce further dramatizes the performative and, rather poetically, illustrates how the division between serious and non-serious contexts will not hold.¹⁵

The performance given in *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film* is as close as Bruce ever came to the forensic defense he wanted to give. His efforts to perform his act before the courts were never realized, and he was found guilty of obscenity in the New York case he defends in this performance. The Supreme Court rejected his appeal for review, although on December 23, 2003, Governor George Pataki posthumously pardoned him, the first such pardon in the history of the state (Kifner). When Lenny Bruce died on August 3, 1966, a victim of an accidental overdose of morphine, he might have maintained - we can only assume - that he was also a victim of a failed act of communication: he never had the opportunity to transmit the accurate meaning of his act to the courts.

¹⁵ Before Bruce exits the club to the street outside in the final seconds of *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film* - the second to last performance he would make before his death - his last words spoken on camera were vintage Lenny Bruce - irreverent, odd, sincere, funny: "I really dug working with you, and good night, and as Will Rogers said, I never met a dyke I didn't like, and, good night."

Up till now, I have been forwarding a position that Bruce's defense strategy in *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film* appears to be that if he could only introduce a more accurate version of his performance into the context of the courtroom, he could successfully communicate the accurate meaning of his act to the judges and they would then understand that his act was not obscene. This line of thinking seems to hinge on the traditional communication model's view of speech and gesture as superior to writing and on Austin's failed attempts to segregate non-serious utterance from serious utterances based on definably stable contexts. But perhaps Bruce's position is more complex than that. Perhaps Bruce, on some level, intuitively feels that the effect he wants the courts to receive from his act actually resides in its performative force. In the same way that he seems to be insisting on accuracy and on instilling himself as the point of origin of these utterances, another way to read this is that he is actually more interested in what his utterances do than in what they mean. He appears to suggest as much in the bit cited above about how burlesque shows are advertised on Las Vegas marquees when he says, "The fact that the tittie, perhaps, is repugnant to the people, *it's not the word*. Because Las Vegas, that's the entertainment capital of the world, and the attraction's not a Monet exhibit, it's tits and ass." That is to say, the word "tittie" itself isn't offensive, but rather it is the *force* of the "tits and ass" Las Vegas performances that people have a problem with, because such performances have effects on audiences that trouble certain moral perspectives.¹⁶ The parallel that can be drawn here between Bruce's act and a

¹⁶ In the interest of the performative element of this essay, I'd be remiss if I failed to connect Bruce here to George Carlin's treatment of "tits" in his seminal 1972 bit "Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television" from the album *Class Clown* (an album Carlin dedicates to Lenny Bruce for "taking all the risks"). In the bit, Carlin satirizes the absurd ratio of the 400,000 total words in the English language to the seven words you can't say on television ("They must *really* be bad!"), taking particular umbrage with the inclusion of "tits" on the list:

“tits and ass” Vegas act is that the importance of both acts resides in their force and not their meaning. The attraction of burlesque acts for people who go see them lies not in what they *mean*, their constative element – those are naked women – but in what they *do* to certain audiences, their performative element – those naked women are turning me on. Because ultimately, Bruce is not campaigning for an opportunity to appear before the court and *explain* the literal meaning of his act to the judges, he is literally begging for the chance to *perform* his act again for them. Likewise, he isn't asking for the opportunity to write out his own transcripts of his act for the courts to judge him on, but rather (in lieu of an in-person performance) wants to enter *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film* as evidence in his defense. Bruce might be theoretically naive in believing that by changing the context of his act he will change the meaningful outcome of his trial, and a more versed theoretical position might hold that a transcript and a film are both representations where meaning is but one of many possible outcomes, and, therefore, one context is unable to guarantee accurate meaning transmission more than any other context. Yet Bruce, on some level, appears to be wrestling with the fact that the crux of his show lies in its performative force and not in its constative meaning, because he seems cognizant of the fact that the significance of his act resides

And tits doesn't even belong on the list, you know? Yeah ... That's such a *friendly* sounding word. Sounds like a nickname, right? 'Hey, Tits, come 'ere, man! Hey, Tits! Hey! Hey Tits, meet Toots, Toots, Tits, Tits, Toots, man!' Sounds like a snack, doesn't it, huh? Yes, I know, it is, right, just that ... but I don't mean your sexist snack ... I mean new Nabisco Tits! And new Cheese Tits! And Corn Tits and ... Pizza Tits and Sesame Tits, Onion Tits ... Tater Tits ... Betcha can't eat just one, huh?

Less levity is found in another connection between Carlin's bit and Bruce's performance; a version of “Seven Words” broadcast on WBAI New York in 1973 led to a lawsuit that was appealed all the way to the Supreme Court, who, in 1978, ruled in favor of the FCC. This decision formally established regulations in American broadcasting regarding times of the day when “indecent” material may be broadcast to best protect children. Serious stuff, indeed.

somewhere beyond the words themselves. After all, he doesn't want the judges to *comprehend* the precise meaning of his act as much as he wants to give them the *experience* of its performative force. Because if he were able to give them the experience of his performance, the court might be provoked into a different kind of response, one that does not necessarily hinge on the meaning of the words in the act. Bruce is hoping that by giving them the experience of his act's performative force, he will succeed in provoking a specific response from the courts: laughter. Bruce is a stand-up comedian, and like all stand-up comedians, audience laughter is the only name of the game. Whether or not the courts understand his act correctly is not necessarily important for Bruce's purposes, a point Muckelbauer underscores in claiming, "One need not transmit the truth as a content in order to incite a response or persuade someone to act in accordance with this truth" (*Future* 18). Bruce might be theoretically naive in believing that by changing the context of his act he will change the meaningful outcome of his trial, but his actions do suggest an underlying intuition that language does more than just mean things and that his show contains within it a quality, a force, that can only be conveyed – and appreciated – through its performance.

Finally, when we talk about this asignifying force of language as having the ability to provoke responses in an audience without principally appealing to meaning and understanding, we must take care to acknowledge that this force we talk about is not some monolithic entity, but a movement, a dynamic repetition that is always being created again and again in different contexts. In other words, *all force is not the same*. One of the contributions *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film* makes to the ongoing conversation on force within rhetoric is to dramatize the unique effects of a particular example of this force: laughter. Laughter has held a long and tangled position in rhetoric's historic conversation

about persuasion, as rhetoricians have indicated both a concern for and a guarded appreciation of its powerful effects on an audience. Plato most pointedly shows dismay for laughter's uncontrollable force when he famously derides laughter as a kind of malice exhibited by "the spiteful man [who] is *pleased* at his neighbor's misfortunes," (*Philebus* 48b8-9). In the *Republic*, he argues that laughter affects the human soul like a drug, intoxicating its rational part and making the individual more vulnerable to persuasion and influence. Plato insists that, in his ideal *kallipolis*, any stories by poets that depict the gods as being overcome with laughter should be censored, since the gods should be beyond such unjust behavior: "Whenever anyone says such things about a god, we'll be angry with him, refuse him a chorus, and not allow his poetry to be used in the education of the young" (383b10-c1). Later rhetoricians didn't share Plato's extreme trepidation toward laughter, but a lingering anxiety about its powerful effects can still be discerned. In the *Ethics*, Aristotle identifies a balance a subject should strive toward between "[t]hose who go to extremes in raising laughs [...] vulgar buffoons," and "[t]hose who would never say anything themselves to raise a laugh [...] [the] boorish and stiff" (1128a5-13). Cicero writes of laughter's ability to "give pleasure to an audience," an ability that he sees as, "often of great advantage to the speaker," but he still maintains that, "jokes should be suppressed when there is no fair occasion for them" (*Oratory* II.LVI). And Quintilian acknowledges the important talent of inspiring laughter because it "dispels the graver emotions" in an audience, but he likewise cautions that a subject must not "display his wit on every possible occasion, but must sacrifice a jest sooner than sacrifice his dignity" (*Books IV-VI* 449). These positions are all concerned with how a speaking subject's use, or misuse, of appeals to laughter will influence his or her ethos in the eyes of the audience. In other words, laughter is viewed as just another

means of persuasion, but one that requires extra special care in how it is implemented. Yet this view still implies that the speaking subjects at the center of the rhetorical situation can be trained to control appeals to laughter, even though they might need to exercise more caution when attempting to provoke it in certain audiences.

The apprehension rhetoricians have long held toward laughter, however, reveals their recognition of its asignifying force that can escape an orator's control and provoke unintended effects. Cicero, for example, describes the effect of a joke on an audience as an explosive burst that becomes, "fixed in the mind of the hearer, before it appears possible to have been conceived" (*On Oratory* II.LIV). Quintilian similarly notes, "the excitement of laughter" (*Institutio Books IV-VI* 6.3.23) as having, "a certain imperious force of its own which it is very hard to resist," emphasizing that, "It often breaks out against our will and extorts confession of its power, not merely from our face and voice, but convulses the whole body as well" (6.3.9-12). Given the powerful qualities of laughter's force, Cicero and Quintilian maintain an intense respect for the potential dangers such a force can present an orator, and they therefore try to identify which of the strategies used to inspire laughter might be especially counterproductive to persuasion. One such strategy singled out as being especially dangerous for the orator is the use of inappropriate words, or obscenities. Cicero refutes, "indecent language [is] a disgrace not only to the forum, but to any company of well-bred people" (*On Oratory* II.LXII) and Quintilian renounces obscenity as something that, "should not merely be banished from this language [of the forum], but should never even be suggested" (*Books IV-VI* 6.3.33-5).

When considering the issues at stake in *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film*, then, in terms of these longstanding views within rhetoric about laughter's potentials and pitfalls, this

particular performance proves especially significant, both because it joins the ancient rhetorical conversation on laughter's unique force, and because it dramatizes the uncontrollable and potentially dangerous effects of this force that have concerned rhetoricians since antiquity. In particular, this performance calls attention to the specific effects that can be provoked by the use of language defined as obscene. The bursting forth of laughter that Quintilian believed was an "absolutely indispensable" skill for an orator to possess is clearly on display in the form of Lenny Bruce as a brilliant stand-up comedian, a contemporary version of the ancient orator who artfully uses laughter as his primary means of persuasion. But also clearly on display are the potential dangers implicit when any subject invites an audience to laugh. In *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film*, the dangerous effects of this force are manifested in very serious ways. When we reflect on the cumulative effects of this force on Lenny Bruce's life, the overwhelming results seem to rationalize the cautious approach rhetoricians have historically taken toward laughter. The reason these rhetoricians approach laughter so cautiously is because what laughter places at risk is the subject itself. Laughter's asignifying force exceeds the bounds of the subject and, therefore, cannot be controlled by the orator. *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film* shows us an example of such an unstable subject, a subject interrupted by the asignifying force of laughter.

The Lenny Bruce Performance Film not only provides a dramatization of language's asignifying force, but also allows us to focus on laughter as particularly powerful example of this force. This unusual performance highlights the tension between the constative and the performative that Austin wrestled with and helps call attention to language's myriad performative effects that are irreducible to questions of meaning and understanding. Through its unique demonstration of the language's iterability, the film illustrates how no

context can guarantee a speaker's intended meaning more than any other context because of the breaking force inherent within the structure of *all* language at the moment of its inscription. In addition, it demonstrates how this breaking force not only applies to contexts and *addressees*, but also to *addressors*, as Bruce's own subjectivity is called into question by way of how the multiple iterations of his are differently received by not only the courts, but by Bruce himself. By virtue of these many attributes, this particular text makes a unique contribution to rhetoric. It provides the conversation on asignification with an explicit example of a particular type of asignifying force, laughter, and the many unintentional and uncontrollable effects of that force. It not only connects to the ancient discussions on laughter within rhetoric, but it also challenges them by demonstrating that no matter how well orators are trained, no matter how well their ethos is constructed, laughter is an uncontrollable force that often provokes unintended effects. It therefore makes a contribution to what rhetoricians say about the subject, because it shows us that the orator at the center of the rhetorical situation does not get to control this particular force of laughter the way ancient rhetoricians wished he or she could.

Even as I advocate for an increased focus on asignification, it is important to take a moment to stress that the intention here is not to move language's role in provoking responses and effects into a privileged position in relation to language's role at creating meaning and understanding; that move would simply be replacing one system with another. But in a field that remains largely devoted to epistemological concerns, *The Lenny Bruce*

Performance Film shifts the established focus from questions of meaning, signification, and understanding toward questions of persuasion, force, and effects.¹⁷

¹⁷ In closing, I leave you with the last lines of journalist Dick Schaap's eulogy to Lenny Bruce from *Playboy* magazine: "One last four-letter word for Lenny. Dead. At 40. *That's* obscene" (qtd. Collins and Skover 370).

Chapter Four

I'm So Glad You're Fake: Postmodern Slapstick and the Creation of the Real

This show features stunts performed by professionals and/or total idiots. In either case, MTV suggests that neither you or [sic] any of your dumb little buddies attempt the dangerous crap in this show.

- Disclaimer from the television program *Jackass*

The longest-running scripted American television program, *The Simpsons*, features a recurring segment called “The Itchy and Scratchy Show,” a children’s show-within-a-show that depicts the ultra-violent anthropomorphic exploits of Itchy, a cartoon mouse, and Scratchy, a cartoon cat.¹⁸ The plotline of “Itchy and Scratchy” is unvarying: Itchy kills Scratchy. Always.¹⁹ But the fashion in which this predictable outcome is achieved is remarkable because of the seemingly infinite ways in which Scratchy meets his gratuitously violent ends. An episode called “Bang the Cat Slowly” begins with an innocent birthday party for Scratchy, but takes a dark turn when Itchy places a lit bomb into an empty box, uses Scratchy’s tongue to wrap the box as a present, and snaps the present into Scratchy’s mouth like a rubber band. The bomb explodes, and Scratchy’s head is blown into the air, where it drifts back down only to be impaled on the spiked end of his own party hat. Another episode, “Cat Splat Fever,” begins with Itchy leaving a suicide note for Scratchy to find. Scratchy sees Itchy throwing himself into a well, so he races into the back yard and leaps down after his friend. As Scratchy falls, he passes Itchy sitting safely on a ledge, laughing

¹⁸ Technically, “The Itchy and Scratchy Show” is itself a segment of “The Krusty the Clown Show,” the favorite television program of the three Simpson children, making “Itchy and Scratchy,” a show-within-a-show-within-a-show.

¹⁹ The one exception was the episode, “Burning Down the Mouse,” of which Lisa Simpson, remarked, “This is the one where Scratchy finally gets Itchy.” However, the Simpson’s television set gets unplugged in the middle of the episode and we, therefore, miss the one time Itchy gets his comeuppance. When the television set gets plugged back in, Krusty the Clown declares that the network will never allow that episode of “Itchy and Scratchy” to be broadcast again.

hysterically. Scratchy plunges to the bottom of the well and into the open mouth of a waiting alligator. Now deceased, Scratchy's dejected, harp-playing soul rises slowly back up the well only to again encounter Itchy, who shoots Scratchy's ghost in the head with a revolver. And in "My Dinner With Itchy," Itchy serves Scratchy what appears to be a glass of wine. Scratchy drinks it, screams in pain, and looks down to find that his body has been stripped to the skeleton from the neck down. Itchy shows Scratchy the wine label, a skull and crossbones embossed with the word "ACID," and throws his own glass into Scratchy's face. His fur and flesh now completely burned off, Scratchy's disoriented skeleton runs screaming from the restaurant and into the street, where he is flattened by a passing trolley car. Predictable as the sunrise, Itchy kills Scratchy. Over and over and over and over again.

Within the context of *The Simpsons*, "Itchy and Scratchy" serves a dual purpose. On the one hand, the creators of *The Simpsons* are clearly making a comment on the violent nature of mainstream entertainment and the voraciousness with which children consume it. After all, when each and every episode of "The Itchy and Scratchy Show" concludes, we see the Simpson children sitting on their couch laughing hysterically. This juxtaposition of the graphically violent nature of "Itchy and Scratchy" with the overwhelming pleasure Bart, Lisa, and Maggie take in watching it occurs with the same monotonous regularity as the plotlines of "The Itchy and Scratchy Show." In other words, this creative choice by the creators performs the very statement they are trying to make: children become desensitized to violence with repeated exposure, children become desensitized to violence with repeated exposure, children become desensitized to violence with repeated exposure ... On the other hand, however, *The Simpsons* is a situational comedy, and "The Itchy and Scratchy Show" serves a much more pragmatic purpose: it's *funny*. The more savagely poor Scratchy gets

taken out, the harder we laugh. And even though it might initially seem sadistic to find great joy in such brutal depictions of violence (regardless of the make believe, cartoon format of the depictions), those of us amused by such things can't help ourselves: we laugh anyway.

Traditionally, the discipline of humor theory would identify “The Itchy and Scratchy Show” as an example – albeit it a rather extreme one – of *slapstick comedy*. Slapstick is a physical form of comedy in which unruly actions are enacted upon a body in excessive, ridiculous, and sometimes, violent manners. Because slapstick typically derives its response from an individual's misfortune, whether that misfortune takes the form of a pie in the face or a fall down a flight of stairs, slapstick is considered a form of comedy that dramatizes the *superiority theory* of humor. In *The Philosophy of Humor and Laughter*, John Morreall defines the superiority theory succinctly: “According to the Superiority Theory [...] we laugh from feelings of superiority over other people, or over our own former position” (5). Simply put, we feel better when someone else has it worse off than we do, even if that someone else is us at a previous moment in time. The oldest of the primary three humor theories (the relief theory and the incongruity theory being the other two), the superiority theory traces its roots back to Plato. Plato questioned the ethical and moral merits of laughter to varying degrees, because he believed certain types of laughter are “always directed at someone as a kind of scorn,” and he feared that the effects of laughter would lead the human soul away from its rational part and toward the part ruled by appetites and desires (5). Today, the superiority theory is seen as somewhat outdated in the circles of humor theory, because, as Morreall states, we now accept that “there is no essential connection between laughter and scorn,” and “[t]he Superiority Theory turned out to be a classic case of a theory built on too few instances” (3). However, its domination of the philosophical tradition for over two thousand

years has left an enduring legacy that is not universally accepted as positive. Morreall, for one, laments the negative impact of laughter's longstanding alignment with scorn has had on philosophy: "The sloppy theorizing that created and sustained the Superiority Theory has troubled the whole history of thought on laughter and humor" (4). In other words, not only was laughter something traditionally taken as non-serious because of its jovial and whimsical effects, but when it was taken seriously, it often represented something spiteful in human nature that should be treated with great caution and skepticism.

Despite its conflicted theoretical past, however, examples of the superiority theory, such as slapstick, represent some of the earliest and most enduring forms of comedy, with roots in Greek and Roman theatre that continue through to the present day. For example, Aristophanes' play *The Frogs* featured the excessively exaggerated whippings of the slave Xanthias and the god Dionysus by King Aeacus. Many of Shakespeare's most famous comedies such as *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, and *A Comedy of Errors* liberally employ slapstick as well, and the late nineteenth and early twentieth century American vaudeville houses featured a style of slapstick that later found international fame in the "Golden Era" silent films starring the Keystone Cops, Charlie Chaplain, The Marx Brothers, Laurel and Hardy, and The Three Stooges. In the 1960s, popular children's cartoons such as *Wile E. Coyote and the Roadrunner* and *Tom and Jerry* (the latter of which clearly inspired Itchy and Scratchy's grotesque cat and mouse satire some thirty years later) maintained slapstick's popularity for new generations of television viewers. So even as the superiority theory has fallen out of favor as an all-encompassing theory of humor, one of its most basic examples, slapstick, still endures. Aeacus might have merely beaten Dionysus in Aristophanes' *The Frogs*, whereas Itchy is burning Scratchy's flesh off with acid in *The*

Simpsons, but the key tenant of the superiority theory is still present: in either case, we are laughing at the misfortune of someone, or something, else.

The traditional argument for why the western world has been laughing at slapstick from 400 BCE to the present day has relied on a stable boundary that separates the real from the fake. In *Comedy: Meaning and Form*, Robert Corrigan claims that comedy's ability to produce the effect of laughter necessitates the absence of pain:

Pain is never funny in itself. Painful circumstances that turn out to have no serious consequences do provoke laughter. In comedy, action has definite consequences, but these consequences have had all of the elements of pain and permanent defeat removed. The pratfall is a fitting symbol of the comic. Even death is never taken seriously or considered as a serious threat in comedy. (10-11)

Even though, as the superiority theory claims, we laugh at the misfortune of others, the depths of our masochistic capacities are not limitless. So while a pie in the face, a pointed insult, and a fall down a flight of stairs might all be examples of us laughing at other people's misfortunes, the fall down the flight of stairs really requires us to believe that it is not really happening – that it's fake – because the effects of a fall down a flight of stairs are potentially life threatening, whereas the effects of a pie in the face are generally nothing more than an embarrassing mess. In other words, we're capable of finding pleasure in malice, but we're not *that* malicious. Just as Plato wanted to outlaw the kinds of uncontrollable laughter that interrupts the rational soul's pursuit of the good life, he still allowed for the kinds of laughs "which a healthy, self-controlled man has, and in general all those pleasures which accompany every kind of virtue" (*Philebus* 63e3-6). Corrigan further refines comedy's need to maintain the distinction between the real and the fake:

[M]anifestations of the ludicrous must be made painless before they can become comic. The writhings of the cartoon character who has just received a blow on the head, the violent events in some of Molière's plays, or the

mayhem committed by slapstick clowns remains funny only as long as it is quite clear that no pain is involved. One reason why the violence of slapstick is so effective in films [...] is that it is virtually impossible to fear for the characters, since the actors have no physical reality. (11)

In other words, because we know Moe is not *really* poking Curly in the eye and hitting him in the head with a two-by-four, and we know Itchy isn't *really* burning Scratchy with acid and shooting him in the head (they're cartoon animals, after all), we are in some way authorized to laugh at these examples of violence because we accept them as fake. These examples that would be quite serious if they were real, but because we know they are not, we can safely, and painlessly, find them funny.

However, much in the same way that laughter shows us that the definition between the human and animal is not as stable as it appears, this comic boundary between pain and the absence of pain in slapstick comedy – between the original and the copy – is not as stable as it has traditionally appeared either. For while the traditional view has been that slapstick produces laughter only when we know the performers' "physical reality" is never in jeopardy, certain forms of what I call *postmodern slapstick* problematize this distinction. Examples of postmodern slapstick abound in the motion picture *Jackass 3D*, the final installment in the *Jackass* television series and film franchise.²⁰ The postmodern slapstick

²⁰ For those unfamiliar, the basic premise for *Jackass* is rather down market and simplistic: people perform various pranks and stunts that produce self-inflicted injuries in order to conjure up laughter in the viewing audience. Conceptually, *Jackass* evolved out of the 1990s skateboarding culture celebrated in the magazine *Big Brother*, as several of the show's creators and actors were professional skateboarders who contributed early versions of *Jackass* material to the magazine. As such, the physical pranks captured in *Jackass* are oftentimes skateboarding related. In one longer segment, blindfolded skateboarders skate over an elevated platform while medicine balls tethered to the ceiling swing across their path like wrecking balls. In another very brief clip, an actor skates down a thirty-foot ramp and slams into a Plexiglas wall. However, as the show's production level has steadily increased, culminating with the third and most recent film being presented in 3D, the examples of

found in *Jackass 3D* differs from traditional forms of slapstick in several ways, the most significant of which is that the humorous appeals used in postmodern slapstick relies on the essential humanness of the actors. Unlike traditional forms of slapstick, whose humor derives from producing images of actors lacking physical human reality, the appeals in *Jackass 3D* derive from images of actual painful and damaging effects inflicted upon the actors' physical realities. Here we're not laughing *in spite of* the actors' pain in postmodern slapstick, but *because of it*. As such, postmodern forms of slapstick comedy present the images of their rhetorical appeals as being closer to the original, to the human, and to the real than traditional forms of slapstick. The differences between postmodern and traditional slapstick are also rhetorical, in the sense that both forms present their humorous appeals to the audience in different manners. In the case of traditional slapstick, the humorous appeals announce themselves to the audience as being explicitly *produced*. The idea that we can laugh at Curly's "pain" and the Coyote's "pain" is because we know that this "pain" is not real. It is clearly an image of pain that makes no effort to hide the fact that it is produced. However, in the case of postmodern slapstick, the humorous appeals in this form want to announce themselves to the audience as being non-produced, as being *real* images. Humorous appeals in postmodern slapstick must appear as essentially human and essentially real to function as such ("real" human pain is befalling the actors, and that's what makes this form unique from other forms of slapstick), but the production of them – these images of human "realness" – and the means by which they are exchanged with the audience paradoxically raise questions about the essentialness of the original and of the human, because this sense of the real is ultimately an effect postmodern slapstick *produces in itself*.

postmodern slapstick have taken on a grander scope as well, as actors get gored by bulls, attacked by police dogs, attacked by bees, and fired out of cannons.

The humorous appeals used in the postmodern slapstick of *Jackass 3D* help us rethink the distinction between the original and the copy. These questions have long been a foundational concern to rhetoric, traceable back to Plato's sustained opposition between philosophy's "original" truth and sophistry's degraded copy of truth. In *The Sophist*, Plato defines two different kinds of image-making, "the art of making likenesses, and phantastic or the art of making appearances" (264c). Both the philosopher and the sophist create a resemblance of knowledge, though the former's resemblance is always oriented toward Truth, while the latter's is oriented toward persuasion. Therefore, the sophist's "art is illusory," because the sophist "deceives us with an illusion," and, as a result, "our soul is led by his art to think falsely" (263c). In this way, sophistry and laughter are dangerous for Plato for the same reason: they lead people away from the rational part of their souls toward the part ruled by appetites and desires. They both "deceive us with illusion," and lead our souls to "think falsely." The philosopher's resemblance of knowledge, because it respects the original, is a *true copy* of knowledge, but the sophist's, because it shows no regard for the original, is a *false copy* of knowledge. In terms of slapstick comedy, the notion of the true copy and the false copy are dramatized in the relationship between traditional and postmodern slapstick. Both are copies of an original, "real," pain. While pain is difficult to define and distinguish because it, like laughter, is an emotion, the argument here is that both traditional slapstick and postmodern slapstick are producing images of pain for the purposes of creating humorous appeals for an audience. But traditional slapstick maintains an appreciation for the distinction between the original and the copy because it always announces itself to the audience as a representation of actual pain, never suggesting that the injuries befalling the actors are real. In that sense, it functions as a true copy, maintaining a

regard for the original. However, the humorous appeals captured in postmodern slapstick announce themselves to the audience not as representations of pain, but as actual pain. But because they are still images, still dramatized as humorous appeals for the purposes of making an audience laugh, they are also still a copy of real pain. So postmodern slapstick does not show the same regard for the original and the copy as does traditional slapstick; it functions as a false copy. But since both forms are still images of physical violence befalling people, they can – at times – resemble each other. For Plato, this is the risk of representation and the reason why the sophist is such a danger: because both the philosopher’s copy of knowledge and the sophist’s copy of knowledge resemble each other, it is difficult to distinguish the difference between the two. Muckelbauer suggests that the effects of the sophist’s false copy are so troublesome to Plato because the sophist claims to be a teacher of wisdom but he is “a pretender to this lofty lineage, a counterfeiting thief whose very presence threatens the proper inheritance of wisdom” (“Sophistic Travels” 228). In other words, the sophist possesses the resemblance of knowledge on all subjects, but this knowledge is not original knowledge, and, therefore, falsely leads us away from the pursuit of original knowledge. And because it is difficult to tell the difference between the philosopher’s resemblance of knowledge and the sophist’s, we might not even know we are following the wrong one. So, as Muckelbauer suggests, what the false copy, or simulacrum, places at risk is the very idea of there being an original at all: “Resemblance is the very condition for Plato's dialectical movement; that the sophists knowledge and the philosopher's knowledge resemble each other places the dynamic of resemblance and, therefore, dialectical thought, at stake (233). The postmodern slapstick of *Jackass 3D* also functions as a simulacrum that places the distinction between the original and the copy at risk. Humorous appeals in

Jackass 3D are structured to produce the sense of the real in the audience vis-à-vis images that dramatize injuries to the physical reality of the actors. Because these appeals are presented to the audience as images amplified and manipulated by cinematic enhancements such as high-definition 3D technology, however, this sense of the real that the actors are experiencing gets called into question. In other words, much of what appears as real in postmodern slapstick are actually effects of a false copy, effects that are ultimately more for the audience's sense of real than they are for the actors.

In order for the postmodern slapstick in *Jackass 3D* to distinguish its humorous appeals from those of traditional forms of slapstick, the film must always be actively working to produce a sense of the real in its own performances. One important way it does this is by means of presenting something fake to contrast itself against. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard notes that fake spaces like Disneyland function to produce a sense of the real in the surrounding city of Los Angeles:

Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle. (12-13)

So just as the boundary surrounding the Magic Kingdom and all its imaginary “play of illusions and phantasms” must remain distinct from the city around it in order to for the conception of something of a “real city” to be possible, the boundary surrounding *Jackass 3D* must establish a similar boundary between its postmodern slapstick and the more traditional forms (12). In this way *Jackass 3D* and Disneyland follow inverse paths to creating a sense of the real: Disneyland produces a sense of realness in Los Angeles by calling attention to its own lack of reality, whereas *Jackass 3D* constructs its own sense of reality by calling

attention to what is fake around it. For example, in the opening interlude, the film presents an image of a traditional form of slapstick humor – one in which the physical reality of the actors is never at risk – to contrast its postmodern forms of slapstick against. The first image viewers see on screen in the film’s interlude is Butthead, half of the imbecilic cartoon comedy duo *Beavis and Butthead*. Butthead’s purpose appears to be to explain to the audience that the movie they are about to see will be presented using 3D technology: “You will see the Jackasses as never before.” His partner Beavis then joins in to explain, “in order to experience this new dimension, you must put on the special glasses that you were given in the lobby.” Butthead looks down at his own hand and says, “Whoa! Beavis, look at my hand! It’s in 3D!” Beavis, the more moronic of the two, begins to say, “Really? It really doesn’t look too different ...” but his response is interrupted by a punch in the face from Butthead that seems so real to Beavis, it convinces him of the authenticity of the 3D technology: “Whoa! That’s amazing! It felt like you really hit me!” Beavis continues on about the “amazing technology,” as Butthead continues to punch and slap him about the head and face. This interlude concludes with Butthead saying, “So sit back and enjoy the movie,” as he slaps Beavis one more time for good measure, punctuating his last slap with his infamous tagline, “Dumbass.”

While an argument could be made that this segment merely performs the utilitarian “how-to-put-on-your-3D glasses” purpose that all 3D films must apparently meet (a seemingly unnecessary sort of cinematic regulation along the lines of how the airline industry still insists on instructing millions of human beings on how to put on a seat belt before each and every takeoff), Beavis and Butthead’s inclusion here serves the larger purpose of demonstrating how traditional slapstick comedy differs from the postmodern forms found in

Jackass 3D. For one, while the juvenile sense of humor found in *Beavis and Butthead* might aesthetically be in concert with what will follow in the main event, their performance of cartoon slapstick places *Jackass 3D* squarely within the tradition of slapstick comedy, while also providing it with a point of divergence from that same tradition. Like *Tom and Jerry* and “The Itchy and Scratchy Show,” Beavis and Butthead’s cartoon version of slapstick comedy is a non-human form of the genre. As such, it dramatizes the idea that traditional slapstick comedy’s success as a form of comedy precludes the absence of pain. Butthead can beat Beavis all day and night, and, even though we might take some pleasure in watching this (partially because Beavis is a character that quickly gets under the skin), we ultimately know that no harm is ever coming to either of them. Furthermore, the “new dimension” Beavis makes reference to in the interlude, the incorporation of the 3D technology itself, enhances the manner in which *Jackass 3D* transgresses the boundary between the real and the fake. The entire purpose of 3D, from a cinematic standpoint, is to take the two-dimensional format of film and represent it in a manner that more closely resembles real life (a fact reflected in the name of today’s preeminent 3D company: Real3D). In other words, 3D technology, both rhetorically and, in a way, “physically,” is always structured toward the audience, toward the outside. It is not there for the actors, not there for the original action, but for the audience. It attempts to produce a visual copy of the action and bring it closer (literally, visually closer) to the audience. But in this effort to produce a more “real” copy of the original action, it loses all regard for the original because it is always structured outside, always away from the original, always toward the audience. When Butthead slaps Beavis in the face, his hand reaches out into the audience and swings right in front of our own faces, as well, never touching, of course. We are still in the free play of cinematic fantasy, yet this

gesture provides an authentic approximation – a spatial closeness that *Tom and Jerry* could never approach – that stimulates the perception of the boundary between the real and the fake making it appear more illusory than we might often admit. Much like, as Baudrillard argues, Los Angeles relies on Disneyland and other theme-parks such as “Enchanted Village, Magic Mountain, Marine World [...] imaginary stations that feed reality, the energy of the real to a city whose mystery is precisely that of no longer being anything but a network of incessant, unreal circulation” (13), *Jackass 3D* also relies on “imaginary stations.” The explicit non-reality of cartoon performances and twenty-first century cinematic technology help maintain a distinction between fake forms of humorous appeals found in traditional slapstick and the sense of the real that *Jackass 3D* wants to construct in its own postmodern slapstick. In other words, the technological amplification produced by Beavis and Butthead’s cameo at the beginning of *Jackass 3D* sets the stage for the non-cartoon performances that will follow, performances that will contrast the non-human cartoon slapstick against the human postmodern slapstick, as both extremes are continually enhanced by Real3D.

Jackass 3D’s further produces a sense of the real in its forms of postmodern slapstick by way of the disclaimer. Every iteration of *Jackass*, from the earliest television series to the final feature film, has begun (and ended) with a disclaimer about the stunts contained within the film. The epigraph that begins this chapter is taken from the very first television episode of *Jackass* that aired on MTV in 2000. In it, we see an air of informality, both in the lax grammar of the copy (neither you *or* ...) and in the casual irreverence of the semantic references to “total idiots,” “dumb little buddies,” and “dangerous crap.” In total, this disclaimer tries to downplay its authority and seeks to fit in as part of the show itself, sharing in the anti-intellectual, anti-authoritarian spirit of the performances that will follow. By the

time we get to *Jackass 3D*, however, the disclaimer has evolved along with the show's performance budget, becoming appreciably more grown up (i.e. more legally binding) in the process: "WARNING: The stunts in this movie are performed by professionals, so for your safety and the protection of those around you, do not attempt any of the stunts you are about to see." Gone are the references to "total idiots," (apparently they're strictly professionals now), "dumb little buddies," and "dangerous crap," and they've apparently run the copy past a high school English teacher as well, as the either/or, neither/nor grammatical faux pas found in the earlier version has been corrected. Additionally, not only does this disclaimer present a more formal written appearance, it is also read aloud by a young but serious-enough-sounding male, ensuring that even those movie goers trying to send out one final text message before the film starts will at least *hear* the warning, reflecting a clear effort on the production company's part to cover its legal bases in every manner possible. Because, ultimately, that is what a disclaimer of this sort is intended to do: we told you letting a snake bite your penis was a dangerous idea, so you can't sue us if you decide to do it anyway. As the production value of the film increases, so does the film's budget, and so does the film's overall exposure and risk, all of which invites the legal team to step in and remind us all that not everything in life is a joke. The moral here is even Jackasses have to grow up sometimes, and in Hollywood, no matter how fantastically whimsical the story you are selling may be, money is always very, very real. Ultimately, though, the disclaimer in *Jackass 3D* performs an additional role in that it declares that the film's performances of postmodern slapstick put the actor's safety at risk. Quite literally, it tells us that the postmodern slapstick in the movie you are about to watch is so real that it can hurt you. The disclaimer explicitly draws a distinct boundary around *Jackass 3D* that divides it from all previous, traditional forms of

slapstick comedy, and, in doing so, connects postmodern slapstick more explicitly with the human.

In the near five hundred years Shakespeare's comedies have been staged, disclaimers have never (at least this explicitly) been an aspect of their productions. The same is true for the cartoon slapstick of *Tom and Jerry* and "Itchy and Scratchy"; *Tom and Jerry* has been entertaining children for over fifty years with physically violent forms of Saturday morning entertainment without any kind of warning, which is precisely what the sensationalized violence of "Itchy and Scratchy" satirizes. Even the 2012 Farrelly Brothers' reproduction of *The Three Stooges* manages to avoid warning the audience about the dangerousness of the pranks and stunts contained within, even though non-cartoon depictions of eyes being poked and hair being pulled are clearly actions that could be quite dangerous. In all of these examples of traditional slapstick, the assumption appears to be that we know enough to know that what we are seeing on the screen is fake, and, therefore, we don't have to be warned otherwise; this boundary has been historically repeated and maintained to such an extent that no one even questions it anymore. However, this clear-cut distinction cannot be assumed with postmodern forms of slapstick. The image of the disclaimer serves to explicitly address the physical reality of the human actors and to make the audience aware of how these forms of slapstick differ from traditional forms. But the disclaimer, like the 3D technology of the film itself, shows no regard for the original events. It shows no regard for the original, physical reality of the actors (they obviously didn't heed its advice), but is instead turned toward the audience. It dramatizes the film itself as a false copy, or simulacrum, as always turning away from the original, always structured toward the audience. *Jackass 3D* uses the disclaimer to further set up how its humorous appeals in the form of postmodern slapstick

continually reproduce a sense of the real by maintaining the perception that traditional slapstick is as fake as Disneyland.

By using traditional forms of slapstick and the image of the disclaimer at the film's outset, *Jackass 3D* sets the stage for the audience to receive a heightened sense of the real within the film's postmodern comedic form. In Baudrillard's terms, the humorous appeals found in these postmodern slapstick skits dramatize how the simulacrum threatens this distinction between the original and the copy because it doesn't imply a presence, or a regard for an original, but an absence, which calls into question the principle of reality itself:

To dissimulate is to pretend to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn't have. One implies a presence, the other an absence. But it is more complicated than that because simulating is not pretending: 'Whoever fakes an illness can simply stay in bed and make everyone believe he is ill. Whoever simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms' (Littré). Therefore, pretending, or dissimulating, leaves the principle of reality intact: the difference is always clear, it is simply masked, whereas simulation threatens the difference between the 'true' and the 'false,' the 'real' and the 'imaginary.' Is the simulator sick or not, given that he produces 'true' symptoms? (3)

While the simulation produced by *Jackass 3D* is not a technically a kind of sickness (although a case could probably be made), its postmodern slapstick does appear to want to give the appearance that "true" symptoms are being produced in the actors. For in traditional slapstick, we clearly see a form of dissimulation, or of pretending to have what one does not have – pain – in a way that leaves the distinction between real and fake intact. Traditional slapstick implies presence. However, while the postmodern slapstick in *Jackass 3D* produces the symptoms of pain in the actors, the production of these symptoms, as images structured toward the audience, is enhanced in ways that have no regard for the original actions.

Two specific skits from *Jackass 3D* dramatize how the film problematizes the distinction between the original and the copy. The two bits, "Beehive Tetherball," and

“Gorilla in a Hotel Suite,” demonstrate the lengths to which postmodern slapstick will go to create a sense of the real. Additionally, because both of these bits feature humor created by bringing together the human and the animal, looking at them together helps further complicate the human-animal relationship that has been viewed as foundational in traditional theories of humor. As Simon Critchley writes:

Humour is human. Why? Well, because the philosopher, Aristotle, says so. In *On the Parts of the Animals*, he writes, ‘no animal laughs save Man.’ This quotation echoes down the centuries from Galen and Porphyry, through Rabelais to Hazlitt and Bergson. Now, if laughter is proper to the human being, then the human being who does not laugh invites the charge of inhumanity, or at least makes us somewhat suspicious. (*On Humour* 25)

From this traditional perspective, laughter lends a sort of authenticity to the human experience of humor, sequestering it from the experiences of other animals. This makes laughter more “real” to the human being than to the animal, because in the animal kingdom, so the traditional view goes, laughter is impossible. Therefore, any reference to an animal laughing must be fake (Itchy the cartoon mouse laughing at Scratchy’s repeated demise, for example) and naturally divided from the authentic experience of human laughter.²¹ While the skits included do not overtly engage in the debate about animal laughter, they do rely on a certain distinction between human and animal in order to perform their forms of postmodern slapstick, while simultaneously teasing at this distinction.

The first skit, “Beehive Tetherball,” is a quintessential example of postmodern slapstick performed within the *Jackass* oeuvre. The skit produces its humorous appeal by celebrating the pain of two *Jackass* actors and, in doing so, revisits Plato’s early

²¹ However, as Chapter One explained, chimpanzees produce identifiable laugh types when responding to other laughing chimps and lab rats are attracted to other lab rats who exhibit frequent laughing chirps. So this traditional distinction is becoming eroded as the human increasingly moves closer to the animal and vice versa.

apprehensions about how malicious forms of humorous appeals interrupt the subject's rational pursuit of the good life. In the skit, actors Steve O and Dave England are (minimally) dressed as bears: furry bear ears, wristbands, sneakers, and underwear briefs. The bears play a game of tetherball using a beehive as the ball. The skits protracted setup, featuring testimony from a professional beekeeper and a predatory animal expert, produces the sense that the actors are in very real danger. The beekeeper, commenting on the roughly 50,000 bees in the hive that will be used in the skit, all but guarantees the punchline will be delivered:

Camera Operator: What do you think the chances are of these guys getting stung today?

Bee Keeper: They're gonna get stung. Yeah, there's no doubt in my mind, when you hit a ball full of bees, you're going to get stung.

After establishing sting certainty, the predatory animal expert quantifies the range of danger as it pertains to bee stings, a testimony that serves to further ratchet up the drama surrounding the skit's pain and safety levels:

Steve O: How many bee stings do you think we can take?

Predatory animal expert: I think it takes about a hundred to kill a man.

Dave England: What?

Steve O: There's 50,000 bees in there ...

England: Did you just make that up? Please?

The skit unfolds much as one would expect. Steve O and England, before they even take their places around the tether ball, are clearly getting stung, as bees swarm around the dangling tether ball and frantic voices from off-frame ("This is gonna be gnarly now, man!"; "I'm already getting hit!"; "Come on! Do it! Do it! Do it! Do it!") highlight the moment's precariousness. Loomis Fall, playing the role of referee (and getting stung himself), introduces the skit while screaming in pain: "Got a butt-ton of bees! My two sexy players! This is Beehive Tetherball! Game on!" Steve O and England hit the ball back and forth

about a half dozen times, all the while screaming, swearing, and swatting bees from their face and legs, before England finally submits and runs from the frame, screaming, “I can’t do it anymore!!!” As England flees in pain, the promise of postmodern slapstick in the skit becomes successfully realized: everyone (actors, crew, predatory animal expert) gets repeatedly stung by bees. Rather than being sidestepped here, pain is celebrated, and, as a result, laughter is produced in the audience (again, that is, if you’re in to this sort of thing).

“Beehive Tetherball” realistically represents the painful experience of getting stung by bees and, by this logic, might be simply seen as inverting the pain/absence of pain binary upon which traditional slapstick comedy relies. However, even though laughing at the misery of Steve O and England’s beestings is clearly an example of the superiority theory of humor, this skit’s effects are not reducible to flipping this pain/absence of pain binary by capturing the base, animalistic, and painful experience of postmodern slapstick on film in a humorous way. Instead, the formal cinematic techniques used in the production of the skit both create and perform a simulation that is structured toward the audience and produces effects that exceed the naturalness of the skit’s bee sting premise, raising questions about the distinctions between original and copy, human and non-human. Throughout the skit, scenes highlight certain safety considerations that the film’s dialogue does not explicitly call attention to. For example, while Loomis Fall introduces the skit (with bees already stinging Steve O, England, and Fall himself), standing in the background – yet still clearly in frame – is the predatory animal expert, who is holding a long spear with a sharp metal point at one end. One assumes that this man and his spear are nearby in the event things take a turn for the worse. Similarly, after England flees the game, a camera follows him as he sprints through an open field, arms flailing, in an effort to get as far away from the bees as possible. When the camera operator

finally catches up to him, he is hysterical and begins to sob (“Oh, fuck! ... Oh, Dude ... It fucking hurts! ... Oh god ... Oh fuck!”) as bees continue to swarm him (“Please put me somewhere where there’s no bees!”). As England pleads for help, parked behind him and very much in frame is an ambulance, present, like the predatory animal expert, to provide assistance to the actors. Of course there are pragmatic purposes for having these safety measures in place when you are filming a skit like “Beehive Tetherball,” but the filmmakers make decisions to include these specific safety measures in the film’s final cut. These choices effectively transform the ambulance and predatory animal expert from their original pragmatic purpose in the scene into images or props that produce effects exceeding their original purposes. Exchanged now as images not limited by their roles on set, these props further the film’s efforts to produce a sense of the real by enhancing the overall image of danger and risk inherent in the skit’s production of postmodern slapstick.

To take this a step further, “Beehive Tetherball” creates another image of heightened danger by means of the film production technique “Foley.” Foley is the use of reproduced sound effects, which are added during postproduction to subtly enhance the sonic realism of a scene. Throughout *Jackass 3D*, Foley is liberally employed to heighten the sense of physical impact dramatized in the postmodern slapstick skits. For example, in the recurring “Rocky” skits, where actors are snuck up on from behind and punched in the face while the Rocky theme plays, and in “Roller Buffalo,” where Johnny Knoxville is run over by a charging buffalo while wearing roller skates, Foley is added to the slow-motion replays of each scene, enhancing the moment of impact with more sonically dramatic sound effects that exceed the original sound captured by the microphones on set. Similarly, in “Beehive Tetherball,” Foley is used to create the image of an ongoing sense of dread by means of the

din of buzzing bees. Throughout the different scenes edited together to create the skit, the loud sound of buzzing bees is always present at both a decibel level and a consistency that clearly exceeds the crew's sustained physical proximity to the hive. In an effort to capture the real effects of postmodern slapstick, "Beehive Tetherball" employs artificially reproduced sound effects added to the film's soundtrack long after the scene has been filmed; the fake is used, as it is throughout *Jackass 3D*, to create the sense of the real. Perhaps this paradoxical process of producing the real by means of artificial cinematic enhancement is best dramatized in the exchange between England and an off camera crewmember shortly after England comes to terms with the unfortunate mathematical equation of 50,000 bees + 100 bee stings = death. England, with obvious concern, asks, "So what are we doing here?" to which an off camera voice responds, "We're making a hit movie."

While "Beehive Tetherball" transforms precautionary safety measures and employs Foley sound effect techniques to create images that artificially produce a sense of danger, the "Gorilla in a Hotel Suite" skit functions somewhat inversely, creating a sense of real danger with an "authentic" image of fake danger. The "Gorilla" skit is a variation on postmodern slapstick in a sense, because unlike "Beehive Tetherball," for example, physical pain is not intended to befall any of the actors. Instead, the punchline for "Gorilla in a Hotel Suite" is the emotional trauma that actor Bam Margera's parents, April and Phil, experience when they check into their hotel suite and encounter a full-grown gorilla. The animal is fake, nothing more than actor Chris Pontius in an extremely realistic gorilla suit. April and Phil, of course, don't know this. This scenario is further enhanced by the fact that April and Phil have been recipients of countless pranks at the hands of their son over the years, both in the *Jackass* franchise and in a spin off television production starring their son called *Viva la*

Bam, so there is a strong precedent that the element of chaos makes occasional, unexpected appearances in these people's lives. This particular skit, however, tries to exploit that precedent by making it appear that this is not a prank, per se, but a prank gone wrong. The "Gorilla in a Hotel Suite" does not perform a real prank, but a copy of a prank, a prank that is fake. What this skit dramatizes is the impossibility of staging an illusion in the era of simulation, when images are only exchanged with each other. As Baudrillard writes, "The impossibility of rediscovering an absolute level of the real is of the same order as the impossibility of staging illusion. Illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible" (19). In other words, faking a prank shows us that a real prank is, itself, just a performance produced in the image of all the pranks that came before it. Staging a real prank and an illusion of a prank are both made impossible in the era of the hyperreal, as Baudrillard argues in his depiction of a fake holdup:

Organize a fake holdup. Verify that your weapons are harmless, and take the most trustworthy hostage, so that no human life will be in danger (or one lapses into the criminal). Demand a ransom, and make it so that the operation creates as much commotion as possible – in short, remain close to the 'truth,' in order to test the reaction of the apparatus to a perfect simulacrum. You won't be able to do it: the network of artificial signs will become inextricable mixed up with real elements [...] in short, you will immediately find yourself once again, without wishing it, in the real, one of whose functions is precisely to devour any attempt at simulation, to reduce everything to the real – that is, to the established order itself. (20)

What this suggests, therefore, is that a real holdup is really just a re-enactment of the genre of the holdup, showing us that "if it is practically impossible to isolate the process of simulation, through the force of inertia of the real that surrounds us, the opposite is also true [...] it is *now impossible to isolate the process of the real*, or to prove the real," a point the "Gorilla in a Hotel Suite" exemplifies (21).

In the skit, hidden cameras capture the action in both the hallway outside the hotel suite and from various angles inside. As soon as April and Phil enter the suite, two cast members in the hallway lock April and Phil inside. The gorilla appears, dragging a potted plant into the frame and making aggressive sounds and gestures that, obviously, terrify April and Phil, who flee to a corner of the suite, where they watch through a doorway as the gorilla destroys the room. April screams uncontrollably while Phil tries unsuccessfully to leave through the sealed off front door. Singer/songwriter and actor Will Oldham, in a cameo appearance as the panicked gorilla trainer, runs into the scene and tries to establish control over the animal: “No, no, no, no, no! It’s ok, it’s ok, it’s ok! This is Sampson, this is Sampson, just, don’t make eye contact. Sampson down, be quiet. He’s a good boy, he wants to be a good boy, he’s a good boy. Just don’t make eye contact. No sudden movements. Don’t make eye contact.” Oldham then tries to communicate with the gorilla by means of a series of grunts, a strategy that quickly fails as the gorilla knocks him across the room. At this moment, the skit appears to blow its own cover, as a cameraman runs from a closet screaming, “Get out! Get out of here!” What is being performed here is a pretend failure, a skit turned bad because it has gotten dangerously away from the cast and crew to such an extent that any further effort to maintain the artifice would not be in the interest of everyone’s safety. The joke, however, is that this chaos, this apparently failed prank, is all part of the act, all part of the process of creating a fake copy of a real prank. The front door of the suite is finally opened, and the cast and crew take positions at one end of the hotel hallway while the trainer appears to hold the gorilla at bay at the other. From this position of relative safety, an overwrought April and her son have the following exchange, with the cast and crew all feigning the same level of fear and trepidation April is projecting:

April: Oh my god, I never saw a gorilla before.
Bam: He's tame.
April: He's not tame, he just wrecked the whole room!
Bam: Well, no, there's a fucking trainer there.
April: Big deal! Did this go wrong or something?
Bam: Kinda.

The power of the image to produce a sense of the real is exemplified April's terrified response, as she still believes she is in the presence of real gorilla: "What was supposed to happen? [...] What was it supposed to be just fun or something?"²² Poor Phil's response, however, might prove more indicative of skit's performative force, as we come to find out that he was so scared by what he thought was a rampaging gorilla in his hotel suite that he sought refuge from the attack in the bathroom. As the camera crew heads back into the suite to check on him, Phil, from off-camera, utters a dejected, "I shit myself." Ultimately, the fake prank reveals its full artifice when the gorilla breaks character and begins to speak: "I need this thing off, I can't breathe. I need this off." April, upon overhearing the gorilla speak, gets wise to what is afoot: "Is that a person? That's a fricking person!" Oldham steps in and removes the mask, revealing the sweaty, smirking Pontius inside. The gig is up, and a sense of the real has been restored. April, after taking a fresh inventory of the scenario, embraces the now headless gorilla and declares, with a palpable relief that underscores the impossibility of staging an illusion, "I'm so glad you're fake!" The illusion has been revealed, dramatizing Baudrillard's point that real pranks function in the same manner:

This is how all the holdups, airplane hijackings, etc. are now in some sense simulation holdups in that they are already inscribed in the decoding and orchestration rituals of the media, anticipated in their presentation and their possible consequences. In short, where they function as a group of signs dedicated exclusively to their recurrence as signs, and no longer at all to their 'real' end. But this does not make them harmless. On the contrary, it is as

²² A funny coincidence apropos to this bit is that all the Jackass cast members always refer to April by her nickname: Ape.

hyperreal events, no longer with a specific content or end, but indefinitely refracted by each other [...] it is in this sense that they cannot be controlled by an order that can only exert itself on the real and rational. (21)

The fact that the gorilla was fake did not render it harmless, as April's blood pressure level and Phil's intestinal discord clearly attest. Instead, the preexisting genre of the prank precedes this attempt to fake a prank, showing that no "real" prank could ever succeed without this same preexisting "recurrence of signs." It is the simulacrum that precedes the original and gives the original its own sense of authenticity.

The notion of the true copy and the false copy are dramatized in the relationship of traditional slapstick and postmodern slapstick. Traditional slapstick maintains an appreciation for the distinction between the original and the copy because it always announces itself to the audience as a representation of actual pain, never suggesting that the injuries befalling the actors are real. In fact, the humorous appeals in traditional slapstick rely on this distinction to function in the first place. We can laugh at Curly's eye pokes because we know the human being playing Curly isn't getting hurt, and the Coyote's injuries are similarly authorized because he is a cartoon and not a human at all. Thus, traditional slapstick is a copy, but because it maintains a distinction between the original and the copy, it is a true copy. Postmodern slapstick, on the other hand, blurs this distinction. The humorous appeals captured in the postmodern slapstick of *Jackass 3D* announce themselves to the audience not as representations of pain, but as actual pain. However, because *Jackass 3D* is a film it is still a copy of the real. By employing various cinematic techniques to enhance this production of the real, *Jackass 3D* does not maintain the same distinction between the real and the copy that traditional slapstick relies on; therefore, *Jackass 3D* is a false copy that lacks the concern for the original. Both traditional slapstick and postmodern slapstick are

copies, and both copies, in a sense, resemble each other. But because the postmodern slapstick is a false copy, a simulacrum with no concern for the original, it calls into question the distinction between the original and the copy.²³

²³ On a closing note, the final on-screen image in *Jackass 3D* is a callback to the film's opening disclaimer. Read in the same youthful, yet serious tone as the opening montage, this disclaimer also looks backwards in the past tense, as it tries to buttress any nostalgic impulse that this closing montage and the film itself may have inspired in the movie going audience:

REMINDER: The stunts in this movie were performed by professionals, so for your safety and the protection of those around you, do not attempt any of the stunts you have just seen.

In other words, it still takes a professional Jackass to be a real Jackass, so don't try to fake it. You might get hurt.

Chapter Five
So I Don't Even Know My Own Name?: Approaching Alterity in Soundboard Prank Phone
Calls

Wouldn't you typically just hang up on a weirdo?

- *Howard Stern*

[A telephone rings. An older male (interlocutor A) answers the phone at his home and begins a conversation with celebrity fitness advocate and Deal-A-Meal entrepreneur Richard Simmons (interlocutor B). Interlocutor A does not recognize interlocutor B.]

A: Hello?

B: *For all these years I wondered, what I would ever say if I ever found you.*

A: Who is this?

B: *My name is Cheryl. I believe I am your daughter.*

A: Uh ... you must have the wrong number.

B: *Oh my god. My name is Cheryl. And I'm your daughter.*

A: I don't have a daughter named Cheryl.

B: *Please tell me why you're doing this to yourself?*

A: What do you mean why I'm doing this to myself? You better get off this phone before I call the telephone company and have them come git'cha.

B: *I don't like this new attitude of yours.*

A: Well you don't have to like it! Just get off my phone!

[A Hangs up.]

[Telephone Rings again ...]

A: Hello.

B: *I just want you, to be my mom.*

A: You want what?

B: *I just want you, to be my mom.*

A: How can a man be a mom?

B: *Well, I'll think about it ...*

A: Well you better think a long, long time and don't dial this number again.

B: *I mean for your whole life you knew nothing about me.*

A: And I don't want to know anything about ya', now, I just want you to get off my phone and leave me alone.

B: *I'm so sorry.*

A: Well show me that by not calling me anymore.

B: *OK!*

A: ...

[A Hangs up.]

[Telephone Rings again ...]

A: Hello.

B: *My name is Cheryl. I believe I am your daughter.*

A: I told you to get off my phone and quit calling me! Now I mean it!
I'm gonna have you put in jail if you don't!

B: *What's wrong?*

A: Huh?

B: *What's wrong?*

A: What's right?

B: *Please don't hang up the phone again.*

A: I'm gonna hang up the phone again, because I've got no time for
you!

B: *Don't you start with me!*

A: What do you mean don't start with you, you, you started it. You
started it when you dialed my number!

B: *Where's mama?*

A: What?

B: *Where's mama?*

A: You heard mama? What are you talking about?

B: *I'm sorry.*

A: Well show me you're sorry by leaving me alone, and don't dial my
number anymore.

B: *I'll call back in an hour!*

A: You'd better not!

B: *Yes! Yes! Yes!*

A: I'll tell you what ... If you call back the telephone company is
gonna monitor the call and they're gonna know who you are
and they're gonna come git'cha!

B: *You're so beautiful.*

A: I don't know what you're talking about.

B: *My name is Cheryl. And I'm your daughter.*

A: No, you're not my daughter. I don't have a daughter named
Cheryl. I don't have a daughter that's a man.

B: *Sure.*

A: Obviously, obviously you're a male. You sound like a male.

B: *No!*

A: And how could I be your mom? Because I'm a male, too.

B: *Don't you start with me!*

A: Well you started this!

B: *I don't like this new attitude of yours!*

A: I don't like you either!

B: *What's wrong?*

A: What?

B: *What's wrong?*

A: What do you mean, "What's right?"

B: *Well, I'll think about it ...*

A: Well you better thing about it for 1,000 years ...
B: *No!*
A: Yes!
B: *No!*
A: Yes!
B: *No!*
A: Wait, why do you say, "No"?
B: *Is this Diane?*
A: What?
B: *Is this Diane?*
A: Is it ... what?
B: *Is this Diane?*
A: Tan?
B: *Is this Diane?*
A: ... No!
[A Hangs up.]

Imagine yourself getting caught up in a conversation such as this one. You're home alone, the phone rings, and you answer it. Quickly, something seems ... off. The responses of the party on the other end of the line don't follow any rational pattern you can relate to. Certain statements seem logically (and perhaps biologically) contradictory. The person doesn't seem to be comprehending you, or even listening to you or to what you are saying. No matter what you say, you get the feeling that it is not being interpreted, and, try as you might, you can't make the other person's words ring any hermeneutic bells for you, either. You find yourself continually struggling to make any meaning at all out of the communication that is taking place, to return any part of the other party's utterances into the realm of your own experiences so as to make some sense of it. But you keep trying, desperately, to find a way to understand what the other is saying, or to get them to understand what you are saying, on your own terms. Ultimately, you're left not really knowing what to do about the situation you have found yourself in, and you start to get the feeling that the only sensible explanation for all of this is that the person on the other end of the phone is a complete weirdo.

But what if the person on the other end of the line wasn't really a person at all? In this conversation transcribed above, the reason why interlocutor A found the conversation so frustratingly impenetrable was because it wasn't really a conversation at all. Not in the traditional sense, anyway. From A's perspective in this phone call, the voice on the other end of his line *sounds* like a human voice (and, technically, it is). The sounds A hears are, on a sonic level, the very sounds created when Richard Simmons speaks, and the words being spoken are actual words that he has spoken himself at one time. But the living, breathing human being whose experiences are collected under the name "Richard Simmons" is not actually present on the phone call. In other words, it is not Richard Simmons himself, not a self-present human subject, who is talking to A. The reason why interlocutor A is struggling so hard to make sense of the person on the other end of his line is because the person on the other end of his line is not an actual person. But unfortunately for A, he doesn't know it.

What interlocutor A actually *is* in this conversation is the butt of a joke, an unwitting victim of a prank telephone call constructed using a technique called *soundboarding*. While lexically similar to the new-millennial coercion technique known as waterboarding, soundboarding (although perhaps itself a low-level form of torture) has a much less grave intent than waterboarding. Soundboarding is a technology regularly employed by producers on "The Howard Stern Radio Show," meaning these prank phone calls are created specifically with Stern's audience in mind. Like any other prank phone call, soundboarding is a way to play a practical joke, to "get one over" on unsuspecting victims. Because these soundboard pranks require a butt of the joke, they produce laughter at the expense of someone else. As such, they are examples of the superiority theory of humor, or the ethically suspect form of humor that greatly troubled Plato. The fear for Plato is that when we laugh

at the expense of someone else, the source of laughter is malice, and malice is not something a soul seeking to live the good life should take pleasure in. Laughing at these jokes interrupts the subject's rational pursuit of the good life, and, as such, Plato argued for their censorship in his Ideal Republic.

As examples of the practical joke genre, prank calls have been around since cheeky children have had telephone lines in their homes and free time on their hands. The classic gags of the genre, cliché's at this point with unknown origins, include "Do you have Prince Albert in a can?" and "Is your refrigerator running?" Traditionally, the early forms of prank calls were always done by actual human beings on other actual human beings. For example, when the corner storeowner responds that, "Yes, we do have Prince Albert in a can," the practical joker on the other end of the line delivers the punchline: "Well, you'd better let him out before he suffocates!" Part of the thrill in making these traditional forms of prank phone calls is based on whether or not the practical joker can keep in character and keep herself from cracking up as she implements the prank. The question to be answered is can the practical joker maintain herself as the stable center of the prank's rhetorical situation long enough for the joke to succeed to its full potential? The practical joker who gets too excited might laugh out loud before the punchline is delivered, effectively blowing her cover, or the shy prankster might get embarrassed and end the call prematurely. In other words, these early forms of prank phone calls relied on a human prankster maintaining rational control over herself in order to successfully deliver the humorous appeal and produce her desired effects. If laughter, or some other uncontrollable emotion such as embarrassment, were to well up inside the prankster and exceed her abilities to rationally control herself, she would lose control of the rhetorical situation, lose control of the joke, and the gag would be a bust.

Early forms of prank phone calls function just like any other persuasive rhetorical situation: a stable human subject attempts to control language to produce effects of her own design.

Soundboarding, however, complicates this traditionally human-centric prank phone call model because it uses new-millennial technology to create a non-human prankster. Here's how it works: a recording of someone's voice is originally made. That recording is cut up into small clips, or citations. Those clips are then loaded into a software program on a computer – the soundboard – where these individual audio clips are assigned to buttons. When the buttons are pressed, whatever audio clip has been assigned to that button is played. In this way, the person operating the soundboard can press the buttons in any order to create a voice that sounds like a real human interlocutor – but it's not. So the prank phone caller makes a call to the unsuspecting victim and places that person into dialogue with the soundboard-produced, non-human interlocutor. The resulting exchange typically bewilders and exasperates the victim, because the victim becomes embroiled in a very frustrating conversation. As such, these calls typically break down in unpredictable ways. For example, in the above transcript, the clips heard in the prank call were originally recorded for one of Richard Simmons' audio books. Richard Christy and Sal Governale, two producers from the "Howard Stern Radio Show," took the original audio book recording and cut it into small clips that were loaded into a computer soundboard program. The prank phone call was made, and the clips of Richard Simmons were played back to create a series of absurd and mystifying responses to questions that appeared to be coming from a human being. The whole prank was then recorded by Richard and Sal, and, ultimately, broadcast on the radio as a comedy bit for Stern's audience. The breakdown of the conversation caused by the victim's unflinchingly off-balance responses to the soundboard interlocutor creates the

prank's humorous appeal: we laugh at the prank's victim twisting in the wind, struggling to come to terms with the incomprehensible weirdo on the other end of the line. The more profoundly that breakdown occurs, the more successful the prank, and, in theory, the harder we laugh at the appeal (that is, again, if you're in to this sort of thing).

In addition to being excellent sources of entertainment for the junior high student living inside (some) of us, these soundboard prank calls – because they dramatize an exchange between a human subject and an unapproachable other – also give us a way to think about the ethics of alterity, or the Otherness of Levinasian ethics. Alterity is important to rhetoric because it offers a way to think about a poststructuralist ethics that is an alternative to the humanist or Enlightenment view of the subject. As Diane Davis puts it in *Breaking Up [at] Totality: A Rhetoric of Laughter*, rhetoric has long imagined a very human subject occupying the center of the rhetorical situation manipulating language to create persuasive appeals of his own design: “‘man’ is at the center of language, the master of his own speech, and that speech is an expression of man’s consciousness” (69). The problem with this humanist view of the subject, however, is that, in this model, the subject’s relationship with the other is always one of appropriation. In other words, the humanist subject goes out into the world and contacts otherness, but those encounters are always in service of absorbing the other into the subject’s own horizon and enriching the self. As Jeffrey T. Nealon writes:

[To critique this humanist view of subjectivity is] to critique a subjectivity that inexorably goes about reducing the other to the categories of the self. Any ethical system that understands the other as simply “like the self” will be unable to respond adequately to the other’s uniqueness and singularity; indeed, such a reduction amounts to a kind of subjective colonialism, where all the other’s desires are reduced to the desires off the ‘home country,’ the self. (*Alterity Politics* 31-2)

In this instance, the humanist subject lives to seek out otherness everywhere and then kill it; it defeats otherness in the sense that the humanist subject always returns the other to its own horizon. For example, consider the typical vacation scenario where one visits an exotic “other” culture: I go to Fiji, I take a lot of photos, and I buy a cannibal fork (the ones they sell especially to tourists). I then return home with a lot of photos and a cannibal fork and a bunch of stories (“They had actual cannibals there not very long ago ... can you believe it?”) that demonstrate how I have used this encounter with the other to enrich myself. I am now myself *plus* this experience in Fiji. This demonstrates a movement of the other toward the self in order to enrich the self for personal gain and profit. Again, Nealon writes:

So the Enlightenment subject, ‘in order to find himself,’ turns *outward* to the diversity of the other(s); such a subject ‘loses himself’ in order to secure the higher dynamism of an evolving, adventuring appropriation that can confront and conquer ever newer forms of otherness. Such a subject has learned to make use of the other, and finds itself only by means of the other. The bourgeois subject, one might say, profits from its investment in the other; it gets a return for its risk. (32)

This desire to appropriate is dangerous precisely because this subject only puts itself in relation to the other to master it, to bring it back home to its own horizon. Therefore, humanist ethics is a kind of black hole, always and only drawing otherness toward the self where otherness cannot escape. It is an essentializing, appropriating, colonizing ethics that does not approach the other on its own terms, but seeks only to make the other a part of the self, to reduce the other’s difference to the self’s same.

An ethics of alterity, however, offers a way to respond to the other not as something to be mastered and returned to the subject’s own horizon, but as a radically unapproachable and absolute “Other,” one toward which the subject is always moving, but can never reach. In this encounter with otherness that cannot be reached, the subject itself is interrupted. In

Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority, Emmanuel Levinas uses the concepts of *totality* and *infinity* to forward an approach to the other that is non-essentializing. Levinas defines *totality* as the space of identification of the self; it is the ontological realm of “being” where human reason and meaning-making occur and subjectivity resides. As he writes, “The meaning of individuals (invisible outside of this totality) is derived from the totality” (*Totality* 22). According to Levinas, the “I,” the ego, takes place in the world of totality; it is the space where we reside when we are acting the parts of our identity. In short, totality is the always-appropriating space of the rational human subject.

But there exists a space beyond totality, a space where movement is always away from the self, always toward a radically other Other that is, itself, always effacing, always going away. Soundboarding prank phone calls provide a glimpse of this space, the space of *infinity*, or the non-totalizable space beyond totality and beyond the self’s ego, where the ethics of alterity arises. Levinas imagines this “Other ethics” as follows:

A calling into question of the same – which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same – is brought about by the other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics. (43)

For Levinas, what it means to be in relation to the Other is to be subjected *by the other*, to have infinite debt *to the other*. To say “I” is to admit my total dependency on an Other who has allowed me to have some kind of identity; “I” am not anything but this response to the Other. Diane Davis describes this response by way of an appropriate metaphor for this chapter, the telephone call:

[Y]ou pick up the phone, and your first word is ‘yes?’ Even if you say ‘hello?’ it means ‘yes?’ Before you can say, ‘yes, I will take your call’ or ‘no, I won’t take your call,’ you have taken the call, *in order* to get the chance to

decide. Already in picking up, you have responded, welcomed the other in. Indeed, even before you pick up, the ringing itself announces that the other is in, has already come in through the phone line or cable line or cell signal that runs into your home (or pocket) from the outside. (*Inessential* 121)

When the victim of a soundboard prank phone call hears the phone ring, she is already being welcomed by the Other, already being given a chance to say “yes.” It is the Other who provides the victim with an opening; the Other is always calling us and allowing us an opportunity to say “yes,” to say “I.” From this perspective, to be “I” is to have no attributes that come from an ego or a stable self. We are not full of the characteristics collected under our name. Instead, the things that make us unique come from our unique modes of subjection; we are constantly in a performative response when we are in a responsible relationship with the Other, and this performative response never ends. Even though we do not stay in this space of infinity – we do hermeneutical things, for example, analyzing things and returning the other to the self all the time – there has to be this space of infinity before the space of totality can even be possible. As Levinas writes, “Metaphysics, transcendence, the welcoming of the other by the same, of the Other by me, that is, as the ethics that accomplishes the critical essence of knowledge. And as a critique precedes dogmatism, metaphysics precedes ontology” (43). In other words, this space of infinity, this ethics of alterity, is a *condition of possibility* for having a sense of the self and living in totality. In a soundboard prank, the call of the soundboard-created, non-human other provides the victim with the condition of possibility for having a sense of self and for living in totality. But these calls also dramatize the interruption of both the victim of the prank and the audience of the prank occurring as a result of the victim’s encounter with an infinite Other. When the butt of the joke is placed into conversation with the soundboard created Other, the performative response of the butt of the joke is to become frustrated and unglued, to become interrupted by

this encounter with infinite otherness. And the audience listening to all this happen responds to the victim's breakdown by laughing at the victim's misery, a performative response that also interrupts the subjectivity of the audience members, since laughter's asignifying force produces effects that exceed the rational control of the human. In other words, the audience of soundboard prank phone calls encounter otherness as well; while the victim of the prank encounters otherness by means of an encounter with a wholly non-present, radical Other, the audience of the prank call encounters the otherness of laughter.

But it doesn't take a soundboard prank phone call to encounter otherness. As Levinas suggests, this is what happens anytime anyone is addressed in a phone call (or addressed in any situation); the Other interlocutor is always an infinite Other, and the relationship remains an irrecoverable exteriority. However, for Levinas, this relationship is always a fundamentally *human* relationship. Davis writes:

According to Levinas, the address that opens the space of the ethical relation takes place – first of all, if not exclusively – among human ‘brothers.’ [...] Levinas himself declares that his notion of ethics arises precisely in the ‘gap between the animal and the human,’ and he stakes his ‘entire philosophy’ on the conviction that this gap is uncrossable. (144)

Again, we encounter another front in the human-animal divide: the human is the animal who laughs, uses rhetoric, and remains exclusively capable of creating the address that opens the space of the ethical relation. However, what these non-human, non-representational soundboard prank phone calls can help us imagine is not just a non-appropriating encounter with a non-present Other, but a non-appropriating encounter with a *non-human* Other. In this instance, the address that opens the space of a soundboard prank phone call does not take place exclusively among human brothers. Davis says of the address:

When you address me, you both give a said to be interpreted and, simultaneously, withdraw from the interpretive context [...] No matter what

you say to me, when you address me you present yourself as an interpretable phenomenon from which you are always already busting loose, as a theme or concept that nonetheless cannot contain you. Sending me a greeting from the ‘outside,’ you communicate more than I can comprehend, a ‘surplus’ of alterity that I can neither appropriate nor abdicate [...] it’s the address that provokes the opening [toward the other], and [...] the address itself is a rhetorical gesture. (“Addressing Alterity” 193)

Put differently, when a human subject addresses someone else, what that subject offers in that address can never be fully contained by the person being addressed. The addressor is “always already busting loose,” always, on some level, an “impenetrable phenomenon” to the addressee. But in traditional conversational exchanges, the “said to be interpreted” still resides within language, still resides within meaning and within the realm of the humanist self because both the addressor and the addressee remain *human*. However, what takes place in a soundboard prank call, in the rhetorical gesture of the prank itself, is not an essentially human address, but an address from a wholly non-present and non-human other. Consider the following example of a soundboard prank call, also taken from “The Howard Stern Radio Show.” This prank begins with a middle-aged man (interlocutor A) answering the phone at his place of business. He begins a conversation with radio talk show host and self-proclaimed alien abductee Riley Martin (interlocutor B), but interlocutor A does not recognize Martin:

[Telephone rings ...]

A: Hello?

B: *Hello, Bobby?*

A: No, this is Thomas.

B: *Hello, Brian?*

A: No, this ... what you want?

B: *Hello, Chris?*

A: No.

B: *Hello, Chris from Arizona?*

A: No.

B: *Hello, James?*

A: No.

B: Hello, Louis?

A: No.

B: Hello, Michelle?

A: Ah ... look here. All them names you calling me, they ain't making no sense.

B: Hello, Tony?

A: No, this is Thomas.

B: Hello, Tom?

A: Yes.

B: Hello, Steve?

A: No.

B: Hello, Thomas?

A: Well, wait a minute now, I'm gonna hang up.

B: Hello, Otis!

A: ...

[A hangs up.]

The setup of this prank is conceptually simplistic. Riley Martin does a radio show where he takes calls from listeners. Stern show producers Christy and Governale recorded one of his shows, cut out the audio clips where Mr. Martin addresses his callers by their different given names, and then put those audio clips into a soundboard program. They then called an unsuspecting victim and used the soundboard to create an interlocutor who addressed the victim with a variety of names, occasionally landing on his actual name, but never staying in that place of understanding for very long. The call continues:

[Telephone rings again ...]

A: Hello?

B: Hello, Stephanie!

A: Hey, look here. You, you're talking to the wrong person.

B: Hello, Thomas?

A: Alright, then.

B: Hello, Slim?

A: No, I ain't Slim.

B: Hello, Curtis from New Orleans?

A: I ain't Curtis from New Orleans.

B: How are you, Mike?

A: I ain't that. My name is Thomas.

B: Hello, Thomas!

A: Hey.

B: Hello, Michelle?

A: ...

[A hangs up.]

The prank revolves around its manipulation of the rhetorical address, but in particular, it toys with a specific aspect of the address, the part that calls out, literally, to the victim's source of self-identification: his *name*. In this call, the humorous appeal is derived from a sort of amplified identity crisis on the part of the victim. He hears someone on the other end of the phone, addressing him, giving him a chance to say "yes" to the Other, but this address becomes interruptive for him because the "him" that is being addressed is being toyed with by the pranksters. The victim wants to be called out to by his own sense of "I," but this call shows us how that sense of "I" is only possible after the other has already welcomed him in and given him a chance to say "I." In other words, the victim is given the chance to be his sense of "I," to be "Thomas," (which is who he wants to be) at the moment his phone rings. But Thomas becomes frustrated because he wants the Other on the other end of his phone to call out to him specifically, to acknowledge himself to himself *as* himself, to tell him, "Yes, you are Thomas!" But this call shows us how identity is already interrupted by infinite otherness, because "Thomas" is no more stable, no more full of the qualities that make him "Thomas" before his phone rang than he is during this interruptive phone call. It is just that the phone call explicitly brings an interruption that is always already happening and that continually gives him the chance to have the performative response that he calls "Thomas," to light.

When people listen to a prank call like this, one typical response is to ask, “Why is the guy still on the phone? Why doesn’t he just hang up on this weirdo?” Perhaps, the victim seems to linger so long because he is trying to return some part of the call – the part that addresses his self-identity – back to the horizon of the same. Or, perhaps he is trying to respond to the address, to answer the call and say, “yes” to the other. In either case, the victim’s perseverance and patience with the soundboard interlocutor and his struggle to make meaning out of the call dramatizes how the subject is interrupted by way of an encounter with otherness that cannot be reached. But it does so in such a way that the victim’s loss is the audience’s gain. Listening to someone become interrupted, watching them twist in the wind and break down in frustration during an encounter with otherness, provides an opportunity to laugh, and, much to Plato’s chagrin, to take pleasure in the misfortune of others. Frankly, it is hard not to laugh at someone who, when called both “Curtis from New Orleans” and “Stephanie” in the space of the same phone call, doesn’t immediately hang up. Yet while we laugh at the victim struggling with otherness, we are simultaneously encountering otherness ourselves: the otherness of laughter. What these soundboard prank calls ultimately do – by way of humorous appeals constructed around encounters with otherness – is to bring the audience listening to the prank on the radio into an encounter with otherness in the form of the interruptive effects of laughter’s assignifying force.

In addition to dramatizing how the victim’s rational sense of self is interrupted when he encounters a wholly non-present other, the next section of this prank call also highlights Derrida’s concept of language’s essential iterability. As the call continues, it expands on the prank’s initial setup, as the soundboard interlocutor stops addressing the victim with random given names and, instead, turns to reciting a garbled “shout out” of people and places and

dog names and general gibberish.²⁴ Once the victim thinks that the person on the other end of the line is finally talking to “Thomas,” the message that is then transmitted remains incomprehensible to the victim as it continues to address things beyond the victim’s horizon of meaning:

[Telephone rings again ...]

A: Hello?

B: *Hello, Tom?*

A: Yeah?

B: *Yeah, um, yeah, yeah, uh, shout out, uh, shout out here, uh ... to uh ... Andre, Tom Hoffman, and his little dog Ember in Gentilly, Virginia, uh ... Jeff in Jefferson, Mississippi ... Uh, he don't hurt nobody [laughing] ... And, Bill Nickin in Rosaries.*

A: Look here. Uh, if you want to keep talking, you call somebody else. But, don't call me. Cause I got, I, I'm on a business phone.

[A hangs up.]

When we get to the “shout out” section of this prank, we see a performance of how language – in order to function as a language – must be able to be lifted from one context and placed in another where it can still function in some capacity (even if that capacity is “non-meaning”). For Derrida, to be able to identify a mark we must be able to repeat it, and, conversely, we would be unable to read a writing that we could not repeat; it would not be legible to us as writing. Therefore, citation is always possible in language; it has to be for language to be language. We can always lift words from out of one written context and those words will still function. For example, we can record a clip of Riley Martin saying “Hello, Tom!” on his radio show and put that clip on a soundboard and then hit the button and hear, “Hello, Tom!” Language has been cited from one context and placed in another where it can still function as

²⁴ At the end of every episode of the Riley Martin’s Show, Martin does a segment called “Shout Outs,” where he names fans from around the country, recognizing them, and sending them various well-wishes. Often, by the time the shout out section of the show comes around, Martin has had a few too many Miller Lite’s; the shout out’s, therefore, are often difficult to interpret, even when spoken from the non-soundboard version of Riley Martin.

language. However, we can also graft that chain of writing onto another chain where it can still function. Grafted together in a new way, a series of shout outs from Riley Martin's radio show now sounds like, "Yeah, um, yeah, yeah, uh, shout out, us shout out here uh ... to uh ... Andre, Tom Hoffman, and his little dog Enber in Gentilly, Virginia." Even if in this new context the grafts represent "non-meaning" or "agrammaticalness," they still constitute one of the possible effects of language. They can then always be cited again and grafted onto new chains where they have infinite future possibilities. As Derrida explains in "Signature Event Context":

Certain utterances can have a meaning although they are deprived of *objective* signification. 'The circle is squared' is a proposition endowed with meaning. It has sufficient meaning at least for me to judge it false or contradictory [...] 'Squared circle' marks the absence of a referent, certainly, as well as that of a certain signified, but not the absence of meaning. (11)

In other words, writing's essential iterability shows us that "One can perhaps come to recognize other possibilities in [writing] by inscribing it or *grafting* it onto other chains. No context can entirely enclose it" (9). Writing's essential iterability, this repeatability-with-a-difference, always necessitates repetition somewhere else, as iterability is a general condition of language's possibility. Without it, no signs would be recognizable, since any sign, spoken or written, has to be able to be removed from its context and placed in another in order for it to function as such. These soundboard prank phone calls show us how encountering a limitless Other serves to disperse what we might think of as "I" into an infinite number of future possibilities, future instantiations or performative responses of the self. Without them there can be no "I," no sense of the self at all, since they also show us how language functions just like the self. Language is always already interrupted by its future possibilities, just as the subject is always already interrupted by its infinite encounters with a limitless

otherness; without this interruption, nothing resembling a successful language, or a self-identity, an “I,” could ever be possible.

The connection between being and language in soundboard prank calls can further be explored by means of Levinas’ concept of language having two aspects: the *said* and the *saying*. The *said* is that which can be thematized and returned to the realm of the self, to the “I.” As Davis puts it, “The said indicates the constative production of conceptual forms, themes, ideas; it thus offers itself up to interpretation” (“Addressing Alterity” 192-3). In a manner, then, the said relates to Austin’s constatives, in that the said embodies the content of the statement, and, therefore, reflects ontological closure and the assertion of the self. The said demonstrates being as digestive; it is language going out and seeking out alterity only to incorporate it into the horizon of the self. The *saying*, on the other hand, is an expressive position of one facing the other in an ethical relationship with alterity. Davis again writes, “The saying, by contrast [to the said], indicates a performative, an address that necessarily unsettles what is congealed in the already-said [...] it shatters the conceptual image that ‘I’ have interiorized of ‘you,’ which takes us both out, ‘essentially’” (193). The saying, then, is ethical openness – an “*otherwise than being*” – as opposed to the said’s ontological closure (*Otherwise* 1). Relating this to Austin’s performatives, the saying is never fully reducible to meaning, because it escapes comprehension and functions in a manner beyond signification. Rather than reflecting assertion, the saying interrupts notions of statement, content, and assertion. Much in the same way infinity is the condition of possibility for totality, the saying is the “pre-original language” that allows for the statement, content, and assertion of the said to occur. However, like the relationship of infinity to totality, language does not

reside within the saying; the saying is always betrayed by the said. Levinas describes this paradoxical relationship as follows:

The correlation of the saying and the said, that is, the subordination of the saying to the said, to the linguistic system and to ontology, is the price that manifestation demands. In language quo said everything is conveyed before us, be it at the price of a betrayal. (6)

In other words, there is no way to say what is unsayable, no way to use language and not be “betrayed” by the said, because to say anything is to return to the ontological realm of the self that “manifestation demands.” This betrayal – the indiscretion with regards to the unsayable – becomes a labyrinth from which there appears to be no rational way out.

Levinas’ circuitously apropos description of this maze, “The *otherwise than being* is stated in a saying that must also be unsaid in order to thus extract the *otherwise than being* from the said in which it already comes to signify but a *being otherwise*,” suggests that language is caught in a logical contradiction. But Davis suggests that glimpses of a way out are possible if we can resist the temptation to always reduce everything to the realm of meaning and understanding:

[T]he challenge is to refuse to reduce the saying to the said, to keep hermeneutic interpretation from absorbing the strictly rhetorical gesture of the approach, which interrupts the movement of appropriation and bursts any illusion of having *understood*. (208)

This refusal to reduce the saying to the said, bursting the illusion of having understood, is precisely what soundboard prank phone calls do. By functioning as practical jokes designed to thwart meaning and understanding at every turn, soundboard prank phone calls place their victim in a space where the saying briefly ascends the said. These calls rarely *mean* anything; that’s what makes them funny. Yet they still *do* many things that are irreducible to meaning and reason: they interrupt the subjectivity of the victim by placing her into an

encounter with infinite otherness; they dramatize the effects of a non-human rhetorical address providing the opening to the other; and (when successful) they produce the effect of laughter – a non-rational response – in the audience listening along on the radio. These moments where subjectivity is interrupted in both the victim of the prank and in the audience provide glimpses of the space where the saying briefly takes precedent over the said, reiterating what it means to use language and reminding us that meaning is just one possible effect of language.

Consider another example that dramatizes what else soundboard prank phone calls can do. The following prank is more technically involved than the two examples previously addressed, and, therefore, requires a more detailed introduction. In this skit, Stern producers Christy and Governale host a fictitious call-in radio show called “The Jack and Rod Show.” The premise of this recurring skit is that actual guests call into “The Jack and Rod Show” with something real to promote. The guests believe they are on a real radio program, but the interviews always take a turn for the strange. In one episode, fire alarms repeatedly go off inside Jack and Rod’s studio during the interview; the prank culminates with the studio being consumed by fire and the unwitting call-in guest screaming “Get out of there!” to her pranksters. Other examples, however, employ the use of soundboard prank phone calls to create humorous appeals for Stern’s audience. The following prank is particularly germane to the question of how to refuse reducing the saying to the said because it troubles the very horizon of meaning by interrupting the victim’s sense of identity in an unsettling way. Here’s how it works: the prank begins with what seems to be a normal setup for a call-in radio talk show. The show’s hosts introduce the show’s guest:

[Theme Music Plays ...]

Host #1 (Jack): And we’re back with the Jack and Rod Show, and

today we have author of *Who Do You See in the Mirror?* Dr. Joseph A. Williams.

[Applause ...]

Host #2 (Rod): How you doing, doctor?

Dr. Williams: Ok, how 'bout you?

Rod: Tell us a little bit about what makes your book so unique?

Dr. Williams: Well, I, what I did was design a system called the Human CABLE System, which stands for Consequence, Attitude, Behavior, Learning, and Environment.

Jack: Hmm. Interesting. Let's take a call, Rod.

Rod: Good idea, Jack. Caller, you're on the air with Dr. Joseph A. Williams.

At this point, the show's guest, the victim of the prank, is placed into contact with the soundboard created caller. The curious aspect of this particular soundboard created caller, however, is that it is actually created from a previous audio recording of the victim's own voice. In other words, the victim of this prank is tricked into getting into a heated argument with himself. Because the logistics of this prank are so confusing (how does someone get into a situation where they get into an argument with their own voice?), I actually contacted Dr. Joseph A. Williams, and, in my own attempt to return the other to my own horizon, conducted a brief interview with him about this encounter. While the question of "How could you possibly not recognize your own voice?" was danced around and never confronted directly, Dr. Williams graciously explained how the prank came into being. Sometime before the prank, members of the Stern show conducted an original interview with him. The conditions of this first interview, at the time, never revealed any connection to the later prank phone call; Dr. Williams never had any reason to believe that these two interviews, conducted some time apart, were related in any way. They just seemed like two different interviews about his book ("Williams Interview"). So this "Jack and Rod Show" prank unfolded over time, because a preliminary fake interview had to occur with Dr. Williams so that a recording of his own voice could be used in the later prank, and enough time had to

pass so Dr. Williams would not be given reason to suspect any kind of connection between the two interviews. In the preliminary fake interview, Dr. Williams mentioned that another caller was used to “accuse me of plagiarism” (“Williams Interview”). Because the Stern show producers employed this accusatory angle in the prank’s setup, they had recordings of Dr. Williams making statements defending his own work that they ultimately used in the later prank to confuse Dr. Williams. Those earlier recordings were then cited and assigned to the soundboard software, where they were then grafted together in a new context and turned back on Dr. Williams in the prank transcribed here:

Caller: Hello?

Dr. Williams: Good morning.

Caller: You actually stole my idea.

Dr. Williams: Oh, I stole your idea? Ok, well that’s funny. That’s a ... I took the Human CABLE System and, cause I own the trademark on it.

Caller: I have the trademark on the Human CABLE System.

Dr. Williams: Oh, really? Hmm, now, you know, you, that’s a, that’s a pretty big accusation there. And, I, I don’t understand where you’re coming from.

Caller: I clearly own the trademark and it will be registered in about another month.

Dr. Williams: Hmm, that’s gonna be, this is gonna be really interesting, because, guess what? Mine will be registered in a month.

Caller: There was two characters in the book. Can you give me the name of the female character?

Dr. Williams: Oh! Ok, I have, ah, Donna, who’s the female character.

Caller: No, it, it was Donna. He’s wrong on, on the character, the female character.

Dr. Williams: I was wrong, from, from my own book? You, you asked me to name the character from my book.

Caller: Yes.

Dr. Williams: Not your book. My book! My book, is, it’s Donna.

Caller: No, it, it was Donna.

Dr. Williams. That’s what I said! It’s in my book! It was Donna. That’s correct!

Caller: He’s wrong again! He gave me the wrong name.

Dr. Williams: What do you mean? How can I be wrong on my own book? I have a copy of it! It’s in front of me! I have the copy

of the book now, [laughing] as I speak to you!

Caller: You are wrong again.

Dr. Williams: I'm wrong, and, and, it's Donna? And I'm looking at it? How could you come up with that kind of, kind of uh ... vision. I mean that is blatant, it's just don't, uh, It doesn't prove, uh, it doesn't make sense!

Caller: My name is Dr. Joseph A. Williams.

Dr. Williams: Hey, what is, what is going on here? Hey, look here [laughing] My name is Dr. Joseph Williams, come on!

Caller: My full name, is, you know, Joseph A. Williams.

Dr. Williams: Well, that's exactly, uh, my name.

Caller: You are wrong again!

Dr. Williams: I'm, I'm wrong ... oh, so I don't even know my own name?

Caller: No. My full name is Joseph A. Williams.

Dr. Williams: You, you're Dr., well, OK, maybe there's two, so, uh, I'm not going to ...

Caller: Hello, Leroy.

Dr. Williams: Hello? What do you mean, Leroy?

Caller: Hello, Leroy.

Dr. Williams: Oh, I'm Leroy, huh?

Caller: No, it, it was, Donna.

Dr. Williams: Gee whiz, what is going on here? I am now being, I haven't gotta ... then he comes up with Leroy?

Caller: Hello, Leroy?

Dr. Williams: Wow. This is quite a, uh, situation here. I tell ya.

[Dr. Williams hangs up.]

Again, the first question one typically has when hearing a prank like this for the first time is, “How is this possible? How can someone actually not recognize their own voice?” While there are many possible logical answers to this question – nervousness associated with being interviewed, a prideful, instinctive defensiveness of one’s own intellectual property, a general confusion and uncomfortableness stemming from the (misguided) belief that all this abundant weirdness happening to you is unfolding live on the air – the most significant answer is not one that can be derived from logic: one would likely not recognize their own voice on the other end of a phone call because being in a telephone conversation with yourself is a logical impossibility. However, what this prank shows us – in its logically

impossible way of exceeding essence and refusing the said – is how the “I” that we think we are, the “I” with whom Dr. Joseph A. Williams self-identifies, is the result of a constant performative response before a limitless Other that disperses what we think of as “I” into an infinite number of future possibilities. In this prank call, the limitless Other on the phone with Dr. Williams is so unapproachable, so beyond reason, that Dr. Williams cannot return the Other to his own horizon of the same, even though the voice on the other end of the line is his own. Dr. Williams cannot even return himself to his own horizon of the same because he, in this moment, is a self so completely interrupted by his encounter with infinite otherness.

In providing us with these glimpses of infinity and the saying, the exchanges captured in these soundboard prank calls ultimately lead us to a rhetoric beyond the human. In the case of the Dr. Williams prank, they show us Dr. Williams is really not so different than his soundboard created self: the only way the real Dr. Williams ever gets to think about “being,” is *after* he enters this ethical relationship with a wholly unapproachable Other. In this case, there is no stable, complete Dr. Williams. Dr. Williams gets to think of himself as “I” only after a limitless other disperses what he thinks of as “I” into an infinite number of future instantiations or performative responses of the self. An ethics of alterity relies on the kinds of performative responses these pranks capture because, as Nealon notes, they are forms of “nonphilosophical experience” that exceed the totality of the said:

[I]t is not abstract systems of obligation that give a thickness to human ethical life; rather, ethics is born and maintained through the necessity of *performative response* to the other person, and such a responsiveness (which he calls ‘responsibility’) comes necessarily *before* the solidification of any theoretical rules or political norms of ethical conduct. In this way, Levinas asks us to consider the primacy of ‘nonphilosophical’ experience; that is, he continually calls attention to the primacy of an experience of sociality or

otherness that comes before any philosophical understanding or reification of our respective subject positions. (34)

These soundboard pranks offer a way to respond to the other as something not to be mastered and returned to the subject's own horizon. And because the initiator of the address in a soundboard prank call, the originator of the rhetorical gesture, is not human, these calls also challenge the traditional model of the rhetorical situation as having a stable, human subject at its center who consciously manipulates language to produce effects of her own designs. In this way, these calls dramatize the rhetoric beyond hermeneutics that Davis argues for in "Addressing Alterity":

I want to suggest that there is also a *non*-hermeneutical dimension of rhetoric that has nothing to do with meaning making, with offering up significations to comprehension. This dimension is reducible neither to figuration nor to what typically goes by the name persuasion; it is devoted to a certain reception, but not to the appropriation of meaning. Preceding and exceeding all hermeneutic interpretation, it deals not in signified meaning but in the address itself, in the exposure to the other; it deals not in the 'said' (*le dit*) but in the 'saying' (*le dire*). (192)

What these soundboard prank phone calls provide us with a glimpse of is what Davis calls "a rhetoric of the *saying*" (194). As rhetorical gestures that address the other as Other, these prank calls precede and exceed interpretation, operating with an asignifying force that deals not in signified meaning, but in the address itself.

As rhetorical gestures initiated by a non-human Other, these prank calls demonstrate – as much as is theoretically possible – an ethics of alterity, or what happens when a human residing within totality encounters an other *as* Other. This glimpse becomes all the more tangible – not in a rational manner, but in an emotional manner – by means of the interruptive force of asignifying laughter. When we watch someone get pranked by a soundboard call, we witness how her subjectivity is interrupted by an encounter with alterity.

The effect of this encounter for the audience watching it is that we laugh ourselves, expressing an emotion that interrupts our own subjectivity because it operates in excess of reason. Because these prank calls dramatize the uncomfortable, interruptive exposedness of this encounter in a way that produces laughter, they help us *feel* this non-rational encounter with alterity in a more explicit way because we really *feel* the effects of laughter. As such, these calls help show us the interruptive effects of a radical encounter with alterity because they make us laugh, and the effects of laughter's asignifying force are interruptive as well because they exceed our rational control; laughing uncontrollably is not something reason can bring under control. Laughter laughs us as much as we produce laughter in ourselves and in each other. Therefore, these soundboard prank calls show how rhetoric can be about more than signification and the appropriation of meaning by a human subject, as they provide an opening in which to imagine a different way to respond to the Other, a new way to think about an ethics of alterity, and a posthuman horizon for rhetoric.

Conclusion

*I heard the billionth voice, the voice of endless complexity
There were no bearings, I heard them, they were me.*

- Wayne Coyne of *The Flaming Lips*

“We Don’t Control the Controls,” the droning, fourteen-minute, gloriously disturbing closing track on The Flaming Lips’ post-punk, psychedelic masterpiece *The Terror*, concludes a dark, troubling album on a poignantly enigmatic note. With songs like “Butterfly, How Long it Takes to Die,” (“You can see the universe is ending/Making love darker than the night”), “Be Free, A Way,” (“The sun shines now but we’re so alone/It’s not, this not, the light that shines”), and the album’s title track, “The Terror,” (“The terror’s in our heads, they don’t control the controls/I turn to face the sun, we are still standing alone/At last we’ll stand by the terror,”) *The Terror* is a tortuous meditation on how the emotion of human love forces us to confront the limitations of human agency and the fallibility of rational control. On the one hand, “We Don’t Control the Controls” – with its moments of dissonant, atonal pugnacity - sublimely crystalizes the fractured narrative of loss, alienation, and the inevitable march toward entropy that the album, as if caught in the gravitational pull of an irrepressibly immense celestial body, struggles to escape from. On the other hand, however, because “We Don’t Control the Controls” is an instrumental composition, its effects are produced by means of non-linguistic, asignifying forces that are not completely reducible to reason. Not being driven by semantic themes, “We Don’t Control the Controls” – with its chorus of unintelligible human voices mixed opaquely in the background and its structureless rhythmic and harmonic monotony – responds to the limitations of human reason and control in a different way, by means of non-representation sonic forces like dynamics, density, and dearth, forces that lie beyond the limits of rational understanding. In other

words, to encounter “We Don’t Control the Controls” is, poetically, to encounter that which cannot be completely controlled, cannot be entirely returned to the domain of meaning and rational representation, and cannot be contained by the limits of the human subject. It is to confront the limitations of the self by encountering that which exceeds the self, and to accept that, in fact, we don’t control the controls. In this way, *The Terror’s* terminal track performs the album’s narrative of an exposed and vulnerable self struggling to come to terms with its own limitations. But because its response is non-linguistic and asignifying, the song ends the album with a different way to see the struggling self, not as lacking totality and control, but as always already overflowing, always already exceeded by its limitless future possibilities. In other words, “We Don’t Control the Controls” offers an ending that is also, simultaneously, a new way of beginning.

It is upon a horizon of new beginnings that I would suggest we have found ourselves at the end of this project. A horizon where our conceptions of rhetoric and laughter are no longer contained within a rational human subject. A horizon where what it means to use language, to appeal to humor, and to experience the asignifying force of laughter is to experience a glimpse of what is beyond reason, beyond signification, and beyond the human. It is a horizon where to appeal to laughter is to appeal to what is uncontrollable, to a force capable of overwhelming the subject, interrupting her sense of self, and laughing her as much as she laughs it. In other words, it is a posthuman horizon for rhetoric, where the subject at the controls of the rhetorical situation is no longer completely in control.

The path to this new horizon has taken us in two different directions vis-à-vis the project’s two different parts. Part One began by encountering the traditional view of both laughter and rhetoric as being essentially human phenomena. In the case of laughter, this

powerful emotion has long been perceived as a unique aspect of the human experience. Humans have famously been seen as “the only animal who laughs,” suggesting that the emotion of laughter requires a certain ontological level of experience that is definitionally unavailable to other animals (Hazlitt 2). In a sense, then, laughter has served as the keystone of the human, the one piece that holds the human together and keeps it divisible from what is non-human, or animal. A similar human-centric tradition has also held in the case of rhetoric. The ability to not only use language, but to use it persuasively has long been viewed as an essential part of what separates humans from other animals. Whereas animals have been seen as only being able to enact change and produce effects by means of force or violence, humans can enact change and produce effects by other means, including using language toward persuasive ends. Rhetoric, therefore, is seen as the art that civilizes the human. By using rhetoric, we can get other people to do what we want them to do without having to resort to force or violence. In other words, laughter and rhetoric have long been connected vis-à-vis the human: humans are the only animals that both possess rhetoric and laugh.

However, Part One demonstrates how the asignifying force of laughter and non-human rhetorics challenge this traditional view of the innate humanness of laughter and rhetoric. In the case of laughter, recent studies in the field of animal science have indicated that chimps exhibit laugh-elicited laughter much in the same manner as the contagious, conversational laughter exchanged between humans. Some studies have even indicated that rats produce a frequency of chirping that reflects positive emotional feelings, and rats prefer spending time with other rats who frequently produce these joyous chirps. What these studies suggest is that man’s belief that he is the only animal that laughs can no longer be definitively assumed. As such, the boundary between rational “human” discourse and non-

rational “animal” discourse is not as firm as we might like to believe, either. When we are in the throes of uncontrollable laughter and are unable to maintain control of our rational selves, we are not demonstrating some kind of essential humanness. Rather, when we are in the throes of uncontrollable laughter, we are being interrupted by an asignifying operation that we cannot interpret or control, one that shows us the limits of our humanness. No matter how much we might wish it were the case, we can’t always rationally stop laughter: sometimes laughter is in control.

Just as laughter challenges what it means to be human, laughter also challenges rhetoric’s ability to define itself as a uniquely human, rational art. Rhetoric has always proceeded from the position that a human orator residing at the center of the rhetorical situation can rationally use language to produce persuasive effects of her own design. But because laughter is not a signifying language, laughter is not language operating in this traditional, human sense. Even though, as traditional rhetorical theories seek to theorize, laughter can often be conjured by means of constructing language in such a way that the right humorous appeal is produced for the right audience at the right time, this does not constitute the limits of laughter’s rhetorical effects. Rather, laughter functions by means of an asignifying force that is not entirely reducible to reason and signification, yet it can still produce effects. For example, laughter can become contagious and cause others to laugh when they have no idea why they are laughing, or it can overwhelm a human subject at an inopportune time, laughing them no matter how desperately they might wish it weren’t the case. In other words, these interruptive effects of laughter’s asignifying force function beyond signification and exceed the rational control of the subject. Therefore, laughter can never fully be contained within what has traditionally been conceived of as the human

rhetorical situation. In other words, using rhetoric and laughing are not what make us essentially human; using rhetoric and laughing show us the limits of the human. As such, laughter can lead us to a new horizon for rhetoric, one that is beyond reason, beyond signification, and beyond the human.

It is from this posthuman horizon of a rhetoric beyond reason and signification, then, that Part One departs from to revisit the history of rhetoric's traditional approaches to humor and laughter. Because there is, perhaps, no appeal with more persuasive potential than a good joke told at just the right moment, humor and laughter have garnered particular interest and attention across the history of the rhetorical tradition. Since rhetoric is an art interested in teaching humans how to use language to get other humans to do things, an orator who can appeal successfully to what is traditionally seen as the uniquely human emotion of laughter would seem to increase her chances at successful persuasion. Such an appropriately told joke, for example, can refresh a judge who has grown weary from a long day at court, or disarm the animosity surrounding a negatively charged issue, or can even be used as a weapon, as a way of attacking an adversary by ridiculing her shortcomings to take that person down a few pegs in the eyes of the audience. Ultimately, when used appropriately, appeals to humor are a powerful way for an orator to bolster her ethos by creating an intimate connection – Aristotle's "friendly feeling" – between the orator and her audience. When appeals to humor are used appropriately so the desired effect, laughter, is produced in an appropriate manner, everyone is likely to be feeling friendly. And since we generally like to laugh, and we like people who can make us laugh, an orator who is interested in persuasion would likely find the ability to make an audience laugh a very, very good thing.

But because this desired effect – laughter – functions with an asignifying force that exceeds human reason, appealing to this force is risky. Therefore, traditional rhetorical approaches to humor and laughter have tried to advise orators on how to construct humorous appeals in a way that maximizes their chances for success and minimizes their chances for failure. From Plato to Castiglione, theorists across the tradition have encountered humor and laughter from different angles, always with an eye on the odds. In other words, which appeals, at which time, for which audiences are most likely to be appropriate, and which appeals should be used with caution or even avoided entirely. Some thinkers, like Plato, take a much more hard line approach to controlling laughter. Because laughter functions like a drug or like the persuasive arts in general, leading the soul away from its rational part and toward the part ruled by appetites and desires, Plato sees the effects of laughter as a threat to the soul’s efforts to follow the good, rational life. As such, Plato calls for the censorship of literature that depicted gods or worthwhile people in the throes of uncontrollable laughter. Other theorists like Quintilian, however, take exhaustive measures to try to account for as many possible effects of humorous appeals as possible. Quintilian sees the ability to appeal to laughter as an “absolutely indispensable” skill for an orator to possess and, as such, he labors tirelessly toward a sort of method, or a series of focused suggestions at least, that an orator can follow to construct appropriate forms of humorous appeals at the appropriate times to produce appropriate effects. Ultimately, because rhetoric is an art traditionally centered on the idea that a rational human subject can control the rhetorical situation to produce desired effects, all these approaches demonstrate a desire to articulate the means by which an orator can construct the right humorous appeals at the right time to rationally control the many possible effects of laughter.

However, what the act of bringing the asignifying force of laughter to bear on the rhetorical tradition's historic approaches to humor and laughter shows us is that, while these traditional approaches might appear to be concentrating on how to rationally control laughter, they simultaneously all demonstrate an awareness – on some level – that the asignifying force of laughter exceeds the rational control of the orator. When Plato, for example, says in the *Republic*, “Whenever anyone says such things about a god, we’ll be angry with him, refuse him a chorus, and not allow his poetry to be used in the education of the young,” what he fears is precisely laughter’s ability to interrupt rational control (383b9-c1). Therefore, his approach to controlling laughter’s asignifying force and its interruptive ability to exceed rational control in humans (and even gods) is to ban outright certain forms of humorous appeals and the depictions of laughter they produce. And when Quintilian, for example, writes in the midst of his wide-ranging chapter advising orators on how to best construct humorous appeals, “I do not think that anybody can give an adequate explanation, though many have attempted to do so, of the cause of laughter,” he is admitting that the goal of his pursuits is beyond comprehension by the human subject (*Institutio* 6.3.7-8). He is acknowledging that even though appealing to humor is an absolutely indispensable skill for an orator, appealing to an uncontrollable force like laughter is always a risky endeavor. And when Castiglione, rather than presenting his advice on how to construct humorous appeals in a theoretical manner, actually *performs* these appeals by means of jokes told by interlocutors in his dialogues, he actually dramatizes laughter asignifying force rather than suggesting how it can be controlled. For example, when Bernardo tells an inappropriate joke of the sort he claims should not be told in the presence of a lady *in the presence* of Emilia Pia, the lady’s response upends his theory. First off, she laughs. Then, she responds with a joke of her own,

retorting that Bernardo's boorish perspective on women "is caused more by the fact that he has never found a woman to look at him than by any frailty that exists in women themselves" (*Courtier* 175). Lady Pia's response to the joke actually performs the uncontrollability that lies within all appeals to humor, that makes any attempt at conjuring laughter in an audience a risky endeavor. In other words, these approaches are actually doing more than they are saying – both on a theoretical and on a practical level – when it comes to their engagement with humor and laughter. They are performing the paradox that surrounds efforts to control what is uncontrollable. As such these approaches to humor and laughter foreshadow the posthuman notions that the subject at the center of the rhetorical situation can no longer be relied upon to be in rational control of language. Laughter, as an asignifying force that exceeds rational control, is important to rethinking the rhetorical situation because we really feel the effects of laughter. In other words, when a subject is laughing uncontrollably, unable to rationally stop laughter from laughing her, the interruption of the subject is explicitly dramatized: she really feels it. But this interruption is not limited to asignifying operations; signifying operations operate in the same way, it's just that their interruptive effects are not always as easy to feel. As such, laughter gives us a way, an opening from which to approach the idea of a posthuman subject at the center of all rhetorical situations – not just those constructed around creating humorous appeals – who is not rationally in control of language.

A final note on Part One: this new horizon we have arrived at should not be seen as an ending. This path has not led us to a termination; this is not the point where a discrete break from tradition happens and an entirely new direction is born. Rather, this project's approach to rhetoric's historic treatment of humor and laughter in Part One is not a conclusion to somewhere we already been, but the beginning of a new way of imagining

humor and laughter within the tradition, as seeing this tradition as already having done more than we have historically given it credit. Rhetoric has historically been defined as a rational art, and in these traditional approaches to humor and laughter we clearly see attempts to control laughter by means of rationally constructed humorous appeals. So on one hand, rhetoric has attempted to control the object of humor, to construct the catalyst that is used to conjure up laughter in a rational way so that the appropriate effects will be produced. On the other hand, however, the object in this model is always already haunted by the excess of its effects. In other words, appeals to humor, no matter how rationally constructed, are always already interrupted, always already exceeded by the asignifying force of laughter. Yet the new beginning we have arrived at with regard to rhetoric's traditional approaches to humor and laughter is that all of these approaches – on some level – reveal an awareness of laughter's asignifying force. As such, they are more fluid, more dynamic, and offer us a more generous encounter with humor and laughter than they have generally been given credit. In other words, this new horizon Part One concludes upon should not be seen as an ending, but instead, as a way to begin at the beginning again, for the first time.

While perhaps spatially and numerically coming after Part One in this project, Part Two is not to be taken as conceptually following the issues discussed in Part One. What this project seeks to perform by means of its two parts is that at the very moment Part One departs on its path back through the rhetorical tradition's approaches to humor and laughter, revisiting this history again for the first time, Part Two simultaneously departs on its path through contemporary, postmodern humorous locations where the effects of laughter's asignifying force can be observed. In other words, what these two parts are attempting to dramatize is the discrete yet fluid relationship between the two concepts of humor and

laughter. With its engagement with rhetoric's history of trying to rationally control rhetorical appeals, Part One is conceptually more geared toward humor. After all, how these rhetoricians attempt to advise orators when dealing with appeals to humor is to provide them with ways to construct appeals, to make appropriate objects of humor that will successfully conjure up the humorous effects the orator desires. Part Two, however, is more interested in the effects of these humorous objects – laughter. As such, it engages the question, “What happens when we are already laughing?” or, to put it differently, “How does laughter *do* what it does?” Observing the uncontrollable effects of laughter in action, performing its own interruptive power in a variety of humorous locations retroactively allows us to revisit rhetoric's traditional approaches to humor from a new perspective. In other words, the effects of the asignifying force of laughter dramatized in Part Two – how it interrupts the self, functions beyond signification, and exceeds control and reason – are the conditions of possibility for any kind of rational approach to humor – such as those explored in Part One – to ever be possible in the first place. Because even though laughter is ultimately uncontrollable, jokes are told everyday that go off just as they were supposed to. Sometimes, a rhetor can be just the right amount of funny at just the right time. But this desired effect, this outcome of appropriate laughter, is just one possible effect of many. Meaning is always only one possible effect. Sometime laughter follows humor just the way we want it to, but sometimes it doesn't. In other words, the effects of laughter's asignifying force show us that appeals to humor are always already interrupted by their infinite future instantiations. Jokes that succeed are only ever possible because the infinite future possible effects of laughter's asignifying force always already interrupt any joke.

So when Part Two moves through different performances that appeal to laughter's asignifying force, it does so with an eye toward observing what the effects of this force actually *do*. For example, the effects of Lenny Bruce's stand up comedy performance dramatize the positive productive potentials of laughter's asignifying force. In this performance Bruce's comedy act gets reinscribed and reinvented in multiple contexts – the “nonserious” realm of the comedy club and the “serious” realm of the courts – that produce a wide array of effects, some of the most significant of which are clearly unintentional and uncontrollable by Bruce himself. Because of this, this performance shows us how humorous appeals are always already interrupted by their future instantiations and can never fully be contained in a given context, not even by the context of the human subject's conscious intentions. In the case of *Jackass 3D*, the effects of postmodern slapstick upend the traditional notion of the image as a copy that follows the original. Forms of postmodern slapstick don't produce the appearance of pain and suffering such as is produced by traditional forms of slapstick found in *Tom and Jerry* or *The Three Stooges*, but produce actual pain and suffering in the film's actors. However, rather than presenting postmodern slapstick as a new, more “authentic” form of slapstick comedy, *Jackass 3D* actually *creates* a sense of the real by means of enhanced images created by cinematic techniques like 3D technology and high-definition film resolution. As such, this film functions as its own simulacrum, as an image without any relation to reality or a referent and shows us how the traditional distinction between an authentic original and a denigrated copy is upended in the era of simulation when images are only exchanged for each other. And finally, in the case of prank phone call created using the technique of soundboarding, the subjective interruption these calls produce in the prank's victim are the effect of that victim being placed into an

encounter with a wholly non-present, radically other Other. Because the subject at the center of a soundboard created prank phone call is not human, these pranks offer a glimpse at an alternative to the traditional humanist view of the subject as one who goes out into the world and contacts otherness only to return to other into the subject's own horizon and enrich the self. As such, these prank calls dramatize an ethics of alterity, or a way to respond to the other not as something to be mastered and returned to the subject's own horizon, but rather as a radically unapproachable, absolute "Other," one that the subject is always moving towards and can never reach. In a sense, then, these calls offer a glimpse at a new way to respond to the other and a new way to think about an ethics of alterity. But because the Other that initiates the rhetorical address in a soundboard prank phone call is a non-human Other, these calls also offer us a new way to conceive of a rhetoric that is beyond the human, beyond the traditional notion of a humanist subject at the center of the rhetorical situation rationally controlling language to produce effects of her own design.

Which brings us back to where we started. Back to the beginning of the end. Because the two parts of this project are recursive, Part Two's dramatization of laughter's asignifying force lets us reimagine traditional rhetoric's approaches toward humor and laughter in a new way, from a perspective that doesn't find their inability to completely account for all of laughter's possible effects as a failure, but instead sees their attempts to control the uncontrollable as foreshadowing a rhetoric where the human is not in complete control. Conversely, the risks that these traditional approaches advise orators about when attempting to appeal to humor are exposed in the dramatizations of the uncontrollable effects produced by laughter's asignifying force in Part Two, revealing just how little control is possible when appealing to laughter. Ultimately, because laughter is not a signifying

language, yet it still produces rhetorical effects, taking up laughter's asignifying force provides a chance to expand the field of rhetoric in ways beyond the reason, beyond signification, and beyond the human. Taken collectively, then, the interruptive effects dramatized by both Part Two's examples of laughter's asignifying force and the efforts to contain this force in Part One ultimately give us ample reason to question who or what is at the center of the rhetorical situation if, as the song suggests, we don't control the controls.

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Vita

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