

The Devil's Teat and Other Essays

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<u>Contents</u>	<u>Page</u>
1. Introduction: One Damned Thing after Another	3
2. The Devil's Teat	14
3. Rebooting the Nous	35
4. The Pursuit of Happiness	65
5. Language Adventures	78
6. The Speed of Food	92
7. Resisting Advertising	104
8. The Horror of the Other	119
9. What kind of ego should I get?	130

Introduction: One Damned Thing after Another

The essay, rather than just being the primary instrument used for the torture of humanities undergraduates, is an extremely versatile form of creative non-fiction. I prefer, as definitions go, Francis Bacon's "dispersed meditations," Samuel Johnson's "loose sally of the mind," Aldous Huxley's "one damned thing after another,"¹ and best of all, Edward Hoagland's "a greased pig."²

Huxley also came up with a very awkward tripod-shaped piece of intellectual apparatus for thinking about what essays may be, and he concluded (at least according to the indubitable Wikipedia) that "essays belong to a literary species whose extreme variability can be studied most effectively within a three-poled frame of reference."³ These are defined as: personal and autobiographical essays; objective and factual essays; and giraffe-like types. I have yet to determine what, if anything, is meant by the latter category (browsing delicately with a high vantage point? elegantly loping?) Most "loose sallies of the mind" are a mixture of all of the above.

Despite being as tricky a topic to pin down as a greased pig, the essay is still an established and culturally normed mode of writing. It is a method of exploratory thought that adheres to a set of established conventions. We generally expect the essay, since Montaigne's *Essais* (1580), to be some kind of "attempt"⁴ to articulate experience, to synthesise observations, and make fresh sense of something. Indeed, it can be a fairly helpful, if labour-intensive, method of coping with reality, as in my case.

The word 'essay' invites a bit of elaboration. Perhaps the essay is best understood as a kind of intellectual reconnaissance effort, gathering information and making observations via critical surveillance in an attempt to somewhat come to terms with a subject of inquiry and draw meaningful inferences. "Essayer" itself in turn derives from the Latin *exagium* from *exagere*, which means 'to sift' or 'winnow'.⁵ 'Winnowing' is a quaint word not found in the minimalistic MS Word dictionary but it captures what the essay often sets forth to accomplish- to throw ideas up into a breeze so that the grain falls back to the floor, while the wind blows the chaff away. The contemporary essay does this while navigating the intellectual landscape of fiction, academic writing, journalism, and the mobocratic⁶ blogosphere.

1 Heilker, P. (1996) *The essay: theory and pedagogy for an active form*.p.50

2 Chambers's Encyclopedia, p.375

3 Huxley, A. (1958) *Collected Essays*, Preface.

4 From the French infinitive *essayer*, "to try" or "to attempt"

5 WGN radio programme. June 30, 1999, transcript

6 Frederick Douglass' term, in (1892) *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*.

Whilst the essay clearly at some point takes a left turn down the garden path away from composition prose, it does not usually become an undisciplined confession or an ignorant groping in the undergrowth. This is the exclusive domain of our adolescent poetry and Facebook posts. There remains a tacit requirement and readerly expectation that the work will assimilate into the generic convention of talking to a fairly exclusive semiotic community, as can be expected from the formidable, history of the genre. After all, Plutarch, Cicero, Plato and Seneca all used the dialogue, the letter, and the personal essay as preferred media and established the form's intellectual pedigree.

A number of patterns can be traced from early popularisers of the essay form.

One of these is the unusual subject matter and the ways in which it is handled. Apparently it is not unusual for strange objects or incidents to bring on attack of 'essaying'. Predecessors for the pursuit of odd topics include a famous essay by Addison and Steele (in *The Spectator*) which follows a shilling through its life during a single day. More weirdly, Charles Lamb once wrote a famous paper called *A Dissertation on Roast Pig*, which begins delightfully

Mankind, says a Chinese manuscript, which my friend M. was obliging enough to read and explain to me, for the first seventy thousand ages ate their meat raw, clawing or biting it from the living animal, just as they do in Abyssinia to this day.⁷

This wide-ranging play of the mind also has its intellectual ancestry in Montaigne, and the fact that his titles frequently have nothing to do with what he then goes on to talk about. He takes intriguing philosophical subjects like 'experience' and then goes on about whatever occurs to him, ending up with a discussion of his kidney stones. He has what one critic calls "the great gift of digression,"⁸ spinning out ideas with a silver thread, with "the great good luck that he is interesting on everything."⁹

These great gifts are not presumed, but emulating this practice is one of the ways in which one can consciously infuse vitality and relevance by locating the theme in the greater domain of contemporary life. By drawing diverse connections between disciplines in a kind of 'nomadic syncretism'¹⁰ (Hurwitz, 2011), moving between literary and dramatic criticism, social criticism, anthropology, history and philosophy, one can hopefully digress quite interestingly. As Joseph Epstein says, quoting Paul Klee, "I take a line out for a walk."¹¹ The essays in this collection will take a number of familiar subjects on interesting walks through different knowledge domains and

7 Lamb, C (1823) *A Dissertation Upon Roast Pig*.

8 Epstein, in *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction*. Roundtable: The History of the Essay

9 Radio round table, WGN radio programme, June 30, 1999, Transcript

10 To indulge for a second in that beloved hobby of inventing new constructs

11 Epstein, J.(1991) *A Line Out for a Walk*

perspectives. They attempt to show up some of the 'sense-making repertoires' in different spheres, highlighting the funny social processes and the entertainingly unfamiliar *weltanschauungen* that may have engendered them. This way, we experience the pleasure of having our understanding "marvelously enlightened", and avoid the default state described by Montaigne: "compressed and heaped up in ourselves [with] our sight limited to the length of our own noses".¹²

Although there are conventions, the essay often departs from other standardised conceptions of how non-fiction writing should look and sound, whether we refer to journalistic or academic writing. The essay abandons the conventions of formal composition such as 'rules' of logical argumentation, linear organisation and structure (cf: current meandering), acceptable evidence usage, and proper ways of citing sources. Some of the essay's departures from factual non-fiction include ironic wit and language play, idiosyncratic observations, invented characters (e.g. Royko's famous Slat Grobnik) and deliberately unreliable narration. It is through various playful constructions and practices that, while nevertheless venturing opinions, the essay escapes the strictures and the accompanying self-important tediousness that is sometimes the unfortunate corollary of true scholarly discourse.

Serious reflection, academic-style, in high register and including words like "lacunae", "liminality" and "contrapuntal" could be seen as the heavy grain of thought, to return to the sifting metaphor, with the characteristic essayists' personal interjection dismissed as chaff, atheoretical and subjective. But essays do undertake intelligent, sometimes scholarly and more rarely, systematic rumination. They just tend to do this though with a conscious avoidance of 'scientific' treatment in favour of mosaic-like, multi-angled approaches. In this way, too, intellectual themes are located within the greater domain of public life and experience, rather than within narrow technical disciplinary debates. This is possibly a form of democratisation of knowledge, where the arcane wisdom of the academy is redistributed. Essays draw out the most critical, salient and often curious developments and perspectives within a field of inquiry, and yet they do so without offering a dry, systematic review. The genre can handle complex and challenging questions and yet remain aesthetically free of all the burdens of academic rigour and scholarly argumentation. Unsurprisingly therefore, the essay is a popular medium, reaching a wider audience because of an aesthetically enjoyable and unthreatening form.

Part of not masquerading as 'a paper' and abiding by complex institutionalised discursive rules allows essays to focus on contemporary issues in cultural or social life, trivia, and fragments of

12 Montaigne (1575) *Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, p 32.

apparently random experience. They also have a license to be eccentric, quirky, and playfully personal.

In this collection of essays, academic attempts at in-depth argumentation and substantial paradigm-altering conclusions are abstemiously avoided, according to the principle of *bella gerant alii*.¹³ Unfortunately specialists in each area may feel infuriated to see such ignorant stumbling through their complex domains. Apologies to all concerned. Here, even the grain is light. And the chaff is also much more important than the sieve metaphor would suggest. It is vital, hopefully creating the sense of intellectual community, companionship and familiarity between reader and writer that is the hallmark of an enjoyable essay.

Another of the key differences between academic writing and the essay is the presence of the author. There is often a fairly intimate narratorial presence. It is interesting to note that Montaigne's sifting starts off fairly academically, quoting liberally from his reading, and then eventually it becomes more personal, drawing on his own thinking and experience. Montaigne consciously introduces the 'I' into the discussion. In his introduction, he says, "This book was written in good faith, reader". It warns from the outset that "in it I have set myself no goal but a domestic and private one. I have had no thought of serving either you or my own glory..."¹⁴ This kind of subjectivity has become increasingly characteristic of the genre, and is evident in the use of colloquial register and the immediate (sensorial, local, personally locating) descriptions and anecdotes. This style establishes intimacy with the reader, which is a clear departure from the aspirations of pronoun-free, atemporal academic writing.

The American philosopher Eric Hoffer, who employed Montaigne both stylistically and in thought, wrote in his Memoir, *Truth Imagined*, that "[Montaigne] was writing about me. He knew my innermost thoughts."¹⁵ E.B White, a frequent *New Yorker* contributor and more well known for his children's literature (*Charlotte's Web*) and writing handbook (*The Elements of Style*) was similarly identified as being very 'close' to the reader. White used his narratorial style and self deprecating voice to establish an unaffected simplicity, always sympathising with the reader, and leading to him being described as "the most companionable of writers."¹⁶ How much of this is conscious literary choice and construction rather than some form of innocent self-expression (i.e. being an innately nice guy) unfortunately remains a mystery. I am hoping that being naturally good-natured is not a prerequisite to writing things that make people feel stimulated and amused. Woody Allen

13 'Let others wage war'. Originally from Ovid, *Heroides* 13.84,[1] where Laodamia is writing to her husband Protesilaus who is at the Trojan war, begging him to stay out of danger. Ironically, he is the first Greek to die at Troy.

14 Montaigne, M.(1575) *Essays of Michel de Montaigne*.

15 Hoffer. E. (1983) *Truth Imagined*, p52

16 William Shawn, editor of the *New Yorker*.

is a good counterexample, and as insufferable as he is at so many levels, his essays (and screenplays, as long as he hasn't cast himself in a main role) are excellent.

How does one establish intimacy with a reader even a sense of *abyssus abyssum invocat*?¹⁷ For many essayists it is through a measure of self-disclosure, through occasional deliberate informality. In these essays the shifts in register also deliberately (hopefully) throw the reader out of neutral, factual, intellectual reading into ironic reflexivity and an amused awareness of the many shared conventions that make communication possible.

Thankfully the essayistic narrator also sometimes takes the form of a fictional persona, including neurotic psychoanalysts and bohemian outsiders. Charles Lamb does this, for example, in *Essays of Elia*. The terms 'tatter', 'spectator', 'rambler', and 'idler', all appeal to the idea that there is a kind of person out there, a flâneur-like individual with a sophisticated and interesting gaze, and with whom the reader can identify, wandering around, observing culture and society, and reporting on it. The tone of the observation is important. Sometimes it is weariness tinged with amazement,¹⁸ or amused curiosity. It can convey dry, wry, urbane worldliness. Sometimes it is erudite, opinionated, smug, or gleefully self-exposing.

The voice I have attempted in these essays is skeptical and playful. As the tone and voice developed with successive essays, I found increasing confidence and spaces for playful and reflexive observation and a more personal presence. I tried to achieve an interesting balance between parodic high register using sophisticated and occasionally technical diction (self-consciously deployed and drawing attention to itself as a cultural artifact), and playful, wry, subversive writing, almost a *clin d'oeil* at the reader who shares a skeptical, (if not incredulous) critical and mildly theoretically inclined mindset. Critical to establishing this style was the need to hold the reader in high regard, never underestimating her/his capacity to enjoy irony and his or her preparedness to make leaps between competing disciplines, languages (that neither of us actually speak) and frames of reference.

But we still have really not answered the question: why have I chosen the essay, as opposed to anthropology, criticism of imaginary novels, or expressive dance?

The essay allows one to be fairly direct, conscious, and analytical, interrogating immediate experience. But it remains cognitive and rational, slightly removed from its subjects, and usually encourages the reader to resist psychological 'immersion', contra the novel. It is an extroverted form, not as plagued as fiction is, for the amateur writer, by narcissistic neurosis and

¹⁷ 'The deep calls to the deep,' From Psalms 42:7.

¹⁸ Camus, A. (1942) *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p.10.

autobiographical gravity. This kind of writing offers a fun escape, rather than a deeply introspective turn.

Kundera says that “Existence is the realm of human possibilities, everything that man can become, everything he’s capable of. Novelists draw up the map of human existence by discovering this or that human possibility.”¹⁹ Novelists may well expand the possible experiences of being human and draw maps of new territory, but I propose that an essayist into conventional practices can explore why certain maps (ideas, aspects of consciousness) have changed and become habituated, as well as reveal the telling omissions and the entertainingly self-serving distortions in popular representations. If the novelist is the explorer of consciousness, the essayist is its curator or documentary filmmaker.

A few excellent contemporary examples illustrate the qualities of the genre - the already quoted Kundera’s *The Art of the Novel*, almost any *New Yorker*, *TLS*, *Atlantic* or *Harpers*, and the non-fiction work of a Umberto Eco (e.g. *Travels in Hyperreality*), and the more popular and less serious Bill Bryson, whose work is informative and witty (e.g. *A Short History of Nearly Everything*; *Mother Tongue*; and *Shakespeare*). Margaret Visser writes on the history, anthropology, and mythology of daily life. Her books include *The Rituals of Dinner*, *The Way We Are*, *The Geometry of Love* and *Much Depends on Dinner*, the last of which deals with the social and political histories of ice-cream, mielies and lettuce. Clive James’ topical cultural commentary is typically erudite and wry (*In the Name of Honour*; *On Anti-Semitism*) and Nicholson Baker’s explorations catch the imagination in fascinating webs (*The Size of Thoughts*). Whether they are dealing with milieus or mielies, all of these writers’ work is well researched, educational, stimulating, critical, provocative, and at best, extremely funny.

The pure pleasure of Montaigne’s essays moved Nietzsche to say “That such a man wrote has truly augmented the joy of living on this Earth.”²⁰ There is a deep enjoyment in reading essays because they both elucidate and delight. The genre enlightens in that it uncovers credible yet obscure or specialist evidence in a way that illuminates a field of inquiry to the non-specialist reader. Essays are satisfying forays into novel or specialised subject domains because they develop succinct and interesting observations from substantial volumes of often otherwise inaccessible material, allowing the reader an entrée into a line of exploration or a subject which s/he might otherwise overlook or be disinclined to approach through a textbook. And the series of questions is truly infinite. Why did the person who solved Fermat’s last theorem make it onto the front page of every major newspaper? To what extent are people from different cultural

¹⁹ Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, p.42.

²⁰ Nietzsche, *Untimely meditations*, p. 135.

backgrounds becoming socially integrated within working class communities around the world?

Who were the first superheroes and how did they become comic book characters?

But the writing process itself for this kind of work also enlightens and entertains, satisfying one's intellectual curiosity and acting as an excellent way of avoiding TV. Essay writing requires highly eclectic reading and a quick assimilation of key issues in a field. The research process is synthetic, involving web based information, books, book reviews, scholarly articles, blogs, op-eds, pop culture junk, Wikipedia; interviews and drunken debates with friends.

The writing itself provides a space in which to make anthropological observations and skewering satirical jibes without needing to construct rhetorically over-engineered proofs or present certificates of pedigree for every point advanced. In short, it is the genre for the intellectually curious yet disinclined-from-a-PhD (due to simple indolence). We do not need to point out that relative brevity is one of the most obvious (and most blessed) generic conventions of the essay. Rather than entering into mortal combat with a topic, as one must, say, in a thesis, in the essay one can meet an issue, meander with it a while, and politely go on one's way. Further enjoyment arises from the search for witty ways of presenting dry material, and from the transdisciplinarity, oblique entry points, and different levels of evidence.

The project undertaken here was a collection of short amateur historical anthropological explorations of everyday phenomena. These investigations were done from an approach that accommodated investigative and quasi-scholarly fusion, as well as lyrical, narrative and argumentative potentialities. There is also an element of parody of scholarly conventions in the numerous faux footnotes and scholarly constructs.

The assumed readers are modern urban beings, and subjects of a culturally changing, technologically connected, and yet socially (in the immediate and local sense) disconnected metropolis. These are consuming, fragmented agents in a world characterized by historical amnesia, living in the shadow of ever-encroaching middle-class homogeneity, struggling to adapt their bodies to compressed time. I appeal to a reader who is ametaphysical for the most part, certainly agnostic, and not likely to be unreflectively traditionally religious. S/he is alienated by "the waning of affect,"²¹ yet celebrates the wonder of digital convergence. He/she is skeptical, if not cynical, about utopian alternatives and humanistic teleology, and probably dismissive of esoteric products and anything involving Seven Steps. These readers live with entirely unprecedented risks and a heightened awareness of threat - overshadowed by an imminent and increasingly certain global ecological crisis, economic unpredictability, in a world permeated with unending media imagery of far-off tragedies and terrorist violence. And all of this is experienced

21 Frederick Jameson, quoted in Buchanan (2006) *Frederick Jameson: Live Theory*, p.93.

whilst eating takeaways in a Tuscan or Soho-inspired townhouse on a mass produced couch whose identical clone could be bought in any city in the world. What is the genealogy of these dimensions of experience? What are the competing forces resulting in either the consciousness or unconsciousness of the productive forces and the overwhelming scale behind what we do and what we consume, both physically and psychologically? How does one emerge as sane within this context, and what could that possibly mean?

There are three clusters in the collection. They concern three related themes: Being in bodies; being in culture, and how we make sense of ourselves.

The first essays explore the bewildering strangeness of corporeality. This section provides an amusing history of certain aspects of the body, its feelings and experiences, and explores the origin of mainstream narratives, constructions and meanings that inform our understanding of our bodily selves. This tradition, too, has a respectable background. Montaigne discusses sexual impotency and wet dreams, confesses to two bouts of VD, and at one point makes a mock defense for his 'member' in a court of law in a suit brought by the other body parts, jealous of this part's prestige.

The main essay for this section is a social history of the clitoris, which was an excellent icebreaker for the new MA class required to review it. Others include an exploration of the history of the idea of happiness, and a look at humour and laughter.

The second section looks at aspects of contemporary popular culture and social practices. It explores trends and defamiliarises aspects of the present that are taken for granted by highlighting the contingency, excess, and occasionally, full blown insanity of modern human life on Earth. This section has essays on advertising, fast food and reality TV.

The third short section explores an idea that we use as common currency. It concerns the way we think, and the knowledge and ideas that have become part of the mainstream contemporary conceptual apparatus available to us. The essay in this section explores the idea of the ego.

With the addition of a reflexive essay (this introduction), *e pluribus unum*, to comprise a thematically integrated collection.

To bring the collection *a posse ad esse* ²² required the production of about 0.583 essays per month, a pace *celerius quam asparagi cocuntur*, ²³ for the duration of the creative writing course in which the work was undertaken. This was not the only daunting part.

What makes the genre very intimidating is that great essayists were first and foremost already accomplished novelists (Woolf, Forster, M. F. K. Fisher) , philosophers (Russel) , journalists (E.B. White), public intellectuals outside their own specialist disciplines (Krugman, Chomsky, Friedman), historians (Carlyle), poets (Pope, Arnold, Coleridge) and artists or architects (Le Corbusier, Gropius), and not half-baked organisational strategy consultants looking for extra-occupational kicks. Why would anyone want to read my essays? With luck, the entire project is in something other than mere “excrements of an aged mind, now hard, now loose, and always undigested.”²⁴

22 From possibility to a reality.

23 “Faster than cooking asparagus”. A variant of the Roman proverbial phrase *velocius quam asparagi coquantur* - the speed of cooking asparagus.

24 Montaigne, describing his own thoughts (III, 9, 923 [721]).

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Transcription of radio programme: *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction*. Roundtable: 'The
History of the Essay'. Discussion with Joseph Epstein, Northwestern University, and formerly the
editor of *The American Scholar*, Thomas Kaminski, Loyola University (Chicago), Robert Root,
Central Michigan University, co-editor *The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers of/on Creative*
Nonfiction. Broadcast conversation conducted by Milton J. Rosenberg on the WGN radio program
Extension 720 on June 30, 1999. Transcribed and edited by Robert Root. Available at
www.chsbs.cmich.edu/Robert_Root/background/Roundtable.html

The Devil's Teat: A Short Social History of the Clitoris

The clitoris is commonly overlooked in Western cultures, where it is not unambiguously recognised as the fundamental source of female orgasm. Few people know that, in terms of its nerve structure, the clitoris is identical to its larger masculine counterpart, the penis. That means, in plain language, it is a mini version of the willy, and works in similar ways. But a reader to whom this might come as a surprise can hardly be blamed. Mainstream representations of sex in the west are a heaving, penetrative business. The vagina gets all the action. Meaty Hollywood stars bring beautiful women to paroxysms of (apparent) orgasm in minutes without having given her clitoris a moment's attention. At best, it gets some perfunctory and cursory '*foreplay*' before 'the real thing' gets started. And life generally imitates art, so it is hardly surprising that only 17% of women say they have orgasms every time they have sex, and about half say they regularly fake it.²⁵

Perhaps we should be grateful for the lack of recognition. For men, it certainly requires less effort. But what about for women? In countries where the clitoris's erotic significance to women is more explicitly acknowledged, this consciousness frequently takes the form of pre-pubescent or pre-marital female circumcision. This is more correctly known as 'excision' or even more honestly, 'female genital mutilation', which includes various other forms of traditional female genital butchery. Excision involves the total or partial eradication of the clitoris through rudimentary and unsanitary procedures carried out by traditionally appointed practitioners armed with anything from razor blades to rusty nails and even thorns. The ostensible objective is to 'curb nature' and render the woman more 'purely female' (i.e. without the offending penis-like organ) in the hope of preserving chastity and encouraging greater marital faithfulness. A common belief is that the clitoris is an aggressive organ, threatening the male organ and even endangering a baby during delivery. One woman interviewed believed that the clitoris was a worm that would burrow back inside the girl and do internal damage if it were not cut out.²⁶

Although often associated with Islam, we should note that clitoridectomy is virtually unknown in much of the Arab world, and anything but the most minor circumcision of the surrounding skin is forbidden in the Koran. In the English-speaking West, however, clitoridectomy or clitoral cauterisation were performed up to a mere hundred years ago as a cure for girls showing 'hyper-sexuality', 'hysteria' and 'nervousness', as well as on girls with even suspected 'lesbian inclinations' or 'an aversion to men'. Clitoridectomy was also recommended for girls 'suffering with the fascination' of a certain well-known 'bad but pleasant habit', and, to prevent this, was

²⁵ Durex Global Sex Surveys available at www.durex.com

²⁶ *New Internationalist*, Issue 268

carried out on female patients in mental hospitals in the USA until as late as the 1950s.²⁷

The sociology of feminine sexuality (and its long history of suppression) aside for a second, the clitoris' diminutive dimension and relative lack of prominence are surely partly to blame for its social neglect and infrequent mention outside the circles that practice excision or those who campaign against it. It can hardly expect, unlike the bald-faced, all-purpose penis, to get the recognition it deserves. And neither used as an insult, nor metonymically (to refer to the whole woman), and without a playful collection of nicknames to allow it to be bandied about in everyday speech, how could it avoid being an organ of relative discursive obscurity and social invisibility? Compare it with the dick (or willy, cock, shlong, prick, schlinger, schmeckle etc.) And even to attempt to pronounce it carries some risk - it is 'KLIHT uh rihs' or 'klih-TOHR-is' (to rhyme with chorus and stegosaurus)?

As far as its physiology is concerned, the average clitoris is really quite difficult to see, and is found, for those who haven't located it in practice (please seek help if you are unsuccessful), above the vaginal and urethral openings, under the little hood of skin unappealingly referred to as a 'prepuce'. This unobtrusive exterior is full of 'genital corpuscles' ('orgasm transmitters', if you like), and belies the much more voluminous underlying erectile tissue, also dense with nerve endings. The size of the outer bits is variable – the little protruding knob of flesh is either so small as to be entirely concealed, or large enough to protrude somewhat from between the labia.



The best photo that I came across was on a Spanish website.

Capuchón = prepuce/hood. Labio menor = Labia minora

Unusual dimension, as with penis size, has been known to take on extraordinary meanings. A larger than usual and hence more easily visible clitoris, rather than an asset counted as a sign of above average fecundity or enhanced femininity (cf. the big dick), was long thought to betray

27 UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) website on Female Genital Mutilation -

abnormality such as lesbian activity or a tendency to indulgence in 'the baneful habit of masturbation or self-pollution.'²⁸ *The Oxford Companion to the Body* tells us that "successive editions of a standard British textbook of forensic medicine included a photograph of a tribade's [i.e. lesbian's] clitoris well into the middle of the twentieth century." Even now, having an extra-large one would be considered freakish and undesirable and probably wouldn't win one a contract in the porn industry. A special diagnostic term exists for this condition – Clitoromegaly (kleitoris + *megale*, Greek, enlargement, from *megas* large) - an abnormality found in those suffering endocrine diseases, and seen in female athletes overdosing on anabolic steroids. This understanding of the condition is however a substantial improvement on historical diagnoses.

This may be made up- it is recounted on numerous witch-oriented sites of dubious credibility, (flashing pentagrams, many typos and all c's replaced with ck's as in "Magick") but it's a good story: In 1593 at the trial of a woman accused of witchcraft, an inquisitor - in conformity with contemporaneous demonological expertise advising that evidence of witchcraft in women is to be sought on her private parts - discovered a "little lump of flesh sticking out to the length of half an inch". Having conferred with his colleagues, it was decided that the woman was to be convicted. They had all agreed it could only be a "devil's teat,"²⁹ a particularly certain and damning piece of evidence as it represented a secret nipple from which she could suckle her familiar or imp. 'Evidence' of this nature was particularly frequent in witch trials in Britain, for example, Michael Dalton who wrote in his *Country Justice* (1618), "Their said familiars hath some bigg, or little teat, borne by the witch upon their body, and in some secret place, where he sucketh there."³⁰ The Act of Parliament of King James I against witchcraft specifically mentioned those who "consult, covenant with, entertain, employ, feed, or reward any evil and wicked spirit to or for any intent or purpose" and officially made it an offence punishable by death. Needless to say that after having had her clitoris publicly examined, the woman with the bigger than usual organ was duly executed as a "child of Satan".

These iniquitous clitoral connotations are absent from cultures with traditions of sacred sexual worship and full-blooded feminine deities. Unfortunately for the Judeo-Christian world, even after its recovery from the dark ages, the last archetypal survivor of our pagan past was an eternal virgin. Mary remained a deified, idealised alternative in which the sexual feminine body was disavowed. With first Christianity, and then enlightenment rationality in the west, the feminine became increasingly aligned with nature, as opposed to culture. Corporeality, desire, and the sins of the flesh were set philosophically at odds with the immortal soul and the realm of moral choice and self-discipline. With this strange cultural syllogism of sorts, female sexuality for a long while

28 Renshaw, H. and Ryan, M., (1834) *London Medical and Surgical Journal*, Volume 4.

29 Grosz, E.A., and Probyn, E. (1995) *Sexy Bodies: The Strange Carnalities of Feminism*. , p. 91.

30 Dalton, M. (1690) *The Country Justice: Containing The Practice, Duty and Power of the Justices of the Peace*.

disappeared into the shadows. Having no sanctioned social location, raw womanly lust found its expression only in the forbidden zones of brothels or of porn. Conversely, where our mortal, fleshy encumbrance was not as subjugated, and where spiritual practices like “the great bliss of the lower gate” existed, one shouldn’t be surprised to find that the clitoris was also better known and had an accordingly appreciative name. Consider the terms *yonimani* - ‘vulva –jewel’ from Sanskrit or ‘Golden Tongue’ from Cantonese.³¹

In bleak contrast, the organ remained entirely nameless in the English-speaking world until the word ‘clitoris’ was coined in 1615, imported from the Greek *kleitoris*, which literally means ‘the man (sic) with the key’ or ‘little hill’. Other rather more optimistic sources relate the word to the Greek verb, *kleitoriazein*, ‘to touch or titillate lasciviously, or to tickle.’ Here the literal meaning is ‘to be inclined toward pleasure.’ A further obstacle to its popularisation, as found in sociolinguistic studies, is that although ‘clitoris’ is the organ homologous to ‘penis’, this term is not taught to young people as the female counterpart.

The Italian anatomist Mateo Renaldo Colombo (1516-1559), professor at Padua, claimed to have discovered the clitoris. He published his discovery in *De re anatomica*, in 1559. One must pity his wife, for this was apparently at the age of 43, and he died that same year. At least he realised it was something rather significant – ‘the seat of woman’s delight’ he called it, and genuinely believing himself to be the first to discern ‘these projections and their workings’ and that previous anatomists had overlooked the very existence of ‘so pretty and useful a thing.’ He decided to name it. With inimitable Italian elegance, he called it “amor Veneris, vel dulcedo” (the love or sweetness of Venus).³² His claim was disputed by his successor at Padua, Gabriel Fallopius, who, possibly attempting to set a record for ‘number of female organs named after a single person,’ insisted that *he* was to be credited with its discovery. Finally Kasper Bartholin, a 17th century Danish anatomist, got vaguely closer to the spot, dismissing both historical claims and asserting that the clitoris had been widely known for a while yet. He suggested “at least since the second century.”

Through the eighteenth century the clitoris continued to pop up, as it were, in various places. During the Romantic period many writers were generally obsessed with the exotic, the remote, the mysterious, and the weird. Accordingly, medical writers also became interested in exceptional forms of sexuality – eunuchs and hermaphrodites. Through their studies of cadavers, scientists begin to realize that ‘hermaphrodites’ were often in fact women with enlarged clitorises that had been mistaken for penises. Their explanations for the phenomenon of the monstrous clitorises included masturbation, lesbianism, ‘uterine furor’ (horniness), and simply being of non-European racial origin, all of which represented either abnormal desires or a regressive lack of sexual differentiation from men.

31 www.Yoniversum.com, another dubious website without a proper bibliography

32 Columbi, R., *De re anatomica*, libri XV. Venetiis: Ex typographia Nicolai Beuilacquæ, 1559.

Associated with its concern with all things mysterious and otherworldly, Romantic writers increasingly valued what they referred to as 'feminine sensibility'. Women were idealised as "seductively fragile, tearful victims of delicious passionate impulses."³³ Women became symbols of feeling as opposed to reason, and thus ornamental creatures, who were completely unsuited to the harshness of the emerging world of industrialised commerce. Through this exaggerated notion of an incomprehensible and delicate 'femininity' the seeds of the stifling domestic 'doll's house' atmosphere of Victorianism were sown, which saw an intensification of prescriptive norms for women. Upper-class nineteenth century women were under increasing pressure to conform to the ideal of the 'angel in the house' characterized, explored and subverted in the great Victorian novels. Historian Barbara Welter has called the same ideal the "Cult of True Womanhood."³⁴ Its prescriptions for women included piety, devotion to their children, and submissiveness first to fathers, then to husbands. A woman was the bearer of moral virtue and purity, and warned not to 'take liberties incompatible with her delicacy' that would certainly lead to her social and psychological collapse. Expected to preserve goodness and ever renew the moral fibre of society from within the home and the family, women became domesticated and desexualized. For women, sex was simply a necessary prerequisite for motherhood. Female pleasure was conceived of as contingent upon male pleasure, and existed only in responding to and meeting male needs. Nuptial consummation even took on a fearsome terror and regular sex was something to be palliated with stoical nationalist meditations. Sexual desire in women was unthinkable, and so it became but one of the symptoms of an imaginary nineteenth century female epidemic. Faintness, nervousness, insomnia, fluid retention, "heaviness in the abdomen," muscle spasms, shortness of breath, irritability, loss of appetite for food or sex, a "tendency to cause trouble," sexual "yearnings" and "excessive vaginal lubrication" were considered symptoms of female hysteria. Women who were too intelligent, too athletic, not sufficiently submissive or those aspiring to positions beyond their natural feminine domain were also commonly diagnosed with hysteria. A physician in 1859 claimed that a quarter of all women suffered from it, after cataloguing an 'incomplete' 75-page list of possible symptoms.³⁵

The clitoris and its hood featured strongly in the attempted cures for these maladies. One recommendation, from *The Wedding Night*, (1900)³⁶ speculates that the existence of a hood "of course, is an unnatural condition", leading to "nervous derangement", and advised that the sooner the clitoris was surgically freed from it the better. The more common treatment consisted in 'pelvic massage' - manual clitoral stimulation by a doctor to induce a profoundly invigorating sensation

33 Porter, R., (1995) 'The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth Century Britain'. *Jnl Social History*, Summer, 1995.

34 Essay of same title. 1966 published in *American Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 2, Part 1. (Summer, 1966), pp. 151-174.

35 Micale, Mark S. (1993). "On the "Disappearance of Hysteria: A Study in the Clinical Deconstruction of a Diagnosis". *Isis* 84 (3): 496-526.

36 Ida Craddock (1857-1902).

called 'hysterical paroxysm'. Since the procedure didn't involve penetration, it wasn't sex, in much the same way that lesbianism was so inconceivable to queen Victoria that unlike male homosexual sex, it did not require prohibitory legislation. In fact the introduction of the speculum and the tampon caused far greater controversy than this masturbatory therapy. Scores of Victorian men took their wives in and paid for them to receive these hand jobs. The patients were in no mortal peril but hysteria of course needed chronic treatment. The only problem was that these men did not enjoy the tedious task of the massage: the technique, as we all know, was difficult to master and it sometimes took hours to achieve the curative and pacifying 'hysterical paroxysm'. Doctors who had perfected the technique became so busy through word of mouth marketing at proto-Tupperware parties that repeat 'pelvic massage treatments' came to comprise more than half of their consultations. Demand outstripped supply, and in the newly mechanized age, it was natural that someone would soon come up with an automated, profit-enhancing and labour-saving alternative.

The first true electric vibrator for treating 'female disorders' saw its inception in 1869 with the invention of a steam-powered massager, patented by an American doctor. By 1870 a clockwork-driven vibrator was available for physicians, and in 1873 the first electromechanical vibrator was used at an asylum in France for the treatment of hysteria. A British doctor followed up slightly later with a more portable battery-operated model, and by 1900, a wide selection of electromechanical vibrating devices was available, ranging from foot-powered models to those powered by gas engines. These first 'massagers' were first positioned as medical devices for use by doctors, but soon they became available for self-treatment. The appeal of convenient and cheap ongoing treatment in the privacy of one's own home understandably made the vibrator a popular early home appliance. After the sewing machine, fan, kettle and toaster, it was the fifth household device to be electrified. It preceded other less important female domestic items like the vacuum cleaner and the electric iron by about a decade.³⁷

Masquerading as "health and relaxation massaging devices," they began to be marketed more broadly in respectable magazines and mail-order catalogues, often in coy and ambiguous language that left little doubt as to their true function. In 1918 Sears Roebuck offered one model which was "very satisfactory...an aid every woman appreciates." Another advertisement promised that "...all the pleasures of youth will throb within you", and The Swedish Vibrator Company of Chicago commended its device as "a machine that gives "30,000 thrilling, invigorating, penetrating, revitalizing penetrations per minute."³⁸ Vibrators' active commercial life expanded even further from the 1920's as they began to be marketed as panaceas for ills ranging from asthma, to "fading beauty", to tuberculosis. All over the Americas and Europe, "that delicious,

37 Maines, R.P. (1999) *The Technology of Orgasm, "Hysteria," the Vibrator, and Women's Sexual Satisfaction*.

38 A history of vibrators retrieved from the very scholarly site www.beavershaver.com.

thrilling health-restoring sensation called vibration" was making women "fairly tingle with the joy of living."³⁹ It was only after vibrators starred in early porn movies that it became impossible to maintain any illusions of modesty and the advertisements began to disappear from decent publications.⁴⁰

Hysteria, meanwhile, went into decline. The number of psychiatric theses on hysteria peaked at over 110 in the 1890's and then fell dramatically. Fewer than 20 hysteria theses were written in the 1910s. Within a few decades it was no longer recognised as a diagnostic category at all. The inverse correlation with increasing vibrator sales is unclear, but what is true is that as medicine improved and diagnosis became more refined, hitherto unidentifiable diseases were no longer classified under the previous (conveniently expansive but non-existent) category. The number of cases of hysteria was pared down until none remained. Eventually, in 1952, the existence of hysteria as a disease was formally debunked by the American Psychiatric Association.

Meanwhile, one devil had replaced another. As Victoria's reign faded into history and vibrator sales rocketed, one might have expected female sexuality to flourish, but knowledge took another step backwards in the early 20th century as a result of the popularisation of Freudian psychoanalytic theory.

Freud recognised that primary sexual pleasure for women was originally derived from the clitoris, but, because of his own theoretical account of psychosexual development and a conviction that female orgasm must be an evolutionary adaptation linked to reproduction, he very generously invented a new type of orgasm for women. He then asserted that the pleasure of the "miniature penis" must be abandoned if a girl is to successfully become 'feminine' (i.e. passive). Clitoral stimulation becomes merely part of 'forepleasure' in adult sexuality, leading to 'correct' vaginal excitation. Needless to say, Freud's normative trajectory for female orgasm was not based on any investigation of actual female anatomy. He was apparently not able to reconcile himself to reality, and insisted that a vagina simply *should* be able to produce an orgasm. Women who required clitoral stimulation to orgasm or who pursued it as a primary pleasure were 'neurotic' and 'dysfunctional.' Apparently "...whenever a woman is incapable of achieving an orgasm via coitus, provided the husband is an adequate partner, and prefers clitoral stimulation to any other form of sexual activity, she can be regarded as suffering from frigidity and requires psychiatric assistance."⁴¹

Unfortunately the internal consistency of Freud's theories required the inclusion of these twisted

39 Wyer, M. (2001) *Women, Science and Technology. a reader in feminist science studies*.

40 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vibrator_\(sex_toy\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vibrator_(sex_toy)).

41 Caprio, F.S. (1953) *The Sexually Adequate Female*, quoted by Koedt.

ideas, and despite numerous challenges, conceptually contorted retorts kept Freud intact for decades, even a cult figure, and women's sexual reality concealed 'under the hood', as it were.⁴²

Freud did recognise some problems, possibly from immediate observation of his disgruntled spouse- "The fact that women change their leading erotogenic zone in this way, together with the wave of repression in puberty...are the chief determinants of the greater proneness of women to neurosis and especially to hysteria."⁴³ What he didn't guess is that the source of her neurosis, rather than this complex psychic switch, is rather more likely to have been chronic sexual frustration. A man required to permanently relocate his erotic sensation to a less sensitive erogenous zone (the back of his knee, for example) might also suffer from a degree of angst. Luckily for men and probably civilization in general, this is not the case. Apart from the dependable orgasms, women may indeed have something to envy.

Freud's understanding of feminine neurophysiological development was not discredited until the 1960's, but this was not before his ideas had found their home in popular mythology and perpetuated a scourge of feminine self-alienation and self-blame, male complacency, and an epidemic of faked orgasms all across the educated western world.

The fact that the clitoris was not the subject of public debate at the time Freud published his notorious blunders may have assisted in his intellectual propagation and the lack of opposition to it. The extent to which the details of female sexuality were truly unmentionable is evident in a war-time incident preceding his publication by a decade or so, and gives us a sense of the extent to which even the name 'clitoris' was in fact still widely unrecognised in the popular culture of the time.

The word was at the centre of the criminal libel trial of Noel Pemberton Billing, which was described at the time as "the trial of the century."⁴⁴ Pemberton Billing was a idealistic, brilliant, but extremely right-wing MP who had founded his own quasi-fascist journal, *Vigilante*, in 1918. An article had been published in this journal in which it was maintained that German secret agents were in possession of a 'Black Book' containing the names of 47,000 known English homosexuals, and that they were exploiting these names to undermine the fabric of English society by "propagat[ing] evils which all decent men thought had perished in Sodom and Lesbia". When in February 1918 two performances by Maud Allan of Oscar Wilde's *Salome* were to be held at a private venue, *Vigilante* announced the event in the following terms:

42 Greenberg, J.S. Bruess, C.E., Conklin, S. C. (2010) *Exploring the Dimensions of Human Sexuality*.

43 Freud, S. (1905), *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. p.221.

44 Hoare, P. (1998) *Oscar Wilde's last stand: decadence, conspiracy, and the most outrageous trial of the century*.

The Cult of the Clitoris

To be a member of Maud Allan's private performance in Oscar Wilde's
Salome one has to apply to a Miss Valetta of 9 Duke Street, Adelphi, W.C.
If Scotland Yard were to seize the list of these members I have no doubt
they would secure the names of several thousand of the first 47,000.⁴⁵

But what did this imply? Medically, clitoral sexuality (and the clitoral enlargement that went with it) already represented a regressive, primitive form of feminine sexuality common to lesbians, black women, and nymphomaniacs. Now, to top it all, it was being linked with insinuations of a kind of cultural treason! Allan took exception to the outrageous affront and laid libel charges. A six day tribunal ensued.

It didn't go well for the complainant. The fact that Maud Allan knew the term 'clitoris' at all counted strongly against her. She was deemed to have "inappropriate sexological knowledge". One of the witnesses, who claimed to have hitherto been innocent of the meaning of the word, said that a doctor had informed him what it was: "... a superficial organ that, when unduly excited or overdeveloped, possessed the most dreadful influence on any woman, that she would do the most extraordinary things."⁴⁶

The defense illustrated the point empirically - out of twenty-four people with whom a member of the defense had conducted some *ad hoc* socio-linguistic research by checking for recognition and comprehension of the impolite word, only one had known (or felt comfortable admitting knowledge of) what it meant. Another witness said that he had shown it to 'fifty or sixty friends' of his and not one of them had been familiar with the term. Indeed, the writer of the libelous paragraph claimed he had deliberately used an obscure and specialist title "that would only be understood by those whom it should be understood by...Of course, clitoris is a Greek word [...] it is a medical term [...] nobody but a medical man or people interested in that kind of thing, would understand the term."⁴⁷

There were many people who became increasingly engaged by that kind of thing. Despite the obscurity, misunderstanding and or offensive associations, women sex advice writers sustained their pedagogical efforts. Popular manuals in the interwar period continued to emphasise the importance of the clitoris.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p.91.

⁴⁶ Lucy Bland, " Trial by Sexology? Maud Allan, Salome, and the 'Cult of the Clitoris' Case" in Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (eds.) *Sexology in Culture: labelling bodies and desires*.

⁴⁷ Hoare, p. 161.

Marie Stopes, for example, writes in *Married Love* (1918): “[The clitoris] is extremely sensitive to touch-sensations. [It] enlarges when the woman is really tumescent, and by the stimulation of movement it is intensely roused and transmits this stimulus to every nerve in her body.” Helena Wright also spells it out in *The Sex Factor in Marriage* (1930) – “In the centre in front, is a small round body, about the size of a pea...a full understanding of its capabilities and place in the sex-act is of supreme importance.” Seventeen years later she was still trying to make the point in *More about the Sex Factor in Marriage* (1947). This time she says: “It is no exaggeration to say that since the clitoris is the essential organ of sexual sensation in women, and that rhythmic friction is the only stimulus to which it can react, orgasm failure at the outset of sexual experience is unavoidable if the clitoris is not discovered and correctly stimulated.” Joan Malleson, reassuring guilty readers about the clitoris’ universality and indeed, God-ordained function, in *Any Wife or Any Husband* (1950) says: “Nature has placed them there entirely for this purpose - indeed, this is their only use - and the person who thinks that they are not to be enjoyed or touched is defying natural laws.” She even brings legitimacy to desires for better husbandly behaviour thus: “Many wives are aware that the full use of the outer clitoral area will alone bring them satisfaction, yet they are too afraid either to ask, or to allow their husbands to touch this part of their body in the proper way.” Unfortunately there is no record of the impact of these benign post-war texts. Are women in family photos post-1950 generally looking any more radiant?

A very loud announcement in the 60’s of what wives had been trying to subtly hint at all along came in the form of the famous empirical research findings published by Alfred Kinsey, William Masters and Virginia Johnson. It gave the first empirical verification of these ‘natural laws’.

What Kinsey noticed is the enormous difference in sensitivity between the clitoris and the vagina. In typically stiff scientific language he outlined the functions of the various parts and demonstrated how the vagina was supremely unsuited to delivering anything but babies (a highly contentious claim in itself, as anyone who has tried using it for this purpose will attest). The functions of the vagina, he stated, are “*Principally*, 1) menstruation, 2) receive penis, 3) hold semen, and 4) birth passage”. What came as a shock to men was the finding that the interior of the vagina, which according to the erstwhile ignorance was the producer of the female orgasm, is actually more like the digestive tract, since the lining of each originates ‘entodermally’ in the body’s development. That means one would be as likely to have a vaginal orgasm as a ‘duodenal orgasm’, for example, if one accidentally swallowed a dildo. The degree of insensitivity inside the vagina is in fact so high that “Among the women who were tested in our gynecologic sample, less than 14% were at all conscious that they had been touched.”⁴⁸

⁴⁸Kinsey study quoted in Koedt (1970) *The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm*.

Like Kinsey, Masters was another rare man whose ignorance about the neurophysiology of female sexual response was something he cared to resolve. His frustration led him to recruit a professional female partner and to conduct decades of the most systematic empirical sex research. Together they obtained permission for their potentially incendiary work; convinced the press to keep an absolute embargo on news about it for 12 years, and set out to find research subjects willing to be observed copulating. Believing that prostitutes would be more amenable than the average volunteer, the initial phase of research during 1955 and 1956 involved conducting interviews and observing sex professionals at work all over the USA. The work was never published as the sample was considered unrepresentative, but it gave Masters and Johnson the inspiration to devise ingenious recording techniques never used before such as intra-vaginal cameras and nifty orgasmo-meters for later research, which started when the voyeuristic circuit was over. Their work attracted worldwide attention, and *Human Sexual Response*, published in 1966, topped the *New York Times* best-seller list. It provided definitive laboratory evidence that orgasms are only clitoral (the meters weren't fooled by the 'correct' types of orgasms) and that vaginal contractions were but one side-effect of the orgasm produced by the clitoris. Other ancient experiential truths also became official knowledge for the first time: the existence of multiple orgasms in women (most of the obviously male medical authorities had apparently disputed this), and the possibility of fabulous geriatric sex – the only prerequisites being, as Masters liked to phrase it, "a good general state of health and the availability of an interested and interesting partner." That narrows it down quite a bit.

Women were thrilled. As one Professor of Psychiatry remarked, after spending several weeks listening to Masters and Johnson's cases, "They have turned the tables on Freud and exposed the weak underbelly of his theories about sex." The new knowledge quickly found its way into sex advice pocketbooks. Women hoped that at last the male belief that penetration was, or should be, the height of female pleasure would begin to be officially knocked off balance. Copies of these books appeared as gifts all over the world. Yet somehow the old practices stubbornly persisted and women continued to fake it.

The classic publication *The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm*⁴⁹ attempted to understand the sociological reasons why the new knowledge hadn't resulted in an instant mass cure, and called for women to take the matter in hand. It represented one voice in a growing feminist consciousness that saw women's sexual frustration as one aspect of the systematic structural social inequality between men and women. Koedt reiterated the fact that a "false distinction" had been made between the clitoral orgasm and the (illusory) vaginal one. She rallied women to reject

⁴⁹Koedt, A. (1970).

“the myth of the liberated woman and her vaginal orgasm” and redefine sexuality in terms of mutual sexual enjoyment, to throw out non-satisfying “standard positions”, and insist on “new techniques.”

She called an end to the ongoing comedy and the ‘orgasm charade’. The ubiquitous deception of fake orgasms, Koedt said, was due to pressure to bolster the fragile ego of the male lover, whose masculinity is ever at stake in his performance. Women were “simply afraid to establish their right to equal enjoyment...” or too afraid to admit their “vaginal frigidity”, not knowing, thanks to Sigmund, that it was entirely physiologically *normal*. Women who were in fact perfectly sexually healthy had been duped into believing they were somehow defective, blaming themselves and looking for cures for a ‘problem’ that didn’t exist. One proposal went so far as to suggest ‘corrective’ surgery to relocate clitorises closer to vaginas and thereby bring women’s bodies into greater alignment with conventional male sexual activity (rather than men having to lift a finger, so to speak, and recognise the requirements of the standard-issue female body).

Koedt’s other arguments are typical of a certain type of 1970’s feminism - emphasising the extent to which women are systematically subjugated, and arguing that the sidelining of the clitoris is one dimension of deliberate masculine oppression. Perceived as threatening, and potentially making men sexually expendable (the penis is now obviously redundant to a woman’s pleasure), the clitoris has been cut out of the action, either literally or figuratively, in order to maintain their hegemony. The recognition of clitoral orgasm would indeed threaten the very foundations of heterosexual society. The implication of the clitoris being the centre of female pleasure would imply that “sexual pleasure was obtainable from either men *or* women, thus making heterosexuality not an absolute, but an option. It would thus open up the whole question of *human* sexual relationships beyond the confines of the present male-female role system.”⁵⁰ Young post-feminists find all this quite passé, with Lady Gaga and Lara Croft as their most powerful feminist icons, but in 1970 it was groundbreaking.

Koedt was followed by the infamous *Hite Report* of 1976. According to the London Telegraph, “Western society owes a debt to Shere Hite that it can well nigh never repay” This debt arises from her publication of the first of a series of reports - ‘A Nationwide Study of Female Sexuality’ – that was truly the first research ‘by women for women’. Basically, it publicly stated the obvious for the first time – “women can orgasm easily, that it is not women but society that has a problem and needs to change” – i.e. society’s definition of ‘sex’ that should change, not the female body. Most women are able to have orgasm with ease, it is the society that has a problem accepting the way in which women reach orgasm, and that it has nothing to do with penis size, or in fact penises *per*

⁵⁰ Koedt (1970)

se. They are quite irrelevant to the female pleasure project.

The research, the feminist texts, the new sexual advice books and a deluge of more explicit romance novels for women echoed the legitimating chorus to women's private sexual experiences and gave the clitoris the attention it had long been denied. It was at this point that men should have become irreversibly enlightened and as a corollary, women a lot less inexplicably bad-tempered, but still no luck. The Hite report, now published in 19 languages, and despite being almost 30 years old, is still perceived to be 'on the cutting edge of debate.' What *debate* is this?

Before men had really even had the chance to come to grips with the clitoris, and to make for immense confusion, the Grafenberg spot then made its appearance in the 1980's. To some extent it immediately upstaged the clitoris, being more conveniently located for men along the anterior vaginal wall. A certain gynecologist, Dr Ernst Grafenberg, had found, and we will not inquire as to his research methodology, that when this area is stimulated, some women have an orgasm. A sex counselor named Beverly Whipple and a religious minister named John Perry were responsible for its promotion in *The G Spot and Other Recent Discoveries about Human Sexuality* (1982). It is interesting though that Grafenberg himself did not single out the area as anything extremely remarkable. He rather states that "Innumerable erotogenic spots are distributed all over the body, from where sexual satisfaction can be elicited; these are so many that we can almost say that there is no part of the female body which does not give sexual response, the partner has only to find the erotogenic zones." Either way Ernst's contribution was just short of deleterious, with women having to fake their way through the process of a grunting lunatic trying to get his shlong to rub against the magic G-spot, or having to endure much fruitless and confusing belly-button licking and knee-nibbling and rubbing of earlobes and other irritating build-up.

In the nineteen-eighties and nineties the basic anatomical knowledge of the clitoris became increasingly available on the sexuality and health shelves of every major bookstore. Dr Ruth to this day abounds with clitoral references, and men should simply no longer have had any excuse for ignoring the damned thing. Since the instrumental practicalities were all but covered, feminist scholarship in the eighties and nineties had little new to add on the subject and focused on what had been left out of the sex manuals: the social construction of meanings around feminine sexuality that kept things stubbornly complicated.

According to Luce Irigaray, the problem is that we can't figure out how to talk about female sexuality. What is the female sex organ? Is there a single locus that we can represent in

language? After Freud's castration of the woman, there is just "a nothing" on the other side of "penis". Irigaray concludes that female desire is like a "lost civilization," one which has a "different alphabet" and a "different language". Female/feminine language is something unfixed, slippery, not making sense, not anchored firmly within the "phallogocentric Symbolic Order."⁵¹ Like many of her contemporaries, Irigaray eventually attempts to reject logic and reason altogether and descends into incomprehensible language herself. This incomprehensibility is rivaled only by Jacques Lacan's formulations. The phallic function is Φ (lower-case phi), with castration signified - Φ (trust me; it is beyond the scope of this discussion). I wonder if the clitoris might be something like $\equiv \neq \Phi$?

With the 90's post-feminism was born. Without income equality, a fair distribution of domestic labour, and equal access to opportunity, women began celebrating in lipstick and dangerously high heels, feeling free to be taken advantage of in whatever way they saw fit, on their own terms. The internet blasted images of nubile naked teens into billions of households, and greater sexual openness became acceptable. Now there seems to be an obligatory pole dancing bar scene in most TV shows other than the weather report. But apparently some channels are now using newsreaders in bikinis (or less) to help people keep abreast of current affairs.

The popularisation of the web in the 90's has done a lot to promote sex through daily cyber-distribution of a multitude of porno images in multiple categories, but it has done not much at all to promote the truth about female sexual pleasure. Granted, they are not intended to be primarily pedagogic, but of 100 or so commercial porn sites personally surveyed, not one made any overt reference to the clitoris. Nor were there any images to be found of a woman pleasuring herself in ways inconsistent with all the erroneous masculinist assumptions. This is strangely reinforced by the fact that although most women predominantly use vibrators to stimulate their clitorises, the vast majority of these objects are still remarkably phallic in design and are used in predictably dull ways in the xxx clips. Even the "delectable duo" images of so-called "hot lesbo action" consistently reinforce the vaginal orgasm myth and are full of multicoloured, strap-on dildos that would leave most real-life women bored stiffer than, well.... Sadly, a Google search for "clitoris" will get you an explanation of κλειτορίς, but it won't get you much that is erotic.

One of the clitoris' last appearances for the twentieth century was in an article entitled "The Truth About Women" in the August 1998 edition of the magazine *New Scientist*. Dr. Helen O'Connell, a urologist at the University of Melbourne, did the first complete internal and external anatomical study. She finds that the body of the clitoris is about 1 to 2 cm wide and 2 to 4 cm long. She finds that the main nerve of the clitoris is "noticeably large," being greater than 2 mm in diameter. By comparison, the average Meissners corpuscle nerves, those cells in our fingertips sensitive to

51 Klages, M. (2006) *Literary Theory: a Guide for the Perplexed*.

light touch, are a tiddly 50 micro-millimeters in diameter. She also found, incidentally, that the whole thing unfortunately shrinks with extended use and with age. But dissected clitorises do not make for particularly engaging reading. Let us then turn to the present millennium.

We might hope to find that further pea-sized steps of progress have at last occurred. Attention has indeed shifted to a new angle of entry (to the topic), but whether this will result in progress on the pleasure agenda is questionable.

Contemporary scientific /intellectual investigation involving the clitoris asks an old question in a new way. The question is, "what is the point of female orgasm?" It is not being asked in quite the same spirit as many a male lover may have asked it, but in a biological and evolutionary sense. What has happened is that Dr. Elisabeth A. Lloyd, a philosopher of science and professor of biology at Indiana University, has recently looked at theories of the evolutionary significance and adaptiveness, or lack thereof, of female sexual pleasure. Among males, the link between orgasm and reproductive success is simple and direct. For females, on the other hand, the Darwinian rationale is absent, and the question of a possible functional utility becomes more subtle and complicated (isn't it typical?). If women don't have orgasms through penetrative intercourse, and don't appear to need them to fall pregnant- what is the point?⁵²

"The history of evolutionary explanations of female orgasm," Lloyd observes, "is a history of missteps, misuse of evidence and missed references." She shows how an emphasis on functionality and evolutionary adaptation led (male) scientists to neglect and contradict the real evidence and to perpetuate repressive normative codswollop. She argues that female embryos get the same orgasmic nerve pathways just because the nerve pathways for male orgasm are laid down very early in the embryo's development - before the forms of male and female embryos become different. So because men need ejaculatory penises, women end up with clitorises capable of similar sexual pleasures. The same process applies to male nipples. Basically, the clitoris has as much evolutionary significance as a bucket of Norwegian caviar. It is, she says, "just for fun".

Outside the scientific realm, there have been some rather positive recent developments as far as media presence goes- the clitoris has recently made its first appearance in a documentary film by the same title. *The Clitoris* (2003) wasn't quite a blockbuster, but will go some way towards making it possible to say the word without feeling uncomfortable. The film covers teenage girls discussing overcoming social taboos involved in talking about their sexual anatomy, and includes the obligatory educational discussion on responsible relationships. It also examines other issues, such as women's response to erotica, whether or not the G spot actually exists, the nature of female sexual urges, and women's ability to have multiple orgasms. In short, it is a stimulating

52, Smith, D. (2005) 'A Critic Takes On the Logic of Female Orgasm', *New York Times*, May 17, 2005.

documentary handling everything concerning women's basic right to sexual pleasure, and will hopefully become part of the standard curriculum in South African high schools before we reach 2196.

As far as clitoridectomy goes, change also appears to be at hand - at a 2005 meeting on what is now known as "FGM/C" (female genital mutilation/cutting), representatives from 10 countries and more than 100 religious leaders gathered in. Djibouti (where 98% of girls still have their genitals mutilated) to discuss measures to end the practice. When the Djibouti minister of religion stood on the podium and read aloud a proposal for excision to continue to be allowed in certain circumstances under medical supervision, around 150 women stood up, banging on the tables and shouting 'NO...NO...' for around 10 or 15 minutes. The proposal was hastily abandoned.⁵³ Though, how soon such pressure will put every thorn-wielding granny out of business is anyone's guess.

One might well wonder how a survey of current status of the clitoris would be linked to the latest war, but it competes with so much else as just another matter of priority. With bulging budget deficits towards the end of the first decade of the new millennium, there is a demise of publicly funded research into sexuality, with a number of institutes being closed down. Researchers are increasingly being driven to pharmaceutical companies for sponsorship, and so to a focus on researching drugs to treat male impotence. As a consequence, says one researcher - sex research is "drowning under a tidal wave of reductionism, wherein sex is a pelvic vascular function."⁵⁴ Viagra is now the mass panacea for flagging relationships, with soft focus couples on TV advertisements cuddling as the voiceover makes its promises. Erections are clearly more profitable than female pleasure, but as we should all know by now, a stiffy isn't actually much use.

Although it may still be true that we know more about what happened in the universe's first nanosecond than we do about what women really want, we know that whether out of boredom, pity, or fatigue, they still admit to faking it in their billions. We also know that women still largely agree that 'orgasms are quite easy to have provided there aren't any men around, doing all the wrong things.'⁵⁵ To rectify the problem, if there isn't going to be much new research to look forward to that will give voice to women's private sexual experiences, men are going to have to be given a lot more free advice. This should include a lot of practical, specific tips (one columnist suggests: "tongue strengthening, endurance training. Boys, try turning a light switch off and on with your tongue 20 times a day..."⁵⁶ Various people have tried to dispense this training, including

53 CRIN (Child Rights International network), (2005)

54 Clark, J., quoting Leonore Tiefer, a professor of psychiatry at New York University, in (2005) 'Sex: The Big Turnoff'. *Psychology Today*.

55 Wyndham, J. (1986) *Love is Blue. A Wartime Diary*.

56 Krinsky, N. (2009) 'More than you ever wanted to know about fake orgasms'. *Yale Daily News*. Nov 2001.

most recently, Swedish sexpert Ylva Franzén,⁵⁷ who has invented the term 'moreplay'. "A lot of guys know about foreplay, but moreplay is what happens when foreplay ends and penetration begins. This is something very striking, I think, because the orgasmic pleasuring organ in women, the clitoris, is not stimulated anymore. Constant clitoral contact is what a woman needs if she's going to orgasm. A lot of women don't know that - and a lot of men don't either." She recommends a combination of vibrators, new positions, and prescribes intensive homework to her group attendees. There is also the new well marketed Durex O Gel. It is similar to Deep Heat or Tiger Balm, and the panic-stricken rubbing activity required to remove it can cause sexual stimulation.

In reality there is really no simple emancipatory formula. No advice or knowledge will be successful unless women begin to develop a sense of entitlement to equal pleasure, and become a lot more honest about whether or not they are getting it. If men are being consistently duped into thinking they are erotic artists by virtue of the fact that they wield engorged knobs, it no longer implies a structural, institutionalised and oppressive conspiracy, but rather a silly kind of collective self-betrayal on the part of women themselves. For the sake of a more benevolent social order, it is the responsibility of all heterosexual women to begin to contribute to the enhanced sexual literacy of as many men as possible, well a few at least, by starting to communicate more effectively, and to tell the truth about their bodies. The discomfort of the embarrassing admission that you haven't really been getting there will be paid off in perpetuity, whether for you or other women who follow after you. But remember to be gentle about it - the male ego has been found to be the only human organ with more sensitive nerve endings than the clitoris.

57 Sloan, C. (2009) 'Swedish Orgasm Secrets-ELLE gets personal with Scandinavian sexpert Ylva Franzén.' *ELLE Magazine*, Sept 2009 Issue.

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Rebooting the Nous

People who hate laughter are described as *misogelastic*. Some misogynelasts are also *gelatophobic*: a form of paranoia that others' laughter must be in some way directed at oneself. The rest of us don't have to think about it for a second. We love a good rollicking guffaw, regularly pay for it, and know instinctively what researchers in a number of disciplines are at last beginning to empirically verify and take very seriously: Laughter is the KY-gel of human bonding. It makes meeting new people much less abrasive and uncomfortable, builds empathy, has immune system benefits and relieves tension, which is why even people in large corporates are starting to have Laughter Yoga workshops.⁵⁸ Apparently laughter even facilitates cognitive development, although I would imagine that the nature of the comic stimulus does matter here (cf: offensive.jokes.com)

Very many contemporary scholars are now taking forward the work of an intrepid line of gelotophilosophers that starts with the Greeks and begins to truly flourish with Borat. There is now even an annual interdisciplinary gelotology conference, and an enormously large number of recent publications. In elite European theoretical circles the distinguished Alenka Zupančič has just written an important new book about how comedy can help philosophy and psychoanalysis recognise some of "the crucial mechanisms and vicissitudes of what is called humanity."⁵⁹

By now you should have deduced that this piece of amateur gelotology has nothing whatsoever to do with the study of ice-cream and everything to do with an "ancient vocal relic"⁶⁰ called laughter. An exceptionally enigmatic subject that literary theorists, philosophers, sociologists and real scientists have all made attempts to sneak up on over the last few thousand years, having a go at questions like: Why and when do we laugh? What is laughter, physiologically? Who laughs at whom? Do women laugh more than men, or perhaps more at men? What has laughter got to do with politics? (Are repressive regimes good for a laugh, or not?). Then there is the inevitable evolutionary question, what is the point of it? And the even more inevitable: does joking affect productivity?

In this short exploration I would like to try to sneak up on laughter in a quasi hypothetico-deductive manner. It will not be expecting this. In accordance with this methodology we will first look at some data, formulating some of our own hypotheses as we go. Then we will compare the

58 These places are otherwise desperately full of PowerPoint slides, which we know to be the single biggest contributor to both Global Boredom and Deep Brain Thrombosis.

59 I take the liberty of copying an Amazon.com book review.

60 Provine, R. (2001) *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation*.

explanatory value of competing historical hypotheses and theories by testing how well they are corroborated by our first-hand gelotological observations.

Let us turn directly to some primary data samples. Please record your responses in the margins.⁶¹

Primary Data:

1. Faux-theoretical jokes

- a) When a cat is dropped, it always lands on its feet, and when toast is dropped, it always lands with the buttered side facing down. I propose we strap buttered toast to the back of a cat; the two will hover, spinning inches above the ground. With a giant buttered toast and cat array, a high-speed monorail could easily link major metropolitan areas.
- b) If an infinite number of rednecks riding in an infinite number of pickup trucks fire an infinite number of shotgun rounds at an infinite number of highway signs, they will eventually produce the entire world's great literary works in Braille.⁶²

2. A faux taxonomy joke

Borges attributes a translation to a Franz Kuhn in *The Analytical Language of John Wilkins*.⁶³ He describes 'a certain Chinese Encyclopedia, the *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*', in which it is written that animals are divided into:

1. those that belong to the Emperor
2. embalmed ones
3. those that are trained
4. suckling pigs
5. mermaids
6. fabulous ones
7. stray dogs
8. those included in the present classification
9. those that tremble as if they were mad

⁶¹ The contemporary taxonomy of reactions ranges from "RFLMAO" (big laugh involving catalepsy). The next biggest is 'LoL'. A '©' Indicates cute and mildly amusing, but not funny.

⁶² A parody of the well known Infinite Monkey Theorem (Given enough time, an infinite number of hypothetical monkeys typing at random would, as part of its output, almost surely produce one of Shakespeare's plays or an equivalent literary work). This is also a joke that illustrates over-simplification of concepts involved in infinity, probability, and time. The image has recurred with variations many times since in a variety of pop culture media. See Wikipedia *Monkey Theorem* entry.

⁶³ Most famously quoted by Foucault for whom this piece of writing 'shattered all the familiar landmarks of his thought'. Also quoted by others including anthropologists and ethnographers, German teachers, postmodern feminists, Australian museum curators, artists and occasional essayists. Incidentally, Franz W. Kuhn (1884–1961) was a real translator chiefly remembered for translating many Chinese novels into German. Of course, Borges' works often feature pseudo-learned references resulting in a mix of facts and fiction. To date, no evidence for the actual existence of such a list has been found.

10. innumerable ones
11. those drawn with a very fine camelhair brush
12. others
13. those that have just broken a flower vase
14. those that from a long way off look like flies

This is a massively celebrated piece of writing since Michel Foucault made it famous in *The Order of Things*. Like Foucault, we revel in it. In all these clever short circuits this imaginary taxonomy creates connections between utterly heterogeneous orders, mixes up essential characteristics with arbitrary ones, makes itself logically impossible, and puts absurdity, arbitrariness, myth and human interference into the very heart of regulation, organisation and rationality.

3. Science and Mathematics jokes

- a) The most boring book in the world is probably J. Guilloud and M Bouyer, *1000 000 pi*, Published by the Commisariat à l'Énergie Atomique, 1974. The 415 pages contain pi calculated to the first million decimal places. In case it interests you the last 5 numbers in the book are: 58151.⁶⁴

b)

After explaining to a student through various lessons and examples that:

$$\lim_{x \rightarrow 8} \frac{1}{x-8} = \infty$$

I tried to check if she really understood that, so I gave her a different example.

This was the result:

$$\lim_{x \rightarrow 5} \frac{1}{x-5} = \infty$$

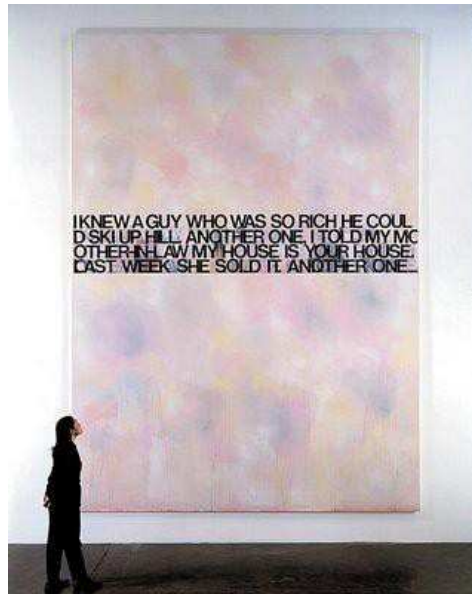
- c) A Sagan: The international unit of humility.⁶⁵
- d) An Eigen function: What an Eigen is made for.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ <http://www.noob.us/pictures/funny-math-jokes-and-equations>.

⁶⁵ Also classifiable as 'in-joke' if you have never read Carl Sagan. He says things like, "We succeeded in taking that picture [from deep space], and, if you look at it, you see a dot..That's home. That's us. On it, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever lived, lived out their lives. ... Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the universe, are challenged.... Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark... It's been said that astronomy is a humbling... To my mind, there is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world."

⁶⁶ <http://www.noob.us>.

3) An art joke: Richard Prince's *Joke Paintings Series*.



Prince is an appropriation artist who uses jokes as part of his found materials.

According to a Wikipedia entry on Prince of April 2010, in the mid-80's, Prince began to search out comedic lines that had been used so often that he considered them to be overplayed and overused.

According to a clearly uninspired critic, "Prince explores the extent of ownership in life and more so in art. He is testing the limits of right to possession by helping these jokes to continue further on their journey, away from their authors and widening the gap between the creator and the end consumer."⁶⁷

The Joke excerpts are clearly no longer even about humour, but about the public circulation of meaning in society.⁶⁸ These joke paintings are especially popular: one sold in 2004 for more than \$700,000. "When they first came out, you couldn't give them away." He says. "They've become pretty serious to people, which is funny."⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Wikipedia entry on Richard Prince, May 2010.

⁶⁸ The question of whether these paintings are actually funny or not is unfortunately beyond the scope of this footnote.

⁶⁹ Interview at Gladstone gallery with Karen Rosenberg (2005). <http://nymag.com>.

4) An Anthropological joke:⁷⁰



I conducted a mini-survey at this point and asked a few people: "Why does this make you laugh?" in order to generate some hypotheses. One person said it wasn't funny and was excluded from the sample, and here are some of the other responses:

There is a mix of the real and the unreal and a mismatch between them that is funny. It makes a joke of the idea that the so-called primitives try to deceive us into thinking they are primitive, so that we (ironically enough) can learn about our own invented (and racist) idea of primitive culture. (David, 17)

It's the look on the guy's face- the one with the TV. No, seriously, it's the gap between the anthropologists' preconceptions about under-developed societies and this unexpected view from the inside (literally) of the object of study. This is a complete reversal of the usual subject positions. (Isn't this a common Larson move?). (Beth, 34)

Both explanations emphasise disjunction between socially constructed views and lived experience. I will provisionally call this 'the Gap Hypothesis'.

⁷⁰ Courtesy of Farworks.

5) Historical jokes:

a. Imperial Russian joke

A man was reported to have said: "Nikolay is a moron!" and was arrested by a policeman.

"No, sir, I meant not our respected Emperor, but another Nikolay!"

"Don't you try to trick me: if you say 'moron', you obviously refer to our tsar".

Zupančič says that comedy is a mode of 'tarrying' with a foreign object - of including the exception. Is the exception here the truthful logical error?

b. Soviet joke

The KGB, the GIGN (French Special Operations) and the CIA are all trying to prove that they are the best at catching criminals. The UN decides to give them a test. For each team a rabbit is released into a forest and each agency has to try to catch it.

The CIA goes in. They place animal informants throughout the forest. They question all witnesses. After three months of extensive investigations they conclude that the rabbit does not exist (in more up-to-date versions of this joke the US government cluster bombs the forest anyway).

The GIGN goes in. After two weeks with no leads they burn the forest, killing everything in it, including the rabbit, and make no apologies.

The KGB goes in. They come out two hours later with a badly beaten bear. The bear is yelling: "Okay! Okay! I'm a rabbit! I'm a rabbit!"

4. WWII jokes

Near the end of the war, Hitler and Göring are standing on top of Berlin's radio tower. Hitler says he wants to do something to cheer up the people of Berlin.

"Why don't you just jump?" suggests Göring...⁷¹

Marianne Elise K., was convicted of undermining the war effort "through spiteful remarks" and executed in 1944 for telling this one:

Hitler asked his astrologer on what day he would die.

"On a Jewish holiday," the astrologer replied.

"But which holiday?"

"Any day you die will be a Jewish holiday."

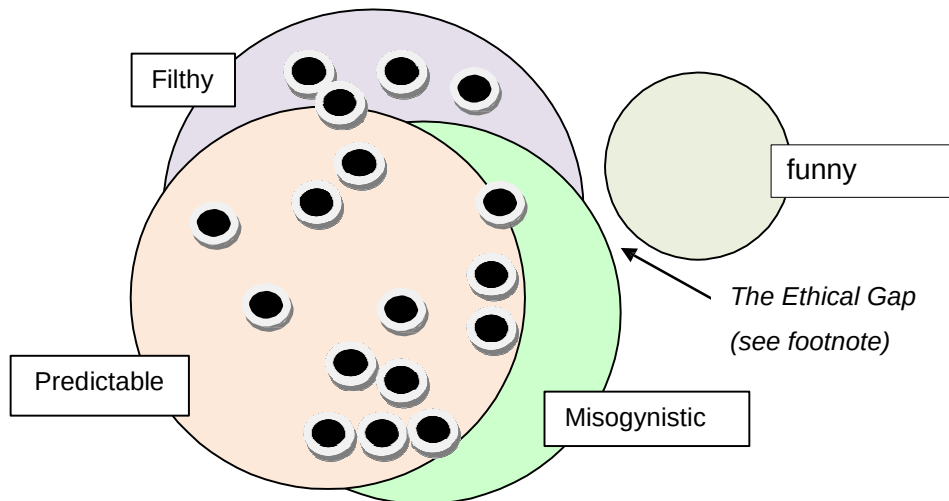
Kundera finds two different kinds of laughter. The first is the Devil's laughter, which points out the meaninglessness of things. The second counters the laughter emanating from the void, expressing joy at meaning and order.⁷² We could be naive and believe that the WWII jokes that I found fall into this second category, affirming life. They are reminding us that humanity will always outlive the likes of Himmler, Mengele, and Pol Pot (Cambodia, 1975-79), and Mao Tse Tung (China, 1958-61 and 1966-69, Tibet 1949-50); and Stalin (USSR, 1932-39); and Leopold II of Belgium (Congo, 1886-1908); Ismail Enver (Turkey, 1915-20); Fumimaro Konoe (Japan, 1937-39); Kim Il Sung (North Korea, 1948-94); Menghistu (Ethiopia, 1975-78); Yakubu Gowon (Biafra, 1967-1970); Jean Kambanda (Rwanda, 1994); Charles Taylor (Liberia, 1989-1996); Slobodan Milosevic (Yugoslavia, 1992-99); Hassan Turabi (Sudan, 1989-1999); and easily the small fry like Augusto Pinochet (Chile, 1973). Yes, this is a devil's list. And yes, these jokes remind us that joyful laughter, as Kundera shows us, is itself laughable.

⁷¹From Herzog, Rudolph, *Heil Hitler, das Schwein ist tot!: Lachen unter Hitler - Komik und Humor im Dritten Reich*.

⁷²Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*.

5. A Dirty Joke: (known as *non-veg* joke in India)

I searched the internet for good dirty jokes for about three hours and discovered that this is indeed an oxymoron. All the jokes I found have been excluded here for reasons of good taste. But they could be plotted as follows. Each black dot represents a dirty joke.⁷³



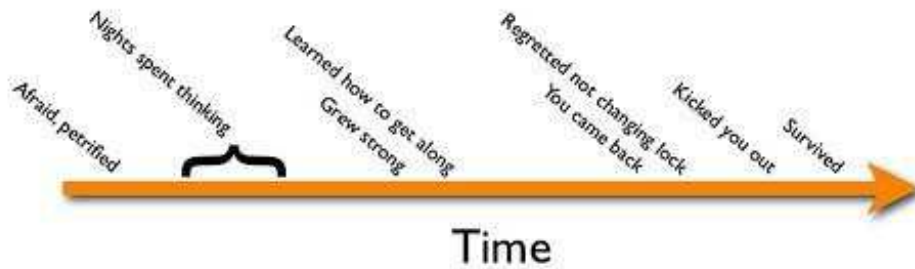
The “parody of medium” joke demonstrated by these sets above is itself an increasingly popular joke form and plays with discursive conventions, carrying popular culture and music into pseudo - empiricism and misapplying analytical frameworks out of context. A more well-known example follows.



Source: *GraphJam.com*

⁷³ Gaut Berys Nigel argues that that unjust jokes are simply not funny (sexist, racist, anti-Semitic, homophobic). ‘Just Joking: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Humor’. *Philosophy and Literature* - Volume 22, Number 1, April 1998, pp. 51-68. What is funny changes radically over time, and these kinds of jokes have become unfunny in civilised society . But humour cannot be subjected to any absolute, as we will see later.

The same approach has been applied to innumerable songs and everyday experiences, using pie charts, graphs, process mapping diagrams, calendar entries, and any other inappropriate representational techniques. Here's another one.⁷⁴



a. A Freudian Joke:

"A man tells his therapist "I think I made a Freudian slip the other day...."

"I went to have lunch with my mother. While we were eating I meant to ask her to pass the salt and instead I said, "You f**#ng bitch you ruined my life!"

This is an example of a joke with an underbelly. Like much modern humour, it is dark and painful. There is an argument that literary humour has tended in this direction for some time:

In the 18th century, the humor of Sterne and Diderot is an affectionate, nostalgic recollection of Rabelaisian merriment. In the 19th century, Gogol is a melancholy humorist: "The longer and more carefully we look at a funny story, the sadder it becomes," said he. Europe has looked for such a long time at the funny story of its own existence that in the 20th century, Rabelais's merry epic has turned into the despairing comedy of Ionesco, who says, "There's only a thin line between the horrible and the comic." The European history of laughter comes to an end.⁷⁵

The trajectory appears to have real validity. *Futurama*, *South Park*, and *Family Guy* take masochistic delight in casting one, laughing all the way, directly into the vortex of existential abandonment. What has been said about the relationship between laughter and mortality, sadness, and evil will be touched on again a little later.

⁷⁴ The song *I will Survive*, by Gloria Gaynor, a hit in 1979.

⁷⁵ Weeks, M. (2005) 'Milan Kundera: A Modern History of Humor amid the Comedy of History'. *Journal of Modern Literature* . Volume 28, Number 3, Spring 2005, pp. 130-148.

8) (Anti-) Christian jokes:

- a) *T-shirt*: I like Jesus. But he loves me. Makes things kind of awkward.
- b) *Bumper sticker*: Jesus is coming. Everyone look busy.
- c) A priest, a pedophile, and a rapist walk into a bar. That's just the first guy.

Most jokes about Jesus on the internet feature outspread arms, which is just plain grotesque. Crucifixion was a nasty death. Today we do not think it is acceptable to torture and murder the mentally ill.

Joke (a) above is a gentle joke. It is utterly literal, and reduces Jesus to a nice guy, albeit with strong, misplaced affections and not somebody with whom one necessarily wants to get intimate. Joke (b) equates Jesus with a supervisor. In each case aspects of Christian semiology or the discourse of Christianity are reduced to other familiar social meanings. Joke (c) is obviously a meta-joke, starting off with an established joke convention and then upsetting it completely by collapsing the three characters together and erasing the distinctions one would expect between a priest and the other two.

9) Chinese Jokes:

These are generously supplied free for English-speaking visitors and for users of Chinese products.



Source: www.english.com

10) Generic multi-purpose formula jokes:

Why did the chicken cross the road?

Martin Luther King : It had a dream.

How many psychologists does it take to change a light bulb?

One, but the light bulb has got to want to change.

Etc.ad infinitum.

Hypotheses about what induces laughter

Major figures in the history of philosophy have proposed theories about why we find things funny, but few have been overwhelmingly compelling or deeply insightful. Alfred Whitehead (1967) was right – “It requires a very unusual mind to undertake the analysis of the obvious.”⁷⁶ This is a short review of what some of the most unusual minds have said.

One of the shortest theories is that laughter is a way of communicating 3 messages: 1) we're having fun 2) I like you 3) someone else is an idiot.⁷⁷

Let's start with the last one, because my guess is that you smiled at that point. Aristotle first saw right into the vicious and aggressive feelings that often fuel humor. We like to laugh at inferior or ugly individuals, he noted, and we feel a joy at being superior to them⁷⁸. Thomas Hobbes would have added, emphatically, “The passion of laughter is nothing else but glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others.”⁷⁹ Nietzsche, too, sensed the dark side. “Laughter: Laughter means to be *schadenfro*h, but with clear conscience.”⁸⁰

Hobbes noticed that this kind of humour can also be directed at former selves. It's true. Doesn't everyone have a witty tale of self-deprecation of a former bumbling or unconscious idiot self? “I am a recovering Catholic,” an acquaintance once joked. But does this theory really apply to all comic moments? The idea that it might be a universal feature of funniness is formally known as the Superiority Theory of laughter. It is one of the big three theories, if one subscribes to this tripartite taxonomy of laughter theories.

⁷⁶ I must introduce a caveat that should have been fairly obvious by now. I am blithely glossing over a number of analytical conundrums. In the example of the laughter: comic relationship I will continue to assume that there is a fair correlation between the comic and laughter, and that explaining the comic goes a way towards understanding the cognitive triggers for laughter, if not its physiology and functioning in every context. Provine (2000) actually argues that laughter is most often found in non-humorous social interactions, deployed as some sort of tension relief mechanism. This is not the kind of laughter that interests me. For people who want something serious and don't like to see Borat and Bergson in the same bed, there is quite a good bibliography.

⁷⁷ Mankoff, R. (2010) 'I Laugh at Fear'. Posted in *The New Yorker*. Online edition. March 2010.

⁷⁸ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449a, discussed in Grafton & Most in *The Classical Tradition*, p.222.

⁷⁹ *Online Dictionary of Philosophy*. Human Nature. Ch. 8.

⁸⁰ Nietzsche, F.(1882) *The Gay Science*, p. 200.

"Enjoying our eminency" as a blanket theory is quite a wet blanket. Laughter is good and fun, we must insist. "Humour is the great invention of the modern spirit."⁸¹

Luckily there are another two theories in this particular Big 3 taxonomy. There are also another 7 theories in the Big 8 theory of theories⁸² and then more recently a taxonomy that posits a Big 100 theory, which is the laziest one.⁸³ Another apparently logical meta-theoretical taxonomy clusters theories into (1) Functional theories of humor, which ask what purpose humor has in human life. (2) Stimuli theories, which ask what makes a particular thing funny and (3) Response theorists, which focus on why we find things funny.⁸⁴ Taquin has proposed the following taxonomy

- 1) Touristic Guidings for benefit Glorious nation Kazakhstan
- 2) Jokes about Racist people⁸⁵
- 3) Jokes that have the cerebral musicality of Jazz mixed with the visceral groove of funk⁸⁶
- 4) Chameleons and lame donkeys
- 4) Creatures that hide in the shadows and sneak up on you when you are alone in the semiotic woods
- 5) Metatheoretical
- 6) Can be re-used and recycled.

Socrates agreed with the superiority view, but qualified and explained the meanness. He says that it is rather the *self-ignorance* we laugh at. We laugh because we see something that someone cannot see about himself, or more rarely, herself. So they deserve it. Henri Bergson strongly endorses this view- a person is comic in proportion to his ignorance of himself.⁸⁷ But isn't there empathy in this too? We surely recognise fragments of our own self-delusion in the tatters left by laughter.

Contemporary humor theorists pay much more attention to the warm, good-naturedness of joke telling, downplaying the nastiness and aggression that Aristotle, Freud, Nietzsche, Gershon Legman⁸⁸ and others still regarded as a key part of humour. The fact that what triggers laughter is an exposed distance between ignorance and consciousness could be read as anything but mean, even as the sign and the sound of a universal philosophy of authenticity; an alarm sounded at all that is bogus. But is this system innate or socialised, and what constitutes our agreement on how it should be calibrated, and what useful adaptive purpose does it play?

81 Paz, O.(1987)*The Bow and the Lyre: the Poem, the Poetic Revelation, Poetry and History*, p.208 quoted by Kundera.

82 Patricia Keith-Spiegel's classification of humor theories into 8 major types: biological, superiority, incongruity, surprise, ambivalence, release, configuration, and psychoanalytic theories.

83 Why is the fact that there are serious competing taxonomies of gelotology theories somehow very amusing?

84 This is why creative non-fiction is so much more fun than philosophy.

85 Racist people, interestingly, are never as polite as smokers. Have you noticed that? Smokers always go, "Do you mind if I smoke? Oh, you do? Okay, I'll go outside and have a cigarette." Racist people never go, "Do you mind if I'm racist? Oh, I'll go outside ... fucking blue people, eh? Coming here, steal our hamsters ..." Eddie Izzard.

86 This mixture is Howard Moon's favourite music (Main Character in *The Mighty Boosh*, a really funny BBC Series)

87 Bergson, H. (1900) *Laughter, an Essay on the Comic*, p.15.

88 See Brottman, M. (2004) *Funny Peculiar : Gershon Legman and the Psychopathology of Humor*. Gershon Legman's magnum opus was (2006) *Rationale of the Dirty Joke: (An Analysis of Sexual Humor)*, succeeded by *No Laughing Matter : Rationale of the Dirty Joke: An Analysis of Sexual Humor*.

Bergson explores laughter as a response, not to inauthenticity, necessarily, but more broadly, to anything that creates *rigidity* and *inelasticity*, and which is therefore inimical to human creative evolution. The comic absolutely refuses any form of inertia. The value that laughter asserts in this model is creative freedom, intellectual openness. Bergson calls it *elasticity of mind* in society, which sounds like rather a valuable utilitarian good.⁸⁹ Perhaps this is why humour is voraciously parodic and always expanding the boundaries of funniness itself in ways that are occasionally rather ontologically unsettling. Recall the first time you saw the cringe humour of Ricky Gervais in *the Office*. Even more progressive, think of *The Flight of the Conchords* and *The Mighty Boosh*. Both expand the boundaries of human consciousness, I would argue, as a bit of a fan.

Before going any further into the theoretical thicket – we must deal with an immediate claim made by many an amateur gelotologist: that only humans laugh. According to www.wisegeek.com, this is not the case. Rats, for example, make high-pitched squeaks when playing together. This source goes on to say that “Some other scientific studies suggest that other animals may laugh too. For example, intelligence studies on dolphins have shown that two dolphins can refer to one another by name. Who can say they’re not *telling a joke*?”⁹⁰ (my italics). In fact it has genuinely been discovered that rats emit long, high frequency, “socially induced vocalizations during rough and tumble play and when tickled.”⁹¹ The sound is described as “chirping”. It is inaudible to us humans, just like the sounds made by carrots being harvested. They also do it before receiving morphine (the rats, that is). The team researching Umbelliferae (carrot family) reactions to morphine has not yet received funding. The study fell short of proving that rats or vegetables have a definite ‘sense of humour’ *per se*, due to methodological constraints, but it did suggest that species other than humans may ‘laugh’ and express joy in their own ways. I feel sick about the Rent-o-Kill contract and vow to switch to Morphine OD.

In *Homo Ludens* (1938), Johan Huizinga⁹² criticizes identifying play with laughter. Laughter is a lot more than play, pleasure and joy. Other theorists are equally emphatic on this point. Zupančič distinguishes incisively between humour and cheerfulness, particularly when this cheerfulness is ‘naturalised’ through ideology and convention. NG *tannies* are good examples.⁹³ Something else is happening in laughter arising from actual humour. Something noological and social, semiotic and physiological. But why does it sometimes involve gelotolepsy? ⁹⁴ And why is a word like

89 Recruitment professionals and organisational psychologists in large institutions have managed to isolate the little useful component in elasticity of mind and have narrowed it down to a construct called learning agility, which is a strong predictor of leadership success. The relationship to laughter seems to have been lost.

90 My italics. www.wisegeek.com.

91 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laughter_in_animals.

92 1872 - 1945, Dutch historian and one of the founders of modern cultural history.

93 Dutch Reformed Church ‘aunties’ known to exude pure sweetness.

94 Geloplegia, Gelatolepsy: Loss of muscle tone induced by sudden or excessive laughter.

gelatolepsy inherently funny? It turns out that there are also theories about this.⁹⁵ Abibliophobia (The fear of running out of reading material), Absquatulate (To abscond with something); and Slangwhanger (Obnoxious writer) are apparently amongst the funniest words in English.⁹⁶ There are also inherently funny numbers. 'Weird Al' Yankovic (of *White & Nerdy* fame) uses the number 27 prominently in his songs because, according to him, "twenty-seven is a funny number." But I digress.

Getting back to the theories. Another dimension to laughter that doesn't necessarily involve the stupidity of a third party may be found in Relief Theory account. This is the second theory in the first Big 3 taxonomy alluded to earlier and is generally physiologically focused.

Herbert Spencer, the 19th century English philosopher, was the real progenitor of all contemporary psycho-physiological explanations of laughter. In his *The Physiology of Laughter* (1852), he tried to explain laughter nomologically (using scientific laws), rather than through the development of philosophical insights. "Nervous excitation always tends to beget muscular motion," says Spencer. Almost like the way that Descartes discovered a relationship between a cat being sawn in half and loud meowing noises (some of his less publicised work).⁹⁷

As odd as this all sounds, it does hint at the experience of unavoidability that can happen when we are 'agitated' in an appropriate way and then 'crack up'. Even our metaphors for laughing suggest that there are laws (or at least culturally specific patterns) and causal formulæ, and that laughter is not arbitrary or individual (except as a stereotypical marker of insanity).

In any case, Freud adopted Spencer's idea of a constrained energy, and in 1905 published *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*.

Freud has always suffered from an oversimplified appraisal of his work. I risk aggrieving the devotees again. According to some secondary reading, laughter for Freud is an 'economical phenomenon' whose function is to release 'psychic energy' that had been wrongly mobilized by incorrect or false expectations. Freud says that the act of joking, while being a release, actually results in the *conservation* of energy.⁹⁸ This is somehow achieved through a complex process that involves either redirecting energy that would have been otherwise used to repress impermissible feelings. Laughter also acts as a pleasure substitute for what one would really like to do.

95 A *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode "The Outrageous Okona" features Joe Piscopo as a comedian who, in attempting to teach the android Data the concept of humor, refers to words ending in a 'k' as funny.

96 Beard, R. (2009) *The 100 Funniest Words in English*.

97 Regan, T. and P. Singer, eds. (1989). *Animal Rights and Human Obligations*.

98 Freud, S., (1905) *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*.

He also explores the ways in which laughter operates psychologically and socially to do things like collapse imagined time into the present and thus relieve the fear of the future and of death. Most reductively put, in much simpler language than you will find in *Jokes and Their relation to The Unconscious*, “Laughter is there for all the hitches, glitches, and gaffes [including the internal ones] that are part of our imperfect existence. It’s a signal to our nervous systems not to overreact”.⁹⁹

One of the big criticisms of relief theory is that it doesn’t address ‘the determining function’ of humour. Explanatory insight is missing from more purely biologically oriented theories like Spencer’s that use hydraulics metaphors. But Freud is more sophisticated. ‘Laws’ in Freud include socially informed interpretive cognition and the emotional and cognitive processes between the stimulus and response. The philosophical, semiotic and cultural are all part of Freud’s analysis. He also discusses the ways in which jokes work like metaphors, creating similarity between dissimilar things, and leading to a combination of bewilderment and enlightenment.¹⁰⁰ So it is rather reductive to lump Freud with the relief theorists and to focus only on the energy economy aspects of his thinking.

The psychoanalytic tradition also brings us Lacan, who says... “Communication makes you laugh.” Does this mean that a true encounter with Otherness makes us laugh in pleasure? Is it some sign of a profound need for connection? Of a recognition? Zupančič stresses humour’s origins in otherness encountered, or “letting the odd one in,”¹⁰¹ as she calls it.

The next cluster of theories contains my own earlier Gap theory. This turns out to be a very crude version of Incongruity Theory¹⁰² developed extensively since Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) , an interesting character who came from some serious family money and so wasn’t subjected to the inanition of a corporate day job. This left him free to spend all of his days figuring out the functioning and limits of reason, being a pessimistic atheist, and as a natural next step, to thinking about laughter. He may have been inspired to explore the latter by one of his Berlin colleagues. He believed that we (posterity) would be provided with an inexhaustible source of laughter at his own times in the form of the “stupefying verbiage” of one of his contemporaries. You may have heard of “this fellow Hegel” and enjoyed his “colossal piece of mystification,”¹⁰³ even if his comic value may have slipped past you on the first reading.

99 Mankoff, R (2010). ‘I Laugh at Fear’. Posted in *The New Yorker*. Online edition. March 24.

100 Commentary on *The Analysis of Jokes And Their Relation To The Unconscious* (1905). 1905C 8/9. <http://www.instituteofnys.org>.

101 Zupančič, A. (2008) *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Short Circuits).

102 Another one of the Big 3 commonly accepted theories.

103 Schopenhauer, A. (1839) *On the Basis of Morality*. Preface to the First Edition, p.15. (Trans. Payne, E.F.J., 1998).

Schopenhauer said the incongruity occurs between a concept and the reality it supposedly represents. The comic is the recognition of this distance. This is what makes us laugh, for example, when the Hayibo columnist in the *Mail and Guardian* refers to Julius Malema as “He Who Makes the Thunder Tremble”.¹⁰⁴ Or is it the precise aptness of the description, and the ominous sense that he could be our very own Idi Amin? (I just realised I left him off the devil's list). In this case it should rather be “He Who is fulfilling a Divine Mission of African Destiny”.¹⁰⁵

Incongruity theory also covers funniness arising from logical impasse, from clashes in discourses and frames of reference, and from irrelevance and inappropriateness. Nietzsche says that “man (sic) uses the comical as a therapy against the restraining jacket of logic, morality and reason.”¹⁰⁶ Humour suspends the conventional rules of sense-making, forcing us to hold two competing meanings or interpretations simultaneously. The obvious meaning is suddenly dropped in favour of the unexpected one, and somehow that results in these pleasantly elevating, spasmodic vocalised expirations.¹⁰⁷ If we recall the short circuits in Borges' imaginary taxonomy and the clashing of heterogeneous orders, we clearly experienced the way in which rational expectations are overthrown by absurdity, yet continue to function within the parameters of a typology.

The social dimension to incongruities invites a lot more exploration - for example the distance between Malema (the object); and the concept (HWMTTT) is only funny because the concept is either a socially expected view or the view held by He Who MTTT himself and no-one else who has even very minimal levels of parieto-frontal integration.¹⁰⁸ The new nickname both highlights his self-aggrandisement and parodically replaces it. For Hegel, who develops and extends these ideas, laughter is the means by which false concepts or “appearances” are annihilated. The comic uncovers and mocks untenable positions.¹⁰⁹ But HWMTTT is so ‘last Tuesday’, as Brūno might say. Let us stick with the 19th Century for now.

Hegel's version of incongruity theory also adds something very insightful. Laughter carries an *insistence on subjectivity*, highlighting experience as the appropriate reference point of all reality. Laughter represents the ascendancy of the subject against all symbols of truth and actuality, having “the power to dissolve even the Gods.”¹¹⁰

104 Hayibo.com. See: <http://www.hayibo.com/unicorns-kittens-on-youth-leagues-list-of-safe-words-2>.

105 Cf: Himmler about Hitler and German destiny.

106 A bit of clumsy translation work. It comes from Kunas, T. (1982), *Nietzsches Lachen; eine Studie über das Komische bei Nietzsche*. München: Wissenschaft & Literatur.

107 “Ha ha ha” in most languages. Unlike barking, which is “wau wau” in German, “woof woof” in English.

108 ‘Brain System Behind General Intelligence Discovered’. ScienceDaily (Feb. 23, 2010).

109 This idea should not be a new idea to any secondary school graduate in the English-speaking world. Cf: Grade 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12 Shakespeare notes on the role of jesters.

110 Heyde, L. (1998) ‘Autonomy and Unhappy Consciousness.’ KU Nijmegen. *Ethical Perspectives* 5 (1998)2, p. 253

Hegel defines this principle as following: "das Selbst ist das absolute Wesen; das Wesen, das Substanz und an dem das Selbst die Akzidentalität war, ist zum Prädikate herunter gesunken."¹¹¹ If you do not read German, Googletranslate very helpfully turns this into "The self is the absolute essence, the essence of the substance and where was the self Accidentality, has fallen to the predicate down." A famous phrase helps us understand why this translation is funny. Bergson (recall rigidity) argues that the primary source of humor is the "mechanical encrusted upon the living", or "mechanical inelasticity."¹¹² We do apparently routinely find this kind of thing funny.

The Hegelian observation means that the self is restored to the throne, and encroaching and encrusting ideas (or people) are put in their places, and return to being 'predicates' (or ideologies, or ideologues, as the case may be).

Along the same lines, Hegel says that comedy announces that a certain culture has grown old; that something new is coming. We laugh at things to which we are no longer subject, or perhaps not entirely subject. Interestingly though, the academic world does not seem to have changed very much. Schopenhauer was not taken in by any of it. He described his star contemporary as a "clumsy charlatan".¹¹³ He was possibly put out because only five students signed up for his course at the University of Berlin, whilst Hegel's courses were booked out. So he applied laughter type 1 (laughter as superiority and aggression) in an attempt to gain the upper hand.

Returning to the Hegelian idea of laughter and of old things growing irrelevant. Although an overwhelmingly enormous proportion of people apparently still claim *never*¹¹⁴ to doubt the existence of God, I am quite sure the last decade has seen an explosion of relentless ridicule of religion and creationism in the west. Is the end of all this nonsense possibly nigh? Surely these are signals that Christianity at least has reached the point of irrelevance where laughter sweeps it away. For me there is genuine hope in the manifestation of the Flying Spaghetti Monster¹¹⁵ in our world, and followers claim that "millions, if not thousands", are joining up. Other emergent parody deities include the Invisible Pink Unicorn, and the Dragon in the Garage.¹¹⁶ There is also the ur-parody god- the Celestial Teapot, to believe in (acknowledgements to Bertrand Russell), or one can go in for Bokomonism (Kurt Vonnegut).¹¹⁷

Laughter may be able to shake the gods, unsettling thrones and tipping wine goblets, but a 2006 poll of 2,000 US households found the same is not true of all these hordes of believers. Atheists

111 Hegel, G.F. (1807/2009) *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. p. 272

112 Bergson, (1900) *Laughter - An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, p.13.

113 Schopenhauer, Arthur. Author's preface to "*On The Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*."

114 "Many people would rather die than think; in fact, most do." Bertrand Russell (*attributed: source unknown*).

115 Pastafarianism is a parody religion

116 Carl Sagan

117 The foundation of Bokomonism is that all religion, including Bokomonism and all its texts, is formed entirely of lies; they may however have anthropocentric value, even if they are inherently 'trash'

were found to be the most distrusted of minorities, more so than Muslims, recent immigrants, and even gays and lesbians.¹¹⁸

James Luchte could be talking about our escape from these theists when he says “for Nietzsche, it is laughter that will free us from the unlimited bondage of a ‘sacred’ like this which is an imposture and mask for nihilism, a barbaric will to power, will to nothingness. Yet, such laughter is most difficult amidst the lacerations of the whip, shackle and the stake”.¹¹⁹

Totalitarianism offers us insight into laughter, precisely because tyrants are extremely unfunny, yet invite us to joke about them. The Neo-Burlesque Turkmenbashi was the most entertaining one (for non-Turkmenistan residents). Not only employing all the usual oppressive apparatus, (censorship, detention, etc) he also imposed his personal eccentricities upon the country, renaming the months in the year after members of his family, and swopping the Turkmen word for bread with the name of his mum.¹²⁰ Such extreme idiosyncrasy is not necessary for a laugh, however. All ideology invites humour at its expense. Possibly because it strives so hard against temporality and insists on a Big History. Laughter, conversely, is a fundamentally temporal phenomenon, ignoring such historical projections of time, inserting anachronistic consciousness.

But then the Roman Empire fell like this- “oh shit.” And we went into what the historians called the Stupid Fucker period. Where everyone was going –“er, I dunno. Is that a Roman road? Can we eat it?” Then there was the dark Ages. “I can’t even see you! Where are you?”¹²¹

Totalitarianism also resists individuality, which we may recall is precisely what humour insists on, according to Hegel. In *Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong* there is a lot of talk about how to eliminate “ultra-democratic” ideas “that are still deep-rooted in the minds of many comrades.” He is also very clear about the fact that “equalitarianism is a mere illusion”. “It is not required by the struggle.”¹²² Hegemony dismisses critique.¹²³ Where we see this kind of ultra-nationalism and “Anti-Imperialist Liberation” a joke cannot be far behind. Humour is antithetical to this. It is temporal, subverting grand schemes. It is aesthetic and anarchic rather than ideological, and forces us to acknowledge that we cannot subjugate Eros to singular ideas.¹²⁴

118 *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, March 25, 2006

119 ‘Zarathustra and the Children of Abraham.’ This essay has appeared in *Pli-The Warwick Journal of Philosophy and The Agonist* (Nietzsche Circle) in the Summer of 2009. It can be found at <http://luchte.wordpress.com>. See also Luchte, J. ‘Marx and the Sacred’, *Journal of Church and State*, Volume 51, No. 3 (Summer 2009)

120 *BBC News*, ‘Turkmen go back to old calendar’, 24 April 2008

121 Eddie Izzard on one of his historical rolls. http://thinkexist.com/quotes/eddie_izzard

122 ‘On Correcting Mistaken Ideas In The Party’. December 1929

123 Žižek reminds us to include liberal-democratic hegemony amongst the hegemonies

124 Cf: Weeks, Kundera

Kundera tells a story- I learned the value of humor during the time of Stalinist terror. I was twenty then. I could always recognize a person who was not a Stalinist, a person whom I needn't fear, by the way he smiled.¹²⁵

Totalitarianism strives against temporality and plurality, even at the level of language, where words are commandeered. It changes the value of words, forcing a common adoption of an obscure group's lexicon, steeping what was previously common property in its poison. Totalitarian language demands assimilation and allegiance, sets itself up as 'finished' and refuses interpretation and critique.¹²⁶ Does laughter offer us a way out?

Parody and satire are both forms of humour that celebrate incredulity and distance. Humour often does this- asserts difference, distances us from a dangerous or inhumane position. Mikhail Bakhtin coined the term 'heteroglossia'. The term translates the Russian *разноречие* [raznorechie] (literally 'different-speech-ness'). This became almost ideological shorthand for the postmodern turn: relativism, plurality, etc. But Bakhtin saw humour serving a "collectivising impulse", evoking 'the people' and driving a particular historical momentum. Laughter is tied to a kind of Hegelian hope. Is laughter the ally of historical determinism and idealism, humanist essentialism, or a spirit of fragmentation and relativism?

It is inviting, because of its apparent celebration of ambiguity, to make laughter relativising and ethically agnostic. But this would be extremely lazy, and deeper reflection and certainly the social data (a sociologist friend calls this "the antidote to bullshit") do not bear out such a relationship. Kundera for one (although he doesn't necessarily count as 'data') sees humour as antithetical to playful valueless postmodern dynamism. Although it defies the monolithic, sidesteps political correctness and so on, it is as disconnected from pomo hyperrealism, hyperactivity, virtualness, in his eyes, as it is from teleological historicity (etc etc) and totalitarian absolutism. So where would laughter take us, ideologically?

One writer suggests, in rather overblown lyricism, that it offers us only a kind of Dionysian alternative. (This must be read in the *Star Trek* voiceover voice for full effect).

To abandon oneself to laughter means the temporary unmasking of one's traditional self and the letting loose of a violence that sweeps the outlived away, makes the body blaze and makes the world vibrate with life. But in the dark depths of laughter, life-giving and

125 Kundera, M. (1979) *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, 232

126 Klemperer, V. (1947) paraphrased, *Lingua Tertii Imperii: Notizbuch eines Philologen* Open Library.

destructive values meet and intermingle, and ultimately these depths are impenetrable for human thought.¹²⁷

Kundera too views humor and laughter as divergences and interruptions, but refuses to see them as historically linear, making his vision decidedly less optimistic than say a Bakhtin's. Indeed, he links laughter to death, as Bakhtin does, yet without offering transcendence. Kundera consistently rallies laughter against optimism. Partly for this reason, he has been able to extend his concepts of humor and laughter beyond the totalitarian context, but also beyond an ahistorical cosmology of desire, of endless, irrepressible mobility (insert any of the following here: dispersed indeterminacy, postdialectic recursivism, ensembles flous). As such it is also not optimistic, it does not assert a belief that the children are our future or that anyone can fly. Perhaps it asserts no belief at all.

Is laughter a-ideological? Is there such a thing? If so, is it an intrusion of something like the Lacanian Real? This Real is something that is much more complex than the idea of a trans-historical 'out there', prior to perceptions. Žižek, a great kalypologist, insists it is an extremely complex and incomprehensible idea that cannot be reduced into a thing, an all.¹²⁸ It is the idea of that which will not be structured by our mutually consensual reality and by fantasy; what we left behind when we entered language. Is laughter then a reminder of nature's meaningless functioning, and the sound of being human stripped of the robes of sense? A voice from, but not of, our myelencephalon¹²⁹ brute corporeality, prelinguistic animality echoing to us from the desert beyond civilization? (An excess of symbolic language is required here as a defense against this repugnant thing). Perhaps this is why laughter is the subject of deep enigma. We struggle with trauma because it cannot be symbolized, Freud said, and integrated into our universe of meaning. Perhaps laughter is a non-symbolic way of integrating this unsymbolisable Real and canceling out its terribly disorienting impact.

The theory that comes closest to explaining what is going on here is a recent theory known as Ontic-Epistemic Theory of Humour. Although it uses none of the vocabulary of Lacanian analysis, there are clear resonances. The Ontic-Epistemic Theory of Humor (OETC), proposed by P. Marteinson (2006) asserts that laughter is a reaction to a cognitive impasse, a momentary epistemological difficulty. This sounds like more incongruity theory, but wait. OETC says that laughter happens when civilisation dissolves. Social Being (in capitals) itself suddenly appears no longer to be ontologically real in any factual or normative sense.

127 Gilhus. I. (1998). *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins: Laughter in the History of Religion*

128 Kalypology deals with the things that are presently unknown or that can never be known, and the reasons why they are, or cannot be, known. It is not a branch of theology. Žižek quotes from Lacan, J., 'Le triomphe de la religion, précédé du Discours aux catholiques'. Paris: Seuil 2005, p. 96-7. Translation on www.Lacan.com.

129 the myelencephalon is the area of the brain which is the most ancestral, eventually controlling visceral mechanisms (basic bodily functions) such as breathing, heart and blood vessel activity, digestion and peristalsis.

When a comic moment occurs, material reality (roughly the Real we have just discussed), is the only percept remaining in the mind. The theory puts forward the idea that human beings accept as real both normative immaterial perceptions (ideas of social identity, status), and the other contents of our *nous*¹³⁰. Most people normally blend material and immaterial unconsciously together in perception and live with the comfortable assumption they are equally real.

Von Glasersfeld (1995) says that reality is made up of the network of things and relationships that we rely on in our living, and on which, we believe, others rely on, too. Knowing is the interpretation and construction of reality based on frames of reference, paradigms, beliefs, values, experiences and socially embedded interactions within a cultural environment. We create social significance as we see, and give our experience a human orientation. Everything we see is defined, informed, filtered, amplified, simplified, and selected by our discursive background. This is a social constructivist epistemology. In this world of ours, a man's social status must not seem any less real than his body.

The comic then, according to Marteinson's theory, is the experience of unraveling. It results from the sudden perception that different classes of experiences and perceptions do not actually have the same ontological status. Contradictory social meanings are equalised (is Sasha Baron Cohen not the grand master of relativisation?). Hierarchies are flattened, symbolic reality collapses, and class relationships are denaturalised. Usually these moments involve relativisation and deculturation¹³¹. So comedy is an onto-epistemological impasse. It fragments the world into its different ontic classes, so that momentarily, the physical world in its literalness and cultural poverty is all that is left standing. The pre-symbolic. And the Real we discussed earlier. This is thrilling and horrifying. The comic is a form of mini acid trip and laughter is the thing that brings us down again.

Laughter, says Marteinson, serves to re-boot the faculty of social perception which has been rendered non-functional by the comic situation. When our sense-making meaning system does not compute, and our onto-epistemic processing functionality is temporarily paralysed, laughter is our rational ctrl+alt+delete. It distracts the system with euphoria, lets us send an error message back into the matrix, and allows us to forget the comic stimulus as well as agreeing with people in our shared semiotic context to forget the comic stimulus before it causes too much trouble. Whitehead spoke about a mathematical "Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness" (the error of mistaking the abstract for the concrete). This is the inverse social equivalent. We could call it "The Danger of Misplaced Contingency."

¹³⁰ Intuition and reason.

¹³¹ Marteinson. P.A (2006) *Philosophical Study on the Origins of Laughter*.

So it turns out to be a reactionary force. We need to maintain social meanings, to live in a society based upon them, to ignore the fact that such socio-cultural institutions are historically contingent and are not really *there* at all. We imagine under normal circumstances, unless we do take LSD, that cultural values actually *exist*, in some sense.

But this does also shed some light on why ideology is unfunny, just as feminism, children's rights, and rape are not generally joke content, even on offensive-jokes.com. If something comes to have consensus ethical value, begins to acquire an 'a priori' ethical quality, it begins to be kept intact and is less inclined to be reduced to arbitrariness. Animal rights are nowhere close. We still farm them and eat them and most people find the idea funny that one day we may find this practice abhorrent (especially when we become more aware of cows' love of satire, pig's communication abilities, and so on). This explains why things can be funny in one context and not in others. What is terribly funny in Lithuania in 1942 may not be funny anywhere at all in 2010.¹³² Jokes keep reminding us of the limits of what the shared values are around us; what is non-negotiable, and no longer up for a laugh.

So far we have seen that laughter helps us alleviate fear, change our minds, or not change our minds. It can be subversive or reactionary. It connects us with one another and affirms what we like to think are trans-historical values, yet it also tears down pretence, and makes sure we are not mechanically rigid or stuck in a fixed noosphere with only one exit that says 'in Emergency Brake this wall to escape'. It keeps our minds and ways of meaning-making flexible. We have seen laughter as a moment of intelligence- but it is not a disengaged intelligence; rather a social intelligence. It is connected to a specific community / group. Laughter has signification and is a social gesture. If we look at some of the sociological data we will see that laughter seems to play functional roles that emphasise the conservative arguments, oriented towards cohesion-building, rather than the subversive or anarchic ones.

A tour of some of the sociological highlights, then:

Empiricists talk about the 'sociality' (the ratio of social to solitary performance of an act) of laughter. We laugh thirty or forty times more with other people around than we do when we're alone. Eye contact between two companions increases the likelihood of laughter.

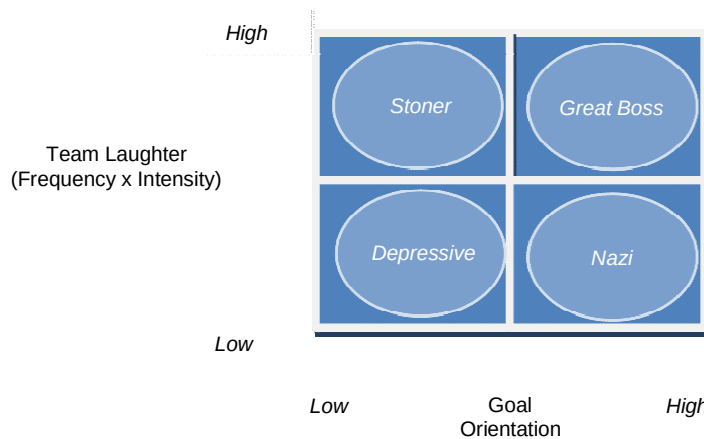
But apart from communication per se- joking is a status-related activity. Joking informs a status hierarchy early in a group's development and dissipates task-related tension later in the

¹³² Think of the Lithuanian civilian behaviour during WW2. People laughed and applauded, seated on arranged benches, as they watched their former neighbours (Lithuanian Jews) being beaten to death with metal pipes.

discussion. A higher proportion of men's humor is differentiating, while a higher proportion of women's humor is cohesion-building. Men, "high participators," "frequent interrupters," and "interruptees" all show specific status-related patterns of "humor use."¹³³ There are all kinds of complicated symbolic transactions in which new communities are formed, intimacy is offered, and otherwise offensive stereotypes and clichés begin to lose their edge. At least most of the time.

It does also make us more productive and improves all group processes (communication, development of group goals, management of negative emotions). And this is reassuringly not at the expense of outcomes (group productivity, group viability, and the learning and development of group members). So it does not interfere with goal-oriented activity.¹³⁴

I should perhaps use this knowledge in the management training models I concoct as part of my day job. Something like:



Things can also get extremely weird in the world of laughter. Laughter epidemics, for example, and I am not referring to Eddie Izzard this time. Robert Provine (an empirical laughter researcher) writes about laughter epidemics that have paralysed schools, and about the Pentecostals that get 'drunk in the Spirit' with laugh sessions. I once personally attended such an event during the height of the wave, "Catch the Fire", I think it was called, 1995. The whole church was in hysterics, rolling about on the floor with gelatolepsy, tears streaming, stomachs clasped. I observed one young man crawling about on the church floor pretending to be a sheep; bleating contentedly and then falling over with hysterical laughter like a demented character in an *Asterix* comic. I believe this was a sudden intrusion of intelligence into this community and that this man in particular was displaying for the first time the appropriate reaction to being called one of the flock.

¹³³ Robinson, Dawn T. Smith-Lovin, Lynn. (2001) 'Getting a Laugh: Gender, Status, and Humor in Task Discussions'. *Social Forces*, Volume 80, Number 1, September 2001, pp. 123-158.

¹³⁴ Romero, E., and Pescosolido, A. (2008) 'Humor and group effectiveness.' *Human Relations*, Vol. 61, No. 3, 395-418

Provine describes an epidemic of uncontrollable laughter that afflicted more than 1,000 people in Tanganyika from 1962 to 1964, where individual laughter attacks lasted from minutes to hours. The outbreak of mass psychogenic illness (MPI) occurred in or near the village of Kashasha on the western coast of lake Victoria in the modern Tanzania near the border of Kenya. The Wikipedia entry says that the school from which the epidemic sprang was sued. The children and parents had transmitted it to the surrounding area so that other schools and a neighbouring village comprising thousands of people were all affected. About eighteen months after it started, the phenomenon had died off. Apart from the laughter: pain, fainting, respiratory problems, rashes, attacks of crying, and random screaming were reported. Doctors reported that there were more complaints about gas than ever before. Caution: Although farts are extremely funny, we are discouraged in the social sciences research from attributing causality when we see correlation.

Other kinds of bad laughter have also been studied. In a 1996 experiment that investigated pain relief, surgery patients were found to require lower doses of analgesics when they watched funny films than when they watched serious movies. However, when they viewed "annoying comedies," their use of analgesics actually increased. Failed humour causes discomfort and even pain. Maybe that is why bad jokes are so often described as 'lame' and 'painful.' I can think of a few shows that should carry health warnings.

The findings above were supported by another study. Nancy Bell of Washington State University recruited a team of gelotology volunteers to accost friends, family members, and complete strangers with the following joke:

"What did the big chimney say to the little chimney?"

"Nothing, chimneys can't talk."

Bell says she found the joke online after Googling for 'bad jokes.' I didn't find it that bad, personally, but then I had an older brother who told the same joke a quattuordecillion times when I was growing up. (Knock knock. Pete, Pete who? Pete Bog.)

The fieldworkers managed to work it into 207 different conversations, including some awkward ones in lifts. I can imagine being alarmed that a stranger would tell me such a joke. What else might he be capable of? People that transgress the bounds of civility on apparent trifles are the ones we need to be most wary of.

Sure enough, the reactions of people on the receiving end of the bad joke were hostile. About 44 percent of the reactions were considered 'impolite,' ranging from a mild reprimand, an insult, and sarcasm to 'outright profanity'. The harshest retaliation came from family, especially children who were told the joke by their parents, which will not surprise any parent.

So laughter helps us to see where things need to be put in their place; but it also keeps things in their places, it helps us to make connections or see where they are missing; to slip the bonds of logic; to reboot our minds and restore social meanings (for good or ill); to organise the profusion of facts we find; the facts without interconnections (profusions of disconnected paradigms producing meaning), or interconnections without facts (*hoc est corpus*,¹³⁵ ideology , elaborate edifices of logically consistent verbiage aloof from historical or material connections.)

Evolutionary biology claims that humor emerged as an indicator of other traits that were of survival value, such as intelligence,¹³⁶ which is why women like funny men. Funny rocks, and you can work on everything else.¹³⁷

Laughter studies should definitely, be a discipline in the humanities. Does laughter not expose the highest (*hiero-*) principles (*archai*) and *histio* (systematics and interweaving) of *logia* (knowledge, interconnection of ideas) and all the other Greek ingredients that comprise the nous, noesis, noumenon? It should be the highest discipline. A meta-discipline. And a compulsory post-graduate course, like conscription. A Trans-disciplinary Kalypto-Noology related to Elastic Knowledge Organization of Symbolic Forms, giving clues to finding hidden patterns that connect, hierarchies, histologies and taxonomies of meaning.

The final exam would be a stand-up piece: 'Hegel at the Mall' or 'Žižek reads his Cruise Ship Holiday,' 'Society if Neanderthals had survived,' 'If Enid Blyton had read Frederik Jameson.' We could rename the days of the week after the top 7 funny words in each language. Blubber, Bouffant, Canoodle, Toupee, Amphigory.

Funny scholars would be the high priests. Religious institutions would be taken over. The old priests would be turfed out and made to deliver mock self-denunciations, and books that are not funny would be publicly parodied in interviews with Ali G. Uncracking subjects will be sent to the Far Side. All people will be made to carry little red copies of *The Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster*. Reactionaries who oppose these policies will be rehabilitated in laughter re-education camps run by Woody Allen.

135 "Hocuspocus" is a corruption of the liturgical phrase "Hoc est enim corpus meum" - With these words spoken by the priest, and the chiming of a little bell, transubstantiation occurs (the wafer turns into the true body of Christ).

136 Miller, G. (2000) *The Mating Mind: How Sexual Choice Shaped the Evolution of Human Nature*.

137 Research has confirmed that a good sense of humor is an important human mate preference worldwide according to Kaufmann et al (2007) in *The Role Of Creativity And Humor In Human Mate Selection*. Yale Department of Psychology

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The Pursuit of Happiness

Nature has placed humankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, boredom and fun.¹³⁸ Now the word *fun* itself (as opposed to the actual having of it) is “a relative novelty, introduced in English only in the late seventeenth century as a variation of the Middle English *fon*, meaning jester or fool.”¹³⁹ But people have surely been having it since Australopithecines first chased one another across the Highveld or poked one another with pointy sticks. The capacity for fun and playfulness may even have been a favoured trait for genetic selection and evolution, which means it goes all the way back to the very beginning of sentient life.¹⁴⁰ Suffering (and especially boredom) are its antithesis. This is why we use terms like “excruciating boredom” and “bored to tears”. It can be measured by the brain atrophy evident on CAT scans taken before and after management meetings.

But I give myself away. I am a generation X, postmodern secularist with not much to worry about other than a few deadlines and why my teenage son is growing marijuana hydroponically in his bedroom. Securely middle class, comfy and contained, I exist at a point in history and society where I *can* define happiness as fun. The other basic feel-good states that would conventionally be the stuff of happiness (contentment, wellbeing, security) have become the raw materials – they are perhaps necessary, yet not quite sufficient. They set the scene for pleasurable consumption, adventure and “lols”.¹⁴¹ Superficial? Maybe. But do not be misled into thinking that we are all about immoderation these days. Our fun is the fun of modest pleasures; premised also on the prerequisite of freedom from fear and bodily discomfort (other than the pain of excessive laughing), as much of the time as possible, and within the reasonable limits of desire. This contemporary norm is a kind of Epicureanism rehashed and wearing designer sunglasses.¹⁴² It is a fun that is somewhat clean, if not unselfconsciously innocent. But it definitely excludes the kinds of low fun to which are attached some unfortunate costs like the risk of toxic psychosis or permanent liver damage.¹⁴³ We are over the 70’s hard rocking version of fun. Cool people have come to scorn such short-termist hedonism and the way in which it results in decrepitude (cf; Keith Richards), and to acknowledge that fun needs to be holistic and sustainable, corporeal and even intellectual. It’s lite and crisp and varied, eating, travelling, or discussing Hegel.¹⁴⁴ Happiness is an escape from vicissitude and the constraints of the real: for some, uncluttered

138 Adapted from *An Introduction To The Principles Of Morals And Legislation*, Jeremy Bentham, 1789.

139 McMahon, p.199, and online dictionary. “Origin: 1675–85; dial. var. of obs. *Fon* to befool”

140 Holloway, 1976, quoted in Nancy Makepeace Tanner. *On becoming human*

142. As the teenage son, clearly looking for lols, might put it

142 This again erred on the side of recommending a bit too much sober reasoning. (Contrary to popular misrepresentation, Epicureanism is not about indulgence and dissipation.

143 Samuel Johnson failed to appreciate this when he said that “There is nothing which has yet been contrived by man, by which so much happiness is produced as by a good tavern.”

144 And even though we cannot prove with any incontrovertible logic that it is better to be a partially satisfied human being than a deeply satisfied pig (see John Stuart Mill), it is still obvious to us that the higher pleasures have immense value for us.

aestheticism, for others, playing *World of Warcraft*. Whatever gets your dopamine levels up.

Is this relentless (and sometimes restless, I admit) pursuit of good feeling problematic? Is it only for the middle classes? I have come across the suggestion that perpetual pleasure is something purely invented by advertising agencies and producers on the lifestyle channels, and not even *real* (wtf?, you may be thinking).

Stopping to look into the subject of happiness, which, incidentally, some would caution, is the surest method for causing it instantaneously to flee, I discover that philosophers, poets, gurus and economists of every orientation and age are attempting to convince me that there is more to it, and that my default view is a trifle shallow, meaningless, politically vacuous, individualistic, lacking in peace of mind, ethically unwise, metaphysically barren, and so on. In Dante's *Divine Comedy*, for example, the Epicureans are depicted as heretics suffering in the sixth circle of hell.¹⁴⁵ Is there another kind of happiness that is more PC, appropriate and meaningful?¹⁴⁶

Sure enough, ideas of happiness have certainly been evolving with the historically contingent creatures (i.e. us) that think them up and then normalise them and become, for the most part, unconsciously accepting of them. I am not going to try a bonsai history of philosophy. Darrin McMahon has already written a truly marvelous, engaging survey of Western philosophy of happiness all the way from Herodotus to our contemporary bioethicists. He says that the history of the idea of happiness can be conveniently summarized in a series of bumper sticker equations:

Happiness= Luck (Homeric)
Happiness=Virtue (classical)
Happiness=Heaven (medieval)
Happiness=Pleasure (Enlightenment)
Happiness=A Warm Puppy (contemporary)¹⁴⁷

As we saw, most of us are somewhere between the pleasure and the puppies in our mindsets. But does that necessarily look like progress? McMahon does not describe this last philosophical phase as a great advancement for humankind. Perhaps he is correct. In spite of our

145 This really seems quite unfair. Epicureanism gets a rough deal and is a terribly misunderstood theory, as I already indicated. Tetracharmakos, or "The four-part cure", is Epicurus' basic guideline as to how to live the happiest possible life. This poetic doctrine was handed down by an anonymous Epicurean who summed up Epicurus' philosophy on happiness in four simple lines:

Don't fear god,

Don't worry about death;

What is good is easy to get, and

What is terrible is easy to endure.

Philodemus, *Herculaneum Papyrus*, 1005, 4.9-14

146 Warning: I will definitely be excluding that most wearisome fall-back (God) as an option.

147 George Schulz, author of the comic strip *Peanuts*

contemporary definition, which makes it sound so easy to attain, so sensorial and uncomplicated, we are apparently still not very happy. I say this because Prozac alone is currently prescribed to more than fifty-four million people worldwide and brings in about \$11billion in annual revenues in the U.S. alone.¹⁴⁸ Perhaps depression is a condition of the same post-modernity that makes our happiness superficial and vacuous, (like our endless consumption and chasing after nothingnesses). But who can guess whether we are collectively happier than we have ever been at any other time in history or not? (What has progress done for us? Other than the end of the plague, good dental hygiene, the iPad, global mobility, safe C-sections, the Pill,...)

One might be tempted to look into utilitarianism - after all it does talk about maximising “felicity”, which sounds promising.¹⁴⁹ But this theory turns out not to really be about happiness *qua* happiness at all. It is rather about morality.¹⁵⁰ Utilitarianism just uses happiness as the touchstone to tell us whether something is worth doing or not. Again, I do not want to provide a critique of utilitarianism here (for the reason that it would cause a net loss of Fun), but let us note that someone we all love and trust, Karl Marx, was not a fan of Bentham and the utilitarianism at all. He thought the wrong questions were being answered to start off with. In *Das Kapital*, he writes, “In no time and in no country has the most homespun commonplace ever strutted about in so self-satisfied a way...” He speaks of Bentham’s “dry naïveté” and writes most of his ideas off as ‘such rubbish’.¹⁵¹ He says that Utilitarianism is true by definition and doesn’t add any meaningful insights whatsoever. A more useful analysis for Marx would be to explore what sorts of things are good for people and what makes them happy. He is talking about people alienated within capitalism, people who continually change, and most importantly, people whose consciousness is historically contingent. So consciousness itself and people’s ideas of happiness change with time and so does the nature of the social arrangements in which they are formed and shaped. What exactly would make these kinds of sentient beings happy?

One wouldn’t win a lounge suite for being able to guess that for Marx, happiness is to be attained through organised collectivism and the triumph of universal socialism – the formation of new forms of political, economic, and social organisation that dismantle and replace the fraudulent relations of capitalism. Isn’t it wonderful to hear it said, straight up? Admit that it is. We may possibly come back to all this in a little while. The approach itself is what matters here: the idea of

148 Stipp, D., ‘Trouble in Prozac’, *Fortune Magazine*, Nov 28 2005, and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eli_Lilly_and_Company.

149 The theory says that the moral worth of an action is determined by whether or not it provides happiness –not just my maximum felicity or yours (which could of course potentially be at my expense if you were deranged or just rude and selfish), but the felicity of all sentient beings.

150 Archaic word, fallen into disuse outside specialist communities (government moral regeneration campaigners, religious workers).

151 Here is more, just for a laugh: “..this prejudice was first established as a dogma by the arch-Philistine, Jeremy Bentham, that insipid, pedantic, leather-tongued oracle of the ordinary bourgeois intelligence of the 19th century..” (Karl Marx, in *Capital* Volume One, Chapter Twenty-Four, Section 5)

radical historical contingency that leads to a whole thrilling discipline called 'the history of emotions'.¹⁵²

One of the most compelling analyses of happiness that is slightly less ideologically predictable to us jaded cynics is provided by Freud. Pleasure and pain have been part of our thinking about happiness for millennia, but it was Freud who provided a detailed map of the intrapsychic dynamics at work in the seeking of pleasure, and some sense of its possibility within the constraints of the real (capricious, brutish, cruel and unfair) world. In Freud's analysis, our poor egos¹⁵³ are caught between our own inner insatiable and excitable instincts and drives, on the one hand, with their blind and infantile desire for immediate gratification (more dopamine now!); and intractable external reality on the other.

We all know by now (unless we choose to imagine some benevolent friend in the sky that works things in our favour) that external reality doesn't give a toss about our desires, and teaches us the harsh reality principle and the skill of 'reality testing' one way or another. As Freud put the problem so succinctly in *Civilisation and its Discontents*, "the pleasure principle is at loggerheads with the whole world... There is no possibility at all of it being carried through. All the regulations of the universe run counter to it."¹⁵⁴ In other words, it's a damn shame but Jesus really isn't coming back, ever, and Robert Downey Jr. (insert your own sex icon) would surely report any of my ardent amorous advances to the police, but somehow I just have to grow up and live with it. In this light I wonder if our Prozac bill is just a result of our growing appreciation of the unsympathetic nature of reality and the lack of an imaginary answer to save us. There are no magic fairies, and we have to face the seemingly innate murderousness in ourselves as a species (cf: repeated genocides).¹⁵⁵ We see only a handful of African countries successfully and sustainably democratised, our financial systems are unstable and chaotic. We also have the simultaneous (and hideous) emerging knowledge that we are indefatigably annihilating our planet, and even the Prozac packaging isn't biodegradable.¹⁵⁶ On the other hand, many of us do have a sense of entitlement to a long and healthy life, and access to a mindblowing abundance of

152 History of emotions research rests on the assumption that emotions – feelings and their expressions – are shaped by culture and learnt/acquired in social contexts. What somebody can and may feel (and show) depends on social norms and rules.

153 The word ego is taken directly from Latin, where it is the nominative of the first person singular personal pronoun and is translated as 'I myself' to express emphasis. The Latin term ego is used in English to translate Freud's German term *Das Ich*, which literally means 'the I'. The Ego seeks to find pleasure in realistic ways that will benefit in the long term rather than bringing grief.

154 Quoted in McMahon, p. 443

155 As Hegel put it: 'History is not the soil in which happiness grows. The periods in it are the blank pages in history.' Quoted from Lectures on the philosophy of World History, by McMahon, in *Happiness, A History*, preface xi, 2004

156 It is hardly surprising that some people can't cope and turn to doctrine and fundamentalism. We may be pleased to imagine a general decline in ideas of happiness that hinge off eternal damnation, but these have been replaced in popular culture by other superstitions - aliens, made up pseudo-scientific 'laws' (a la *The Secret*), or "Bridges to Total Freedom" (as in Scientology). Jargon, symbols, numerology, crystals, affirmations, paths, oils, tinctures, preparations stirred anticlockwise in the light of the full moon and messages from spirit guides. All the same pre-rational twaddle that may just seem innocuous enough but it should really evoke more vituperation and a lot less spending than it does.

diverting wonders to satisfy our need for eternal novelty and stimulation. That these are increasingly unfairly distributed across humanity is another question.

Meanwhile, there is a growing feeling that we can and even SHOULD be happy in this life,¹⁵⁷ and that it is *our own fault* if we aren't. This is the kind of nonsense that is sold in the popular psychology sections of bookstores. Books that are heralded as the "most authoritative and informative book about happiness ever written"¹⁵⁸ and written by people like life coaches. This kind of bunk is often paraded as 'science-based'. These authors '...know happiness from the inside out'. One author has particular credibility as the "Indiana Jones of Positive Psychology." Apparently anyone truly interested in global well-being and human happiness should read these.

For Freud, up against the same reality that other more delusional authors like to pretend away and coach out of existence, the best we can hope for is a kind of uneasy truce in the reality principle vs. pleasure principle showdown. Happiness is not a warm puppy, it is a doomed mission. Even with so much seemingly within our grasp. No, it isn't, Freud reminds us. That is just what the advertisements would have you believe. But at least a Freudian will not feel inferior for not looking like the person in the advertisement and for having cellulite and being difficult and perverse. I AM PERVERSE. I AM INCONCEIVABLY COMPLEX, might be the counter-slogan (see table on following page). Self-esteem is important in these matters. Is it all about self-esteem? The French philosopher Michel de Montaigne said we feel bad about ourselves because of sexual inadequacy, failure to live up to social norms, and intellectual inferiority. Happiness would at least partially mean just overcoming one's low self-perceptions.

Trying to find the perfect answer for something as complicated as happiness that pins everything down to one thing is a bit like what Daniel Dennett calls "greedy reductionism".¹⁵⁹ He says that 'good' reductionism means explaining a thing in terms of what it reduces to. Greedy reductionism, on the other hand, is too much zeal to explain too much too fast, like religion does. Inventing some interesting terminology, Dennett says that "Good reductionists suppose that all Design can be explained without skyhooks (essentially, fake, e.g. supernaturalistic explanations); greedy reductionists suppose it can all be explained without cranes (legitimate, mechanistic explanations)."

So let us be good reductionists and avoid the skyhooks of the supernatural and look for some nice cranes, but without, as I said, attempting to cram the entire history of philosophy from Herodotus to Homer Simpson into a few pages (-you really should rather read McMahon). In lieu

157 In the 20th century west, the normativity of happiness and a "positive attitude" to life is scarcely questioned. – except by the likes of Barbara Ehrenreich, who will be discussed shortly

158 Diener, E. and Biswas-Diener, R. (2008) *Happiness: Unlocking the Mysteries of Psychological Wealth*.

159 Introduced in his 1995 book *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, to refer to erroneous reductionism.

of this then, let us try matching the columns below, just for fun. (Answers below)

1. Worldwide, the most routine obstacle to human happiness is poverty. To the extent that happiness surveys can be believed, the world's happiest countries tend also to be among the richest ...furthermore, within rich countries, richer people tend to be happier..	a) Milan Kundera
2. The world has grown suspicious of anything that looks like a happily married life	b) Benjamin Franklin, founding father of the USA
3. The Constitution only guarantees the American people the right to pursue happiness. You have to catch it yourself	c) Barbara Ehrenreich, cultural critic and author
4. Optimism is the opium of the people	d) Oscar Wilde, writer
5. It's your own fault. Don't blame the system. Don't blame your boss. Work harder and pray more."	e) Combined Insurance sales training, opening group war cry ¹⁶⁰
6. I FEEL HEALTHY, I FEEL HAPPY, I FEEL TERRIFIC!	f) Anna Scott , played by Julia Roberts, in <i>Notting Hill</i>
7. This is my 'depressed stance.' When you're depressed, it makes a lot of difference how you stand. The worst thing you can do is straighten up and hold your head high because then you'll start to feel better. If you're going to get any joy out of being depressed, you've got to stand like this	g) Sigmund Freud, übertheorist
8. Just as a cautious businessman avoids investing all his capital in one concern, so wisdom would probably admonish us also not to anticipate all our happiness from one quarter alone.	h) Charlie Brown, cartoon character
9. $H=S+C+V$ Happiness is a function of S, where S = the set range, C= the circumstances of your life, and V, = factors under your voluntary	i) Zig Zigler, Christian motivator ¹⁶¹
10. Happiness isn't happiness unless there's a violin-playing goat.	j) Martin Seligman, founder of Positive Psychology

Answers : 1c; 2d, 3b, 4a, 5i, 6e, 7h, 8g, 9j, 10 f

Some contemporary definitions are a just a swindle. Try "Success is getting what you want. Happiness is wanting what you get". This is Dale Carnegie: Happiness.™ The last one above (the goat example) is Anna Scott, in *Notting Hill*, played by Julia Roberts. She is referring to a Chagall painting. The work is characteristically full of vibrant optimism. Here is an artist who said he worked without method, urged on by an inspiration that was uncontrollable. This is the happiness of following Eros: the irrepressible yearning and desire for connection. In Carl Jung's analytical psychology Eros is a force of psychic relatedness. Happiness is a creative movement in which Eros, as a desire for wholeness, leads us forward in life towards integration and individuation.

¹⁶⁰ Accompanied by "the winning punch". In Ehrenreich, p.104
¹⁶¹ Quoted in *Time* magazine, May 2, 1994. in Ehrenreich, p. 115

The opposite kind of happiness is the optimism of the Stalinist kind, featured in Milan Kundera's *The Joke*. (Happiness is the opium of the people). Individuation was a bourgeois aspiration. Stalin demanded relentless, blind and uniform optimism. Those convicted of 'defeatism' found themselves on wonderful extended holidays in very cold places. A very similar thing happens today, where positive thinking has become not just an industry in itself, but mandatory, especially in corporates with their posters and motivational slogans. Critical questioning is frequently sanctioned with isolation.

Life coaches and motivational speakers have been demonstrating for more than a decade that a healthy, positive mental outlook requires abstinence from current affairs, (and reality-based thinking altogether). We should visualise a shiny, abundant world all around us. Barbara Ehrenreich deals with the consequences of this pervasive menace of positive thinking in her mythbusting *Bright-sided: How Positive Thinking is Undermining America*. She argues that happiness has become an oppressive ideology, and explores how on a personal level, it leads to irrational self-blame for sad contingency (being retrenched or diagnosed with cancer...) and a morbid reflexive preoccupation with stamping out one's own 'negative' thoughts. She argues that this is a lot of meaningless hard work and a very stupid waste of energy. She goes so far as to say to say that on a US national level, it has brought an era of irrational optimism directly resulting in the global financial meltdown. We should resist having our attitudes reprogrammed to permanent rosy pink and aspire rather to reality-oriented sobriety (aka 'intelligence').

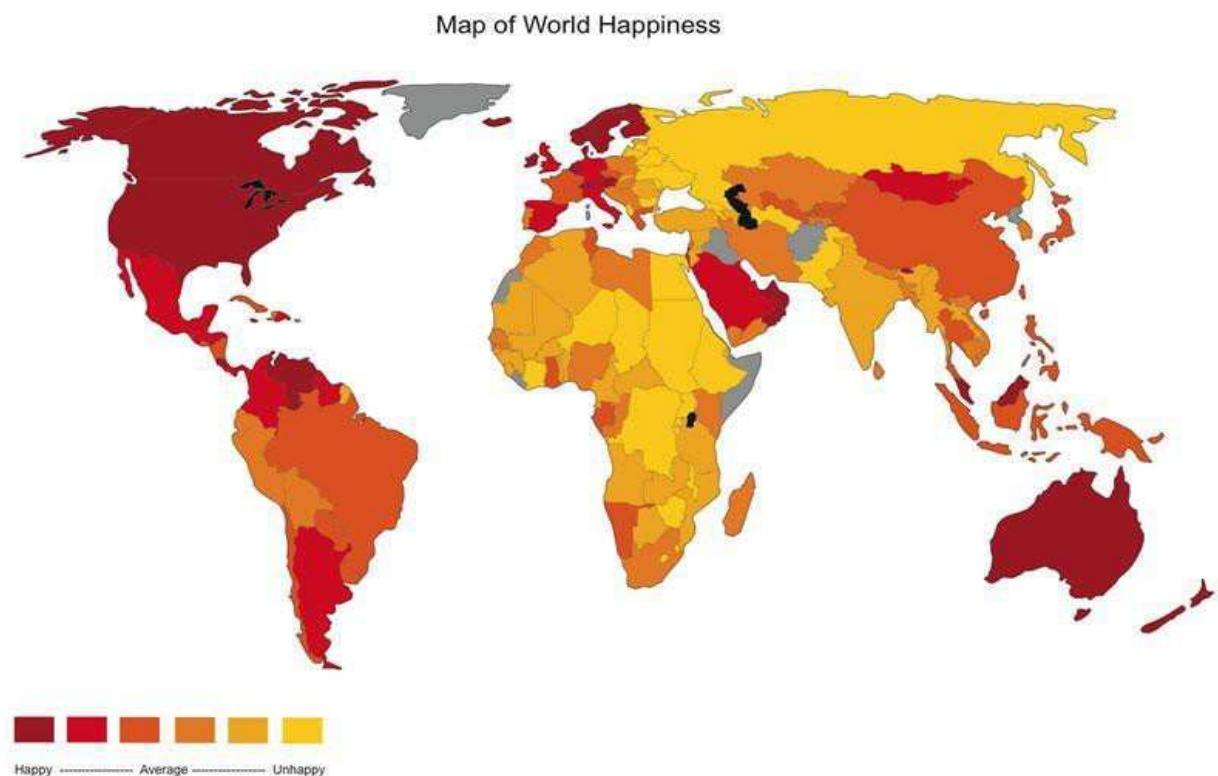
If we still believe happiness is worthwhile, do we have a crane yet as to its causes? Are riches necessary and / or sufficient causes of happiness? Does participative democracy help? Is it a byproduct of access to adequate and affordable sanitation and public healthcare infrastructure, or is it more internal? Genetics? Attitudes and ways of thinking? The result of something closer to *Eudaimonia*?¹⁶² Is it being in or having love, or owning some Monolo Blahnik Patent Campari Mary Jane shoes (\$645)? Perhaps there is a kind of happiness isolated from all causes. What would the Buddha say? Happiness in most eastern forms of spirituality lies precisely in the breaking of attachment to causes, impulses, experience, and transcending earthly vicissitudes.

How would we know? How does one empirically measure happiness? One suggested measure is GNH (Gross National Happiness).

¹⁶² Aristotle's definition of the good life: a kind of well-functioning of the soul, a virtuous way of being characterised by moderation, sound judgment, and balance.

Happiness economics suggests that measures of public happiness should be used to supplement more traditional economic measures (GDP per capita, etc) when evaluating the success of public policy.

The concept of gross national happiness (GNH) was developed in an attempt to define an indicator that measures quality of life or social progress in more holistic and psychological terms than gross domestic product (GDP). The idea was generated in 1972 by Bhutan's King, Jigme Singye Wangchuck. Various sophisticated indicators were subsequently developed and now it is the case that any proposed policies in Bhutan must pass a GNH review based on a GNH impact statement.¹⁶³ The four dimensions of GNH are the promotion of sustainable development, the promotion of cultural values, the conservation of the natural environment, and the establishment of good governance.¹⁶⁴ The measure has subsequently been de-Bhutanised and applied internationally. Below is an example of a Global Happiness Index map produced by comparative studies.



¹⁶³ Wikipedia entry-Gross national happiness.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

It has been found that high income, individualism, human rights, and social equality correlated strongly with each other and with the construct *Subjective Well Being*.¹⁶⁵

Another effort to measure happiness is found in *The Oxford Happiness Questionnaire*, developed by psychologists at Oxford University. The Questionnaire includes some of the following 'True' or 'False' questions.¹⁶⁶

Item 4. I have very warm feelings towards almost everyone.
(I am not rabidly misanthropic but I have no clue who would say 'yes' here other than people currently tripping on ecstasy.)

Item 7. I find most things amusing.
(Same as above, but marijuana)

Item 24. I don't have a particular sense of meaning and purpose in my life.
(This is where the religious people and those who have never encountered existentialism score extra points)

You can go the website and see the full questionnaire and find out whether you are depressed, satisfied, very happy, or *too happy*. Indeed. Recent research seems to show that there's an optimal level of happiness for things like scholastic achievement, health, and success, and being "too happy" may be associated with lower achievement. The test probably attempts to control for the kind of mania that we see in televangelists and/or people on coke.

165 Diener E, Diener M, Diener C. (1995) Factors predicting the subjective well-being of nations

166 Hills, P., & Argyle, M. (2002) 'The Oxford Happiness Questionnaire: a compact scale for the measurement of psychological well-being'. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 33, 1073–1082.

So happiness is the result of a mixture of inner psychological variables, external social and economic variables, and some variables that are a confounded mishmash of the two. The top variables that have emerged so far in all the research are – relationships and social interaction, marital status (you probably already know the surprise about whether being married or unmarried involves more psychological suffering), having a job, being healthy, having democratic freedom, being innately optimistic, being part of a religious group, being wealthy, and hanging out with other happy people. The list raises some questions. Which matters most? Are there second-order effects and interactions? How do we create a control group? Can a politically oppressed person who is innately optimistic be happier than a free person with no friends?

There remains an abundance of questions indeed, and no neat answers, but a growing world of interdisciplinary research. Many of the scholars seem to recognise a complex, qualitative lived dimension that defies any sort of greedy reductionism. What I think we should remember, as McMahon shows us, is that our modern belief in happiness: that happiness is a natural right, is a relatively recent development. It is a product of a dramatic revolution in human expectations carried out since the eighteenth century: a consecration of the idea of the pursuit of individual happiness¹⁶⁷, fuelled by secularisation and later, the emergence of positive psychology. In the world of magical thinking, it is still held up by the skyhook that God wants to 'prosper' people¹⁶⁸ and that we are entitled to all kinds of stuff.

In the real world, happiness is something we can probably promote very well, the research suggests, through greater equality, better social policy, and the promotion of more mutually respectful interpersonal relationships. I sound like an earnest social sciences undergrad, but I suppose that more motherhood and apple pie is exactly what I mean, fairly allocated in lawful and egalitarian societies by democratically elected people who do not conveniently believe that those without apple pie suffer from some kind of attitudinal deficiency,¹⁶⁹ or in our specific case, who do not steal most of it for themselves. Once the social policy side of things is taken care of and we have created a world of happy and well-functioning New Zealands or Swedens, we can stop being too serious about our pursuit.

167 e.g. in the Declaration of Independence and France's Declaration of the Rights of Man.

168 Typical cringeful verbing of nouns that is one of the chief sins of the evangelical movement.

169 I copy Ehrenreich who refers to "the economic elites who flatter themselves that poverty is a voluntary condition."

The famous author James Hillman¹⁷⁰ points us in the direction of Ikkyu, the crazy Japanese monk:

You do this, you do that
You argue left, you argue right
You come down, you go up
This person says no, you say yes
Back and forth
You are happy
You are really happy

170 Interview in March 1998 issue of *The Sun* magazine under the title, 'From Little Acorns: A Radical New Psychology.'

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Language Adventures

The last time I tried to learn a new language I was largely unconscious about the process itself. I wasn't preoccupied with analysing the typologies of my isiZulu errors because I was too busy wrapping my tongue around uncomfortable sounds and trying to pronounce strange combinations of n's, g's, x's, c's and q's (the latter 3 are clicks of the tongue, on top of it). I was blithely innocent of the range and depth of my errors. In these early days of language acquisition, the barest and most stylised meanings must do. Technically, these first attempts are not really even recognised as actual *speech*. Phrases are just recited snippets – just one up from gesticulations and grunts. Learning a new language is not romance and poetry for a long time. In most cases it takes dedicated years. A bit of a look into all this will either inspire you to sign up for classes immediately or possibly boggle you into giving up speaking *toute suite*.

But first some helpful resources. When it comes to learning a new language, there are some very useful phrases you may wish to note. I have collected these from a number of “Useful Phrases” websites. These sites, like much of the internet, confirm every anti-democratic knowledge management instinct. The most indispensable of the collected phrases I share with you below.

Finnish : “Käyhän että tuon kannettavani saunaan?” - *is it OK if I bring my laptop in the sauna?*

French : “Il y a un singe qui vole dans l'arbre” - *There's a flying monkey in the tree.*

Romanian: “Îmi poți împrumuta puțin spatula ta?” - *Can I borrow your spatula?*

Russian: “Борода вам очень идет / Boroda vam ochen' idjot” - *That beard suits you very well.*

Spanish: “Tu ego está fuera de control” - *Your ego is out of control.*

Tibetan: “Gongta di ngay chöloogdâng tüngee mindu” - *I'm sorry, it's against my religion.*

Welsh: “Mae dafad wedi bwyta fy mrechdanau!” - *A sheep has eaten my sandwiches!*

Turkish: “Lütfen pantolonunuzu verin” - *Please give me your trousers.*

The first thing that learning a new language reminds us is that all of these symbolic systems are entirely *learned*. None of us genetically inherited a single phoneme in any language from any of our ancient ancestors, not a *goo* or a *ga*. We have known this formally since the experiment of Frederick II, Holy Roman Emperor (1194-1250), who had some orphans brought to the palace for observation (experiments on orphans being a well-established German tradition). He ensured all physical care for the babies, but forbade verbal contact and affection, keeping them in linguistic isolation. He hoped to find out which language the infants would speak “naturally”. It was expected that the ur-language would be either Hebrew, Greek or Latin. But we can all guess the ending- the children did not speak any language at all. They died, in fact.

Our native language so often feels like part of our bone marrow, yet if we had been born in central Siberia we might be reading this in Yeniseian, or we could be amongst the 100 or so individuals in Irian Jaya reading it in Narau.

The socio-linguistic systems into which we are born, or later attempt to break into as an adult, have all been absorbed, modified, handed down, improvised, evolved, trashed and reworked countless times over thousands of years. They define us as we define them, and they can never be completely written down. Somehow our immediate caregivers (including *The Tellytubbies*) made our immersion into this complex world of signification just as easy and natural as taking our first bubblebath. And it doesn't take long to master. Young children will communicate very proficiently indeed and soon make one feel deficient. I was recently addressed by two very young children in a swimming pool in Egypt, who were clearly trying to include me in a game, or tell me I was in their way, or that a spaceship was about to crash into the pool. They were confused by the fact that no amount of gesticulation and very slow repetition of whatever it was they were saying was getting through to me.

Perhaps the freedom to experiment for months on end is a key step in this immersion in one's mother tongue (also known as L1, or arterial language, by the specialists). By the time a baby begins to talk it has babbled for extended periods in distinctly Czech, Welsh, or Kitsekiri sounds, usually to a very encouraging audience. Steven Pinker compares a child babbling to a person fiddling with a complex hi-fi system in an attempt to understand what all the controls do. Most babbling consists of a small number of sounds, which suggests the child is preparing the sounds it will need to speak the language to which it is exposed. It is conducting an exploration of its vocal tract capabilities. Of course most of us have heard babies exploring their full vocal tract capabilities in restaurants, on planes, etc, and those with children of their own will attest to the fact that 2 or 3am seems to be an optimal time for experimentation with the volume and pitch controls. Adults skip this crucial phase in trying to get into a new set of sounds and meanings. We should possibly all start learning a second language by babbling in it, saying *strooo del raus maus hei deg ger* in language classrooms, with trainers applauding and smiling.

Think of the first time you tried a new language as an adult. Before a new job, new travels, or because of a new love interest or perhaps an infatuation with a poet like Virgil or an untranslatable writer famed for 'word music' like Pushkin. If you are an English mother-tongue speaker then your first foreign language is likely to have been Latin, French, German, or Spanish. It is probable you have had a nostalgically remembered fling with more than one of them. Perhaps you still remember the little songs to remember the conjugations of *to be*? Ich *bin* du *bist*, er/sie/es *ist* - or maybe those first awkward case and mood declensions, and your surprise at all the kinky permutations in genders and numbers, which English wisely avoids.

acquired by native English speakers. This sounds like a fascinating task, and it is easy to appreciate that the FSI has only managed to analyse a meagre 63 languages. Many might think that this is a fair sample, and would only be able to name about 63 languages, but it should be known that on any day there are close to 7000 distinct languages being actively babbled all over our planet.¹⁷³ Smaller numbers of languages are spoken in some of the bigger and relatively more linguistically homogenous countries - Russia has only about 100 languages, China has 293, and India has 415, with just 122 spoken by more than 10,000 people. But in Papua-New Guinea, there are an estimated 832 languages in about 50 language families (i.e. they are mutually unintelligible) spoken by a population of only 3.9 million people. That makes the average number of speakers in this country per language around 4,500, possibly the lowest of any area of the world.¹⁷⁴ One presumably needs a phrasebook to go to the corner shop and interpreters at book-club meetings.

Returning now to the tiny sample of the FSI's most difficult languages, which require at least 88 weeks of immersion and practice. Topping the list are Arabic, Cantonese, Mandarin, and Japanese. The FSI considers Japanese to be the most difficult of all. I do not imagine the FSI even took the logistical difficulties of immersion into account. There are a few languages that are very tricky in this respect, where immersion would be close to impossible, if not highly uncomfortable. Sentinelese is one of them. It is not a Dr.Suess language, as the name might suggest. It is an unknown language spoken on the North Sentinel Island in the Andaman Islands. It is one of the rarest languages spoken today, and is on the endangered languages list.¹⁷⁵ Perhaps only about 200 to 250 people speak Sentinelese. As for immersion: interactions with the Sentinelese have been extremely rare, brief, and usually fatal, and there are no samples of the language on record other than some invective (presumed to be vulgar suggestions for imperialists). Marco Polo briefly mentions the Andamans and claimed that the human inhabitants had dogs' heads.¹⁷⁶

Japanese is similar to other viciously difficult languages in that it is agglutinating (this does not mean that it attacks the gluteus maximus). The word is derived from the Latin verb *agglutinare*, which means 'to glue together'. An agglutinative language typically creates meaning (e.g. adjectives, tenses, plurals) using glued on bits and changes in stress or tone. For example, in the Spanish word *comí* (I ate), the suffix -í carries the meanings of indicative mood, active voice, past tense, first person singular subject and more. So Japanese has this, and over and above

173 The most extensive catalogue of the world's languages, generally taken to be as authoritative as any, is that of the Ethnologue organization (<http://www.ethnologue.com>), whose detailed classified list currently includes 6,809 distinct languages.

174 Linguistic Society of America. <http://www.lsadc.org> website.

175 Languages are considered 'safe' if children will probably be speaking them in 100 years; 'endangered' if children will probably not be speaking them in 100 years; and 'moribund' if children are not speaking them now.

176 Polo, M. (Henry Yule, trans.), *The Travels of Marco Polo*.

this, is distinguished by a complex system of honorifics reflecting Japanese society, with verb forms and particular vocabulary to indicate the relative status of the speaker, the listener, and persons mentioned in conversation (and anyone else who may have met them, including their sister-in-law and passing delivery people).¹⁷⁷

What makes Japanese even more difficult is that it also has a relatively small sound inventory, making what seem to be minor differences between words extra significant. These differences include pitch, which becomes 'lexically significant' and could make the difference between saying oyster, fence and persimmon (all permutations of *kaki-ni*). As in: "Oh Dave, will you decide who you are voting for and stop sitting on the persimmon?" Incorrect pitch accent is a strong characteristic of a 'foreign accent' in Japanese and other tonally meaningful languages. I have a non-Chinese friend who failed to pronounce the beautiful Chinese name she was given as an exchange teacher in Chengdu correctly, and instead of saying Bai-Shu-Ling (Elm Grove/Forest, or something similar) kept inadvertently introducing herself as a form of venereal infection, much to the hilarity of all present.

When we are children we make charming mistakes as we learn our own language/s, misapplying and over-generalising patterns as we intuitively notice that the whole game of sense is governed by systems of rules. This insight was formally described in the field (and there is a whole field) of Error Analysis.¹⁷⁸ Researchers found that many learner errors are produced by learners making faulty inferences about the rules of a language. First language children say 'I swimmied', and 'they knowed' as they unconsciously infer a rule. We laugh at these endearing mistakes because they reduce language to a regular and predictable system, rather than the malleable, irregular playdough that it is. As adults learning a new language, we quite consciously know there are rules and then clumsily misapply them. Just as a child will say 'I goed', overgeneralising the regular form of the verb, learning adults over-apply what they think the rules are, unaware of the arbitrary and irrational things that a language will often do to catch us out.

These rule-based errors are called 'systematic errors'. Other kinds of mistakes are wrong sounds, vocabulary errors, and so on. Technically, errors are categorised according to the degree to which they interfere with communication: global errors would make a statement incomprehensible, but local errors could be overlooked. 'Me go home' would be a local error, since the meaning is apparent, whereas a phrase like 'rabbit atheist undertow' is not. Interestingly, we understand "Twas brillig, and the slithy toves Did gyre and gimble in the wabe", which contains very little English at all. Wonderfully, a few words that Carroll invented in this

¹⁷⁷ Some of South Africa's languages are equally difficult, especially for young women. For example, respectful 'workarounds' must be contrived for a bride to avoid using syllables from a father in law's name. This practice is called *hlonipa*.

¹⁷⁸ First established in the 1960s by Stephen Pit Corder and colleagues (Corder, 1967).

poem (namely 'chortled' and 'galumphing') have entered the English language, and the poem has been translated into many other languages including Klingon and Yiddish.¹⁷⁹

Il brilgue: les têtes lubricilleux
Se gyrent en vrillant dans le guave,
Enmîmés sont les gougebosqueux,
Et le mômerade horsgrave.

First verse of French translation by Frank L. Warrin

Verdaustig war's, und glaße Wieben
rotteten gorkicht im Gemank.
Gar elump war der Pluckerwank,
und die gabben Schweisel frieben.

First verse of German translation by Christian Enzensberger

Inventing words might be a good strategy for language learners if they could evoke meaning in the way Jabberwocky does. Learners do work around the gaping voids in their language proficiency and experiment with different forms to get the point across, but do not have the archive of sounds and meanings required to achieve this kind of poetic communication. An example of what they might try would be the use of the present tense plus 'yesterday' or 'tomorrow' (as in 'yesterday I go') to communicate time in a basic form without requiring any verb tenses. I cannot claim that it is thrilling stuff, but a relatively new branch of scholarship looks at how these maneuvers work, and in what order they happen. It is called Interlanguage studies (founded by Selinker, 1972). Interlanguage studies seek to understand learner language production on its own terms, almost as a natural language in itself with its own systematic rules. Interlanguage scholars reject, at least for heuristic purposes, the view of learner language as merely an 'imperfect' version of the target language and infer rather interesting universal linguistic norms from what they find. As learners we should care because it somehow frees us from the tyranny of formal correctness.

Some of the 'linguistic universals' that have been found attach theoretical constructs to what we half know already. For example, most learners begin their acquisition process with a 'silent period', in which they speak very little if at all. Given that they can't, this is not particularly surprising. They smile and nod now and then and laugh when other people laugh. It is said that for some, this is a period of 'language shock', in which the learner actively rejects the incomprehensible input of the new language. On a recent adventure in Russia, my husband skipped this phase entirely and kept repeating the few understandable 'Russian' words he had learnt, such as 'aeroport express', 'lift', and 'souvenir'. When he needed to say 'I do not want any

179 The website <http://www76.pair.com/keithlim/jabberwocky/translations/index.html> features numerous translations.

ham on my pizza' he resorted to oinking very loudly, shaking his head, and repeating "Nyet *Oink*, Nyet!", which resulted in the waitress collapsing with laughter and being incapable of serving us (see *gelatolepsy*).

Research has shown that many of the initially 'silent' learners are engaging in inner 'self-talk'. While appearing silent, they are rehearsing important survival phrases and what are called 'lexical chunks', memorising little bits and noticing where they pop up again. These memorised phrases are then employed in the subsequent period of 'formulaic speech'. In this next phase, whether by choice or compulsion, some learners (immigrants, for example) have no silent period and pass directly to formulaic speech. This is very basic memorised speech, in which a handful of moves are used to accomplish basic purposes. If we adopt a musical analogy- just some chords are repeated. This phase gradually gives way to a more experimental phase, in which the repertoire expands and the target language is learned to the point that learners begin to construct a true interlanguage, departing from purely remembered phrases and improvising with what they know.

There are a number of factors and variables that either help or hinder the process of the development of a true rule-governed interlanguage. If you went to a South African school in the Apartheid era you will personally be able to attest to the fact that naming isiZulu noun class prefixes and labeling badly drawn pictures of basic foodstuffs is not effective pedagogy. Knowing grammar rules and vocabulary lists does not result in an ability to use a new language with any degree of fluency. Unfortunately many potentially enriching years of language instruction time are mindlessly wasted in this way. By contrast, one really needs to use the language for genuine communicative purposes, learning through feedback and observation. Meaningful output is as necessary to language learning as meaningful input.¹⁸⁰ And this does not include '*la tortue marche*' or '*le singe est sur la branche*' (cf: Eddie Izzard). It means actual communication. For a reason. To buy nuclear weapons or discuss political ontology.

Social factors are just as critical. Closely related to the output argument is the idea that language acquisition depends on interaction. This is why one does not learn French just by watching TV5 or Italian by listening to endless Verdi operas. Interaction generates feedback, and there is no real learning without it. It allows us to revise our mental schema, observe the consequences of our outputs (people laugh, gape in wonder, or do something mundane). Language acquisition is social and situational and requires the observation of others modeling behavior and experiencing consequences. It allows us to test what knowledge was constructed and to compare 'notes' with other speakers. Basically, all of this inter-subjective epistemological reciprocity is commonly known as reality, and language is somehow very difficult to disentangle from it.

¹⁸⁰ See for example Merrill Swain's 'comprehensible output hypothesis'

Studies across numerous cultures have demonstrated that women learn languages more easily than men. It has also been shown that female learners typically use a range of different learning strategies more widely and intensively than males. Whether this is as a result of a socialised vs. an innate ability to communicate better is completely beyond my knowledge and the scope of this ramble. Other powerful sociological variables include attitude. The way in which the language being learned is perceived can also have a profound impact on learning. Negative views of the target language and/or its speakers typically make acquisition much more difficult.

Emotions generally play a strong role, too. Anxiety damages students' prospects for successful learning and limits risk-taking (the learner fears being ridiculed for making a mistake.) Along similar lines, studies have shown that extraverts (or outwardly oriented people) acquire a second language better than introverts (or inwardly focused people). Extroverts will be willing to try to communicate even if they are not sure they will succeed, generate more outputs, get more feedback, and so it is not difficult to see why they do better.

There are some psychological and cognitive characteristics that enhance or constrain language processing. Memory is fundamental. Individuals with poorer short-term memory capacity have limitations in performing the cognitive processes necessary for retention and organisation of meaning. *Tip*: do not go to your language classes stoned.

There are remaining questions about why some people seem to pick up new languages and others not. Something called 'language aptitude' is the construct, and tests for this construct have proven extremely effective in predicting which learners will be successful in learning¹⁸¹. No one is quite sure whether it is because of an organic property of the brain, greater motivation, or a better short-term memory, but it has been figured out that language aptitude is quite distinct from intelligence, and is itself fairly consistently measurable. It is also not something you can change, so definitely do not buy a book that says 'Increase your language aptitude and speak Mandarin in 6 weeks.'

Motivation is critical too. As any teacher in the world could have told us, motivated people learn faster. This has been the subject of extensive scholarship, to the point that The European Union has now funded a project to motivate adult language learners, called *Don't Give Up*. My inner cynic thinks motivation is bound to be determined by all kinds of sociological factors and not something an expensive campaign will bring on, especially for the marginalised, old and brittle-minded.

181 Stansfield, C.W. (1989) 'Language Aptitude Reconsidered.' *ERIC Digest*.

Which brings us to the question of age. Is it better to learn a new language when one is young? Recent studies have showed a linear decline in performance with increasing age. Those exposed to a new language from birth performed best, and 'late learners' worst on all language production and comprehension tests. Other research suggests that the ability to process syntax (grammar) may decline with age, but that semantic (meaning-making) functions are relatively unaffected. Apparently younger children can learn languages more easily because their language processing 'circuits' are still being formed, whereas adults must reactivate principles developed during their first language learning and then forge a brand new second language path.¹⁸²

Apart from the vast empirical data, there are a number of different models of second language acquisition that focus on different aspects of the learning process. Some emphasise language socialisation and view second language acquisition as just one part of adapting to a new culture. Others focus on emotional factors, and others still on interaction from a social constructivist viewpoint. Like most things excluding The Citizen newspaper and the logic of global capital, the field is complex and interdisciplinary and no single model dominates.

But what does it mean to *know a language*? The question may seem absurd – we all know that there is ordering a primavera pizza no ham and there is discussing pre-Raphaelite representivity. There are different standards for different contexts and needs. Technically, 'communicative competence' is the 1967 term that embraces all of the forms of knowledge that learners must have in order to communicate effectively. It simply means that competence itself is complex, the same way one implicitly needs to know all kinds of mathematics, physics, and anatomy to successfully catch a cricket ball. Let us rather turn to the reflections of some very accomplished linguistic migrants to discover what second language 'competence' can mean.

Astonishingly, Nabokov did not think of himself as an expert English writer. He concluded the afterword to *Lolita* saying that "My private tragedy... is that I had to abandon my natural idiom, my untrammelled, rich, and infinitely docile Russian language for a second-rate brand of English."¹⁸³ Another of our most beloved writers in English was a Polish immigrant. Józef Teodor Konrad Korzienowski was how Joseph Conrad started out. He spoke only a few words of English at age 21 when he arrived in England, yet within a decade he had begun work on a significant novel in the local language, which is that curious West Germanic mixture that arose in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and spread into South-East Scotland under the influence of the Anglian medieval kingdom of Northumbria (English, in other words).

182 Sakai, K. L.' (2005) *Language Acquisition and Brain Development*.

183 <http://www.randomhouse.com/features/nabokov/biography.html>.

The exceptional achievements of these writers leave us native aspirants utterly defeated and covetously green. It is all made even more depressing when we discover English was Conrad's third language, after French. Nabokov also chose English over French. "I could have been a great French writer," he once modestly stated, but while his command of that language was excellent, he reportedly felt out of place amongst the Parisian literati, and chose English instead.¹⁸⁴ Conrad rubs in the ease by saying that English came as naturally as any other aptitude with which he might have been born, and that it felt almost inherent. "Rather than choosing English", he says, "it was I who was adopted by the genius of the language...if I had not written in English, I would not have written at all."¹⁸⁵ A critic observed of Conrad that he never wrote quite as a native speaker would have written, but then added that he wrote "incomparably better".¹⁸⁶ The non-native inflection and turn of phrase was possibly a source of his stylistic richness and sophistication. Similarly, the French poet who edited Oscar Wilde's French manuscript of *Salomé* was primarily needed not to correct grammar but to remove "*les anglicismes trop formels*".¹⁸⁷

Sometimes second languages contaminate their learners' native voices. When one falls from a state of monolingual innocence, the way in which one expresses oneself has new possibilities and becomes permanently altered. Mallarmé's syntactical structure in French is allegedly very odd. Hölderlin studied the classics and adopted a Pindaresque word order in his German writing. When I used to phone my mom from Munich many years ago I would like my English verbs at the end of the sentence to be putting. But the effects go beyond voices. A second language can also transform one's mind, sensemaking and way of being. Conrad went so far as to claim that English "had a direct action" on his temperament and helped to mould his character.¹⁸⁸ Which language leads one to greater *menschlichkeit*? Surely Yiddish? To greater crude humour? Definitely Strain (Australian). German causes an increase in *weltschmerz*. French, *ennui*.

Learning a second language helps us to shed the dry skin of dead metaphor. I was once told that my 'style' (in German) was, *so originell*. Pure incompetence can become the answer to avoiding hackneyed expression. Funny direct translations, idiomatic expressions transposed, unexpected syntactical 'errors' and strangely contaminated language streams can come across as poetic, *avante garde* even.

To test this hypothesis I took the following excruciatingly kitsch line, call it proposition 1, and put it into Googletranslate. *If you love something, set it free, if it comes back to you, it is yours, if it does not, it never was*

This was the (German) product .

184 Field, A., (1977). *VN, The Life and Art of Vladimir Nabokov*.

185 Hamner, (1990) *Joseph Conrad. Third World Perspectives*. p.178.

186 A.C.Ward.

187 Raby, (1997) *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*. p.139.

188 Gardner, A. (2008) Second-language authors. <http://literaturesotherlanguages.blogspot.com>.

Wenn Sie etwas tun, lieben es erlösen, wenn sie zu dir zurückkommt, gehört es Ihnen, wenn es nicht, ist es nicht.

Then translated it from German into Afrikaans

As jy iets te doen, is aktief, stel hierdie vry is, soos dit kom terug na julle, dit is joune, soos dit gebeur nooit nooit nooit is dit.

And finally back into English.

If you have something to do, set to open, as i comes back o yo i's yours, as it never never never is.

You would agree this is most definitely a stylistic improvement on proposition 1, and in my view, indeed rather more philosophically insightful.

Language encounters and contamination have the promise of a kind of ontological emergence (sometimes a little jarring) from the dullness of standard expression. Throwing oneself into a new language can bring about novel conceptual encounters; drop us into the unbounded space of fresh perception and creativity. If we do not make it our goal to learn only the closest corresponding dead forms of other languages (to the extent that it is possible to encounter a new language without altering one's conceptual apparatus), then our inner translations and discoveries are innately opposed to kitsch: a deterministic, dead, technical rationality. A new language offers us a dislodging of predictable expression, a resistance to stultifying mundane speech. Learning a new language represents almost a very positive form of psychotic breakdown. In a fresh language there is a loss of control, emancipation (from mental slavery..).

This view is not just silliness and song lyrics. We saw that theories tend to agree that children have a neurological advantage in learning languages. Puberty is found to correlate with a turning point in ability. Researchers find that language acquisition occurs primarily, possibly exclusively, during childhood and that the brain loses flexibility after a certain age. It then becomes rigid and fixed, and loses the ability for adaptation and re-organisation, rendering language (re-)learning difficult. Learning a Language, it appears, does the converse. It introduces a degree of cognitive and sensemaking flexibility into our habitually lazy brains.

The health benefits have even been researched. In a recent *BBC News* article, 'Being Bilingual Protects Brain' (2004) a study is quoted suggesting that being fluent in two languages may help to keep the brain sharper for longer. Previous studies have shown that keeping the brain active in other ways (like playing music, chess, and dancing) can protect against senile dementia. i.e. against the brain atrophying and losing its connections. Now this study, published in the journal of *Psychology and Ageing*, says that being bilingual may also protect against mental decline in old age. It is a possibility that the acquisition of a second language may influence the process of the

development of extra neuronal circuits. This would mean that learning additional languages could enhance 'neuroplasticity'.

This term (neuroplasticity, also known as cortical re-mapping) refers to the ability of the human brain to change. The brain is 'plastic' and 'malleable', contrary to the 20th century belief that many parts of the brain are immutable in structure after childhood. It was held until quite recently that learning only happens by changing of connection strength, rather than the types of connections made, and that only areas related to memory, where new neurons continue to be produced into adulthood, were highly plastic. This belief has been challenged by contemporary findings, suggesting all areas of the brain are plastic even after childhood. According to the theory of neuroplasticity, experience can actually change both the brain's physical structure and functional organisation (which parts of the brain do what, from reading and writing, to decision-making and problem-solving). Radical improvements in cognitive functioning - how we learn, think, perceive, and remember are possible even in the elderly.¹⁸⁹ The adult brain is not 'hard-wired'. Language learning may help us to change how we perceive, think and feel. Proust, in the original, could indeed change your life.¹⁹⁰ Let us all immediately sign up for language classes. We could learn words like *mirabile dictu*, *naiwny obserwacji*, and *rondtrekkend* and feel our synapses rerouting and firming up, even as our triceps loosen and our chins multiply.

¹⁸⁹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neuroplasticity>.

¹⁹⁰ Cf: Alain de Botton 1997) *How Proust can Change your Life*.

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The Speed of Food

An average single fast food meal contains 70% of the calories we should eat over an entire day. So it might not astound you to hear that a number of studies have found associations between fast food consumption and increased podginess.¹⁹¹ It is also no surprise that modern consumers might have an ambivalent relationship to fast food characterised by (in this order): ardent desire, uncomfortable shame, painful remorse, and bloated guilt.¹⁹²

This guilt sometimes mysteriously transforms into strange projective fantasies, to the extent that bizarre conspiracies and tales of contamination flourish and are widely believed.¹⁹³ Consider the hundreds of thousands of internet users who in 2000 were willing to believe the Frankenchicken Hoax. The urban legend went something like this:

KFC uses genetically modified organisms rather than real chickens. These half-creatures are kept alive by tubes inserted into their bodies to pump blood and nutrients throughout their structure. They have no beaks, no feathers, and no feet. Their bone structure is dramatically shrunk to get more meat out of them. This is great for KFC because they spend less on production costs. There is no more plucking of the feathers or removal of the beaks and feet. The government has told them to change all of their menus so they do not say 'chicken' anywhere. If you look closely you will notice this. Listen to their commercials, I guarantee you will not see or hear the word chicken. I find this matter to be very disturbing. I hope people will start to realize this and let other people know... Please forward this message to as many people as you can. Together we can make KFC start using real chicken again.¹⁹⁴

Perhaps this shouldn't be labelled a 'hoax' as such, but should rather be seen as a slightly exaggerated anti-capitalist intuition that something just isn't right. Isn't it a mythopoeiaic reflection of a deeper truth – a form of collective repugnance at the alienation of mass production? A sense of alarm at the scale and voraciousness of the global profit motive? A moment of consciousness of the inhumanity of industrial farming methods?

This collective unease is weighing in on public opinion, as is the simple cost burden of obesity-related disease. Obese Americans cost their country about \$147 billion in weight-related medical bills in 2008, double what they did a decade ago. An obese person costs an average \$2,460

191 'Fast Casual - Insights or Innovative Resolutions'. FastCasual.com. Retrieved 2011-06-29

192 Croft, R. (2006), Folklore, families and fear: understanding consumption decisions through the oral tradition.' *Journal of Marketing Management*, 22:9/10, pp1053-1076.

193 Not that this is unusual for us as a species.

194 Emery, D. (2000) *The Curse of Frankenchicken*: KFC allegedly serves up 'genetically manipulated organisms.' Retrieved from www.urbanlegends.about.com.

(approximately R17,000) per annum more on medical care for chronic preventable diseases than a person of normal weight.¹⁹⁵ Even politically sensitive people who do not feel comfortable making aesthetic judgments quickly express outrage at these numbers.

In 2003 marketing deals began to feel the pressure. The BBC said it would no longer allow its children's television characters to be used in fast food sponsorships with companies like McDonald's, after consumer groups criticized the public broadcaster for helping to promote junk food.¹⁹⁶ In late 2010 the first laws were passed in the US (in San Francisco) and in France forbidding direct marketing to children for high calorie meals and ensuring that they would no longer be permitted to receive a free toy with a meal not meeting certain nutritional standards. The laws, urged in part by the increase in childhood obesity in these countries,¹⁹⁷ would allow direct child-oriented marketing and free toys only with healthier children's meals.¹⁹⁸

Opponents of the new US law included the National Restaurant Association and inevitably the ubiquitous McDonald's Corp, which pioneered direct marketing to children in 1979 with the riotously popular *Happy Meal*. "We are extremely disappointed with today's decision. It's not what our customers want, nor is it something they asked for...Getting a toy with a kid's meal is just one part of a fun, family experience at McDonald's," McDonald's spokeswoman Danya Proud said in response,¹⁹⁹ evading the whole question of the clogging of little aortas altogether.²⁰⁰

This was not the only public relations blow to face the company that year. In October 2010 a news article described how an artist had created an inadvertent installation by forgetting an uneaten *Happy Meal* on her counter. It might have been done to signify a theme of degradation and transience, because As she noticed when she finally tidied her workshop one morning six months later, the 'work' had produced neither mould nor any other sign of putrefaction whatsoever. Her public exposition of this 'performance art event' raised a more general and prosaic concern over the contents of the food served by McDonald's. Was it in fact food at all? Would a block of polyvinyl chloride biodegrade faster than a *Happy Meal*?

195 Hellmich, N. (2009) 'Rising obesity will cost U.S. health care \$344 billion a year.' USA TODAY, Retrieved 2009-11-17

196 Barboza, D., (08/082003), 'Fast Food Industry Zeroes In On Children.', NYT International Herald Tribune.

197 Compare South Africa: Stunting and being underweight are the most common nutritional disorders afflicting South Africa's preschool children, with the National Food Consumption Survey (2005) showing that nearly one out of 10 children (8.6%) aged 4-6 years are underweight and four out of 20 (16.4%) are stunted. - SA Dept. of Health website: <http://www.doh.gov.za/>.

198 In San Francisco, those containing less than 600 calories, less than 640 milligrams of sodium; some fruits and vegetables (i.e. more than tomato sauce and a piece of lettuce on a burger bun), and healthier sorts of beverages than sugary CSDs (carbonated soft drinks).

199 Baertlein, L. (2010) 'San Francisco law curbs McDonald's Happy Meal toys.' for Reuters, Los Angeles, Tue Nov 2 200 In 2006, the latest year for which data is available, fast-food companies led by McDonald's spent more than \$520 million on advertising and toys to promote meals for children, according to a U.S. Federal Trade Commission report. When the efforts of other food and beverage companies were included, promotional spending aimed at children topped \$1.6 billion.

This leads us to speculate. What is *food*? We presuppose some conception – however vague – of what food is before we ingest something. Different conceptions can have real and lasting consequences for our health, our appearance, the environment and the economy. Is food that which decays? That which runs away or has a face vs. inert vegetable matter? Is it the natural vs. the unnatural and the processed? Is it that which is fast from field to plate vs. slow to be constituted and served? The speed of food is probably one of the more significant aspects upon which to ruminate in our harried times.

According to the “content-free” *Uncyclopedia*, ‘fast food’ is a marketing term for imitation foodstuffs made from entirely synthetic ingredients. Since they contain no food as such, *fast* foods can surely be eaten by those who are *fasting*, that is, abstaining from food for religious reasons.²⁰¹

The more conventional interpretation of the term ‘fast food’ was first recognised in the indefatigable Merriam Webster dictionary in 1951. It refers to anything that is served quickly, but it isn’t just the speed of delivery that matters. It was cited as happening in QSRs²⁰² that work with pre-cooked ingredients, delivered in throw-away packaging, rather than being cooked fresh and served on a plate. Most often in these establishments there are no seats. Outlets may be stands, kiosks or drive-thru’s (sic), where people gobble up mouthfuls of mysterious acronyms. Restaurants with tables, where customers indulge in short respites and sometimes have their orders brought to them, are called ‘fast casual’ restaurants²⁰³ (not to be confused with a certain kind of sex, but nevertheless bearing certain resemblances in terms of satisfaction levels and safety).

Fast eating is a distinctly urban phenomenon. In ancient Rome high density *insulae*²⁰⁴ populations were served bread and wine at street stands. In the Middle Ages, large towns had vendors selling meat pies. These establishments catered mainly to singles, ever disinclined from cooking, and the cheffless lower classes. Chaucer’s²⁰⁵ characters also surely consumed fast fare on the road to Canterbury, and *hungri pelegriims* might have represented a significant niche market segment at this time.

The United States has the largest modern fast food industry in the world, and our default is to think of fast food as a western peculiarity because of the best known American franchises, but outside the west, noodle shops have been a feature of Asian cities for centuries, as have pita and falafel in the Middle East. In francophone West Africa, roadside stands have been selling grilled meat sticks

201 http://uncyclopedia.wikia.com/wiki/Fast_food.

202 Industry jargon acronym for Quick Service Restaurant.

203 ‘Fast Casual - Insights for Innovative Restaurants’. FastCasual.com.

204 Ancient Roman apartment building in which most of the urban citizen population lived, including people of lower- or middle-class status (the ‘plebs’).

205 Himself a fat man.

for generations. Indian traditional fast food includes spiced potato dumplings (vada pav), and crispy grain balls (panipuri).²⁰⁶ On the streets of Johannesburg one can buy boiled eggs and char-grilled mielies,²⁰⁷ as well as the charming 'walkie talkie'.²⁰⁸ Any urban society of busy workers 'on the go' has produced some form of matching express cuisine. But these forms of fast food are on the decline, and gradually being replaced by their cheap industrialised competition.

According to Datamonitor's *Fast Food: Global Industry Guide*, which reflects mainly the business of the leading companies, the global fast food market grew by 6.6% in 2008 to reach a value of \$155 billion. By 2013, the global market is forecast to have a value of \$200 billion, an increase of almost 30% since 2008. By 2013, the market is forecast to have a volume of close to 95 billion transactions. That is over 3000 transactions per second, 24 hrs a day. But according to analysts, growth in the food service industry has been rather starved in developed markets, at around 2 to 3% per annum.²⁰⁹ Developing markets like India represent the most significant opportunities. Here, sales are growing by a staggering 30-35% as more and more women enter formal employment (and stop spending hours a day in the kitchen), and the urban middle class modernises and begins to include frequenting western QSR chains in the definition of 'cool'.²¹⁰ This reminds one of the way in which especially young women in developing countries are being targeted as a growing market for tobacco products as sales continue to stagnate in mature markets.²¹¹

American fast food restaurants have so far colonised over 100 countries and McDonalds alone operates over 31,000 restaurants worldwide. Because of their operating model and fairly low start-up costs, these franchises can proliferate extremely fast. Burger King has more than 11,100 restaurants in more than 65 countries. KFC is in 25 countries. In 1990, wasting little time after the wall came down, a McDonald's brought the best of western culture to Moscow. The new store broke opening day records for customer volumes. I recently visited this establishment (hoping I might be able to read the menu) and marveled at the gulag-like working conditions of the staff. I counted 20 serving personnel squeezed into an area behind the counter of approximately 14m² in the stifling Moscow summer heat. I had a large milkshake dropped on my shoe while I waited in a bustling multi-lane queue 10 people deep. The menu was in Russian and the 'food' was so hideous it turned out I could neither read the menu nor eat anything. This Moscow pigpen is apparently the busiest McDonald's in the world. Perhaps I would have had better luck at the Shanghai Pizza Hut. This chain has 100 locations just in China, much to the relief of people who just can't take another

206 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_street_food

207 Corn on the cob.

208 A chicken's head and feet

209 McPherson, Mitchell and Mitten (2003) in the McKinsey Quarterly, Fast-food Fight.

210 Industry Report: *Indian Fast Food Market Analysis*. Published by RNCOS

211 Tye and Warner.(1987) 'Tobacco Advertising and Consumption: Evidence of a Causal relationship'. *Journal of Public Health Policy*. (issue, 1987),..

duck's tongue or crispy fried baby frog.

And which market is most saturated with saturated fat? Per capita consumption is led by the USA, followed by Canada, the UK and Australia. According to market research from Euromonitor International, the high level of per capita consumption demonstrates the importance of fast food as a lifestyle in these countries. This can be clearly observed. Fast food is closely involved in all the key roles that appear to be culturally available: a cop on the beat, a gangsta in the hood, a Manhattan wannabe, a Jennifer Aniston walking her dog in Central Park. If one relied on Hollywood for one's anthropological observations, one might conclude that it is part of American identity to attempt to talk around a hot dog.

But how did we get here? According to Wikipedia at least, The American company White Castle, founded in 1921, is generally credited with opening the first fast food chain. They sold hamburgers for five cents each. Then drive-in's were invented in the same year, by the appealingly named Kirby's Pig Stand, which opened in Dallas, Texas.²¹² Drive-ins rapidly grew in popularity as cars became more affordable and people wanted to do more things in them. In the 1940s the waiters began to serve on roller skates, and it wasn't long before the 'drive-thru' allowed customers to pick up food without leaving the car. A recent development in the history of the drive-through is the opening of McDonald's first two-laner in Chicago in 2005.

A novel innovation is the use of driving edibility evaluation consultants to try out different kinds of food while driving and make suggestions around improved 'extreme portability'.²¹³ One-handed eating is essential. Does one need to stuff one's snout into packaging or is it easily accessible? Does the sauce drip out and schmutz over one's lap? These are legitimate concerns in a country where, less than a century after the first portable hamburgers were served, 20% of food is eaten in the car.²¹⁴ Taco Bell has specifically designed the *Crunchwrap Supreme* for the mess-free "desktop and dashboard dining"²¹⁵ that we seek as an inevitable consequence of longer commutes, longer work days, and increased time demands. The Japanese have come up with single serving yogurts that can be opened and squeezed directly into the mouth. Spain, Italy, and recently Manhattan, have pizza ingredients in a cone. "You can totally walk with it!" said one online reviewer.²¹⁶

212 Jakle, A. & Sculle, K., (2002) *Fast Food: Roadside restaurants in the Automobile Age*.

213 Tomkins Associates (a consultancy) says that single serving sizes and extreme portability, microwavable packages and 'one-handed eating and drinking' are highly in demand.

214 Pollan, M. (2009) *Food Rules: An Eater's Manual*.

215 <http://www.foodproductdesign.com>.

216 *NY Daily News*.com Sunday, February 21, 2010

Pizzacones



Source: Gothamist.com

Unfortunately the innovative brilliance comes second to the predominant feature of contemporary fast food: the unashamed commercial emphasis on keeping it cheap and fast. That means maximum industrialisation. Standardised ingredients are used and cooking and production methods are efficiently streamlined. Processed ingredients are centrally pre-prepared and distributed, then 'cooked' (mostly deep fried) and assembled in a fraction of the time it would take to prepare such a meal from real ingredients by hand.

But not everyone is simply swallowing what is being served up. In 2001, Eric Schlosser's investigative book, the muckraking *Fast Food Nation*, caused a storm and provided Americans with a critical reflection on the culture of fast food. Schlosser begins the by describing how anthropologists of the future might discover fast food packaging, and from these infer significant clues about the nature of American society. He then gives Americans some extremely unpalatable issues on which to ruminate. The analysis looks, for example, at the exploitation of children's naïveté and trust in product marketing strategies, and shows how fast food corporations have infiltrated school canteens through clever sponsorship deals.²¹⁷

The whole value chain is analysed, uncovering the alienation of millions of low-paid employees, the exploitation of immigrant labour, and unsafe meat processing practices (injury levels in this industry are among the highest of any occupation in the US.). Consumer safety is also highlighted. The book covers how cattle are fed fodder made from dead pigs, horses and chicken manure, spreading bovine spongiform encephalopathy (Mad Cow Disease) and introducing E. Coli into the food chain and is a fascinating exploration of every aspect of modern food production. Here is a

²¹⁷ As an aside, they are also in an even less likely location. A 2006 study published in the American Academy of Pediatrics estimates that fast food restaurants can be found inside nearly 30 percent of U.S. hospitals.

small taste:

A flavourist is a chemist with a trained nose and a poetic sensibility. Flavours are created by blending scores of different chemicals in tiny amounts, a process governed by scientific principles but demanding a fair amount of art... the job of the flavourist is to conjure illusions about processed food and, in the words of one flavour company's literature, to ensure "consumer likeability".

The flavourists with whom I spoke were charming, cosmopolitan and ironic. They were also discreet, in keeping with the dictates of their trade. They were the sort of scientist who not only enjoyed fine wine, but could also tell you the chemicals that give each vintage its unique aroma. One flavourist compared his work to composing music: a well-made flavour compound will have a "top note", followed by a "dry-down", and a "leveling-off", with different chemicals responsible for each stage. The taste of a food can be radically altered by minute changes in the flavouring mix. "A little odour goes a long way," one flavourist said.²¹⁸

If there is already such a thing as Xylish Platinum Mint Chardonnay Flavor chewing gum, then it surely can't be long before we get anything in any flavour. I would personally like to see a flavourist come up with a gum the flavour of, say, some Aussie Sauvignon Blanc, which I could best have described as "grapefruit-run-over-by-a-lawnmower."²¹⁹ Or chips in 'bacon fat cooked over burning tires' flavour like certain South African red wines I have tried. We could get cordials in "fresh compost over cherries drizzled with lighter fluid" or "French feet". It may have been worth the challenge of recreating the flavour of a particular New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc that, back in the 1980s, one Australian wine critic described as "being strapped to Elle MacPherson and bungee-jumping into the a vat of cat's pee and gooseberry leaves."²²⁰ Anyway, leaving flavour and returning to fast food, one reviewer of Schlosser's book says, "If you read this book, I defy you to eat a mass-produced hamburger again."²²¹

Another food activist of sorts, Caesar Barber, (born 1945 and miraculously still alive at the time of writing) became internationally renowned for his attempts to sue the fast food chains McDonald's, Burger King, Wendy's, and KFC. He blamed their 'addictive' foods for his obesity. At the time of the suit, Barber weighed 123 kilograms, suffered from diabetes, and had already had two heart attacks. He worked as a maintenance worker and ate fast food almost every day, "because I was single, it

218 These are edited extracts from Schlosser, E. (2001), *Fast Food Nation: What The All-American Meal Is Doing To The World*

219 Wine Critic Alan Barnes cited at www.ChowHound.com.

220 An Australian wine store's mailer, as re-printed in the late Herb Caen's column in the *San Francisco Chronicle* on the first vintage of Cloudy Bay Sauvignon Blanc. Retrieved from: <http://www.wineloverspage.com/forum/village> on 2011/06

221 Review by Nicholas Lezard for *The Guardian*. April 6/2002

was quick and I'm not a very good cook. It was a necessity."

His infamous lawyer, Samuel Hirsch, hoped for the case to qualify for class action status, which would have allowed him to sue on behalf of all overweight people in the US. Given the rates of obesity in the country, the potential judgment was colossal. Hirsch publicly criticised fast food companies for their deceptive marketing and lack of adequate nutritional information. He said that they result in a de facto addiction for customers, especially the poor and children, whose alternative choices are limited.²²² The lawsuit ultimately never made it to court, but caused a wave of media attention and public debate, and some right wing parody.

My client has also been victimized by various other corporate interests. We're going to be suing Gold's Gym next week for failing to convince my client to exercise, Nike for not making running shoes that inspired my client to actually run, and Doritos for not making their Ranch Style chips taste like asphalt so my client wouldn't be tempted to eat bag after bag of them until he collapsed into a bloated heap on the floor.²²³

Despite the parody, consciousness of the health and supply chain labour issues in the fast food industry grew. This kind of activity has led to the birth of the so-called Slow Food movement, whose global motto is "Good, clean, and fair."

Slow Food began in Italy with organised resistance to the opening of a McDonald's near the Spanish Steps in Rome in 1986. This famous spot is where Keats died, and one wonders whether he would now be writing an Ode to the McFlurry (a truly sublime taste sensation, especially the one with OREO® Cookies), were he alive today.

In 1989 the founding manifesto of the international Slow Food movement was signed in Paris by a handful of delegates, but by now it has expanded to include around 800 branches in over 132 countries.²²⁴ It has captured the imaginations and passions of anti-capitalist hippies, organic farmers, and generally anyone who likes their food made from short, comprehensible lists of real ingredients that primary school children could pronounce. 360 of the branches are still in Italy, whose superior foodiness is not just a film stereotype.²²⁵ The movement has quickly spread into mainstream thinking. Even popular treatises like *Food Rules: An Eater's Manual* now recommends not eating things your granny wouldn't recognise, or things that have arrived through one's car window. This particular manual also says that one should not eat anything that no right-minded

222 Wald, J. 'McDonalds Obesity Suit Tossed'. www.Money.cnn.com. Feb 17, 2003

223 'Fast Food Restaurants Sued For Making Man Unhealthy.' Retrieved from: www.rightwingnews.com

224 Gale *Encyclopaedia of Food & Culture*: Slow Food.

225 Eat (Italy); Pray (India), Love. Etc. A movie I avoided.

human would keep in the pantry (like sodium nitrite), or breakfast cereals that change the colour of the milk.

Each regional chapter of Slow Food (called a 'convivium') is responsible for promoting local food artisans, local farmers, and local flavours through regional events such as 'taste workshops', slow food festivals, wine tastings, and farmers' markets. The movement preserves and promotes traditional food products, along with their folklore. This is done by developing what is known as an 'Ark of Taste' for each region, recording and celebrating local culinary traditions. Slow Food also hosts a biennial cheese fair ingeniously named *Cheese*, and a Genoan fish festival called *SlowFish*. There is also Turin's *Terra Madre* ('Mother Earth'), which is a world meeting of food communities worth marking on your gustatory calendar. Just make sure you have a hemp shirt and a pair of Birkenstocks if you want to blend in.

The movement even has a university whose goal is to promote food and nutrition awareness, teach about the risks of fast food, the drawbacks of factory farms, and the risks of monoculture farming. There is also lobbying for the inclusion of organic farming within agricultural policy. If you want to be equipped with the vocabulary of organic anti-globalization while being well fed on delicious, traditionally prepared *carne alla pizzaiola* and *tagliolini al tartufo bianco*, then this is the place to enrol.

Nevertheless, the organisation is still very young and few people are aware of it. Some countries, like Germany, are bigger consumers of organic produce and have a higher level of awareness. In the US, Eric Schlosser (the *Fast Food Nation* guy) is one of its members.

In South Africa, a Slow Food festival was recently held in Robertson in the Cape. It brought together food artisans from all over the country, and you could buy organic mead and unusual mushrooms (not *that* kind of unusual) and learn to make homemade Ricotta cheese. Slow food Johannesburg has only around 70 members and hosts monthly events varying from taste workshops to visits to small producers and themed dinners. I was thinking of joining, but this group is apparently not highly recommended for Jews and/or vegetarians.

As I write, a Wild Boar event has been advertised on the website which will include a trip to a farm, where a boar will be shot, skinned and hung. The plan is for all kinds communal pig slaughtering, 'preparation', cooking and eating, probably around a bonfire. Perhaps in SA the small local convivium has combined forces with the South African *Asterix and Obelix* society. Although they are often carriers of *Yersinia enterocolitica* and are the highest of *trayf*,²²⁶ I am in accord with Winston Churchill, who said, "I am fond of pigs. Dogs look up to us. Cats look down on us. Pigs treat us as equals." I think on that day I might create a quick vegetarian food ritual

226 Unkosher - Yiddish *trayf*, from Hebrew *ṭērēfā* 'carrion'

and embark on an express pilgrimage. I will go to the nearest drive-through that offers a high speed, texturised, non-violent soya veggie burger (with MSG, sodium phosphate and maltodextrin) and pig out in memory of the 100 million tones of these creatures consumed each year.²²⁷ One wonders whether it makes any difference to the pigs whether they are consumed in the form of Allura Red²²⁸ coloured hotdogs or as succulent racks brined with celeriac, cloves and fresh sage, served with Châteauneuf-du-Pape?



Source: <http://animals.change.org>²²⁹

227 USDA's Foreign Agricultural Service (2006). The pigs are not counted as individuals.

228 The colourant Red AC was originally manufactured from coal tar but is now mostly made from petroleum.

229 Feldstein, S. (2010). 'Scientists Prove the Emotional Lives of Pigs'. Retrieved from: <http://animals.change.org>, and Anon. (2010). Can You Ask a Pig if His Glass is Half Full? *Sciencedaily.com*, July 28, 2010.

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http://uncyclopedia.wikia.com/wiki/Fast_food. Retrieved 2011/06

http://www.tompkinsinc.com/industries/food_beverage.asp (Tomkins Associates). Retrieved 2011/06

Resisting Advertising

Usually advertising surfaces our yearnings through a play between the obvious meaning and a connotation that is just below our conscious awareness. It offers us a tangible point of reference after a dizzy diversion through complex desires that continue to echo and vibrate through us even after we arrive at the undemanding denotation "get Colgate."

If your husband ever finds out
you're not "store-testing" for fresher coffee...

...if he discovers you're still taking chances on getting flat, stale coffee ... we'll be onto you!

For today there's a sure and certain way to test for freshness before you buy



Here's how easy it is to be sure of fresher coffee



Look for the "Chase & Sanborn" logo. Can of a Chase & Sanborn. Flatness, roundness, top-down, it's packed under pressure. Fresh. Taste the mean.

Just do this:
Press your thumb against the dome top before you buy. If it's firm, it's fresh. If it's soft, it's stale. Chase & Sanborn's pressure-packed coffee is the one way to get the freshest coffee ever packed.

No other can lets you test!
You can't see an indicator. But you can "test" the "bottom" that tells you as much as the top. But all that happens is that you're told which one is good and which one isn't.

Here's the payoff!
Just as you give a dog, they'll do what you want. Chase & Sanborn is a doghouse brand of more delicious coffee. ... brought to you fresher. No wonder Chase & Sanborn gets a flavor dividend you won't find on any other coffee!



Chase & Sanborn

By then we have had a steamy affair and been to Tuscany and in the case above had a jolly good spanking.

Yes, we know the tacit content is usually either about *schtupping* or its immediate precursor—an identity to evoke the right kind of look from another. But sometimes advertising is also about creating the desire to desire. It promises a way to soothe our thriving netherworld and escape

from the stifling excess of daily frustration and *totesangst*²³⁰ and thinking about thinking, in my case. A happy jingle can sometimes be a welcome intrusion.

All this talk of subconsciouses (what is the plural?) is not something from a Leonardo di Caprio movie.²³¹ Contemporary science confirms the old anxiety that we are not “masters in our own house”. In an online talk, David Eagleman²³² tells us about an experiment in which men were shown pictures of women and asked to rate their attractiveness (why is this so often the test?). In the experimental group, some of the women’s pupils had been dilated, which is a sign of sexual readiness. Amazingly, these women were then rated more attractive by a statistically significant margin. “In the huge mansion of the mind, the conscious bit is the broom closet”, Eagleman jokes. The *self-conscious* bit is even tinier. A dust mite, maybe.

But my worry here is not just the existence of unconscious forces to be manipulated (who is it that goes shopping and how do we make it stop?) but also that marketers are becoming increasingly sophisticated at bypassing the broom closet and going straight to the primal expanses of Id. Call me a paranoid Enoughist²³³ neo-hippie, but I sense an overall trend towards more sneaky manipulation and more insidiousness. Eddie Izzard agrees. He illustrates (in his insane miming way) how in the old days, ads would tell you exactly what to do, and you would simply comply. Now they quietly hint and obliquely point and hum nonchalantly and say “look, those two people like it, and *they’re* shagging.”²³⁴

A micro-history of advertising shows that the trajectory from the early beginnings of advertising could only have been towards greater subtlety. It started off with town criers. Then came industrialisation and the intensification of competition for confused and flooded buyers. Simultaneously the mass media flourished and then the sneakiness began. The advertising industry needed to become more sophisticated to get people’s attention and sell the heaps of stuff that was being produced, but also to fulfil the capitalist dream of redeeming society from backwardness and creating a new homogenous middle class of indebted zombies.²³⁵ Once it existed, in the early 20th century, psychology was mobilised. Many had already discarded the overly churchy soul and traded it in for a newer German model (*das Ich*). Psychology looked

230 Literally “death-angst”.

231 *Inception*, 2011.

232 <http://www.vimeo.com/22287909>. David Eagleman is a neuroscientist at Baylor College of Medicine, where he directs the Laboratory for Perception and Action and the Initiative on Neuroscience and Law.

233 Enoughism: growing rejection of materialism. Emphasises less spending and more restraint in buying behaviour.

234 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FGVFt7yJz40>.

235 At this point advertising was haloed in romanticism. President Calvin Coolidge declared in 1926: “Advertising ministers to the spiritual side of trade. It is a great power that has been intrusted to your keeping which charges you with the high responsibility of inspiring and ennobling the commercial world. It is all part of the greater work of regeneration and redemption of mankind.” Source: History Matters: A Brief History of American Advertising.

scientific, or at least claimed to be (this was before Foucault, after all), and marketing saw it as an ally in making people more predictable. When compared with religion, it was the first quasi-credible approach to understanding human motivation and influencing behaviour since the Neoliths had invented trepanning.²³⁶

Behaviourism and psychoanalysis were the first paradigms to percolate through marketing thinking. Behaviourism is primarily associated with Pavlov and bells. It maintains that the mind should be studied through behaviour, rather than through the inference of invisible and esoteric inner processes, and also that people can be manipulated through external stimuli (like powerful shocks). This mechanistic conception of human functioning (and indeed of all life) was outlined by the earlier German physiologist and biologist Jacques Loeb, who believed that all behaviour was reducible to "stimulus-response reactions". His work made the idea of human control, so craved by advertising, a real prospect. He also produced two headed worms as a hobby, which gives us an intuition of why a behaviourist ethics is sometimes problematic.

The student of Loeb and famous American behaviourist, John Watson, (in-between having and affair with his research assistant) experimented on infants and famously, and very cleverly, conditioned one particular little boy to be afraid of white rats, dogs, and fur coats.²³⁷ He then abandoned his research to go and work for the then largest advertising agency in the world to apply his revolutionary work in more lucrative ways.²³⁸ As part of his new role he gave talks on "How To Influence The Mind Of Another" and worked out which buttons to press to activate human "buying behaviour".²³⁹

It was Watson's breakthrough to leave out the technical content and instead focus on arousing "fundamental

1934 Firestone Safety Tires advertisement.
Source: <http://www.adclassix.com>



²³⁶Trepanning, also known as trephination, is a surgical intervention in which a hole is drilled in the human skull to relieve pressure or release evil spirits. It is not done much nowadays and has been replaced by Electro Convulsive Therapy (ECT).

²³⁷In Watson's 'Little Albert' experiments, Watson tested a nine-month-old infant's fear response: he presented a variety of stimuli to the child, anything from a burning newspaper to a white rat, and recorded the baby's initial responses. Because Albert was so stable, Watson resorted to hitting a four-foot long, suspended steel bar with a hammer to evoke a fear response from the child. When Albert was eleven months old, Watson began testing the ability to condition the child to fear other things by associating them with the loud noise.

²³⁸A Walter Thompson Advertising Company. Philip Dusenberry said 'I have always believed that writing advertisements is the second most profitable form of writing. The first, of course, is ransom notes.'

²³⁹Buckley, K. (1982) *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, Volume 18, Issue 3, pages 207–221, July 1982

emotions". One of the reasons we find early 20th century advertisements like this Firestone ad so quaint is because they contain just so much insistent *content* and are so didactic about it all. It is a premise of behaviourism that humans, being primate mammals, react according to instincts, rather than as a result of sophisticated reasoning.²⁴⁰ Watson realised that sophisticated reasoning would only appeal to about 0.03% of people and the rest were ogling the model's cleavage.

Watson's "Fundamental Emotions" advancement dealt a mighty blow to consumer rationality and conscious choice. One would be extremely challenged to find a contemporary tyre advertisement that made extensive mention of a specific technical product feature. It's all a lot of golden retriever puppies, toddlers, wind-in-one's-hair holidays, and approving spouses. (see contemporary Firestone tyre ad from 2001 below)

As a matter of interest, science does confirm that more basic brain regions like the basal ganglia or the hypothalamus (associated with emotional response) informed our functioning long before the evolution of the distinctively human, higher-order neocortex.²⁴¹ And the old part is a much hungrier customer.



Example of Post-Watsonian Firestone Ad . Sept 2001. Agency: Publicis Norton. Brazil

In the same decade as Watson found the emo control panel, Edward Louis Bernays (1891-1995), Freud's nephew, and another ur-marketer, made significant contributions to the trend of advertising's increasing insinuation and suggestive powers by employing his uncle's new science

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ There is much training of corporate managers in "EQ" to attempt to bring these higher order functions into play.

of psychoanalysis. He released a Freudian bomb of primary drives, sexuality, infantile wishes and libidinal longings into the core of selling, and advertising would never be the same.

His Lucky Cigarettes marketing scheme is a legendary example. Lucky ingeniously saw the immense unexploited potential of the female smoking market, but in order to penetrate this market they needed somehow to overcome the fact that in the '20s smoking among women was still considered scandalous and low class, associated "with louche and libidinous behaviours and morals."²⁴²

According to a psychoanalyst expert with whom Bernays consulted, cigarettes represented phallic power. Now if women could be made to associate cigarettes with their own power...

Bernays commissioned a group of models to participate in the New York City Easter Day parade, and told the press that a group of women's rights activists would be lighting "Torches of Freedom" on the march. At his cue, the women lit up and brandished their flaming phalluses. *The New York Times* printed a picture of 'Group of Girls (sic) Puff at Cigarettes as a Gesture of 'Freedom'".²⁴³ Lucky Strike sales soared and the brand became the suffragettes' smoke of choice.

Another psychoanalyst who made us more vulnerable to the inductions of advertising was Ernest



Dichter, (1907-1991) His aim was to discharge the inhibitions and encourage the id itself to go shopping, unfettered.²⁴⁴ "To ladies, don't sell shoes. Sell them sexy feet" he said.²⁴⁵ He is also credited with putting a tiger in your tank (1959 Exxon slogan) and advising the manufacturers of Barbie to amplify her breasts. Later these psychological insights were augmented by the manoeuvre of marketing strategies designed for the special 'psychographics' of distinct subgroups. This has resulted in some renowned marketing coups and convincing whole new groups of us to go in for things that were previously thought to be the special preserve of others.

242 Bales, quoting Amos, A. & Haglund, M. (2000). 'From social taboo to torch of freedom: the marketing of cigarettes to women'. *Tobacco Control*, 9, 3-8.

243 1 April 1929.

244 Stuart, Heather, 'Libido can rule when the id does the shopping.' *UniNews* Vol. 12, No. 22 1. 15 December 2003.

245 <http://www.dichter.ch/e/dichter.html>.

Consider the textbook Marlboro case. There was a time when Marlboro cigarettes were marketed at women and young mothers. The value proposition was mildness (“you need never feel over-smoked”).

In 1955 Leo Burnett overhauled the Marlboro campaign for men, and The Marlboro Man was born.

The rugged cowboys that are still famous amongst the over 20's were ultimately the most popular variation on an irresistibly beefy theme. He is tough, in control, unintimidated. He embodies confidence, power and virility (especially when he is riding a big horse). He has archetypal warrior appeal. In many of the advertisements he has a tattoo (he is also somewhat non-conformist, embodying rugged individualism).²⁴⁶



In 1955 when the Marlboro Man sales were at \$5 bn. By 1957, within just two years of the new campaign, there had been a 300% increase in revenue to \$20 bn. The campaign was used from 1954 to 1999 and the Marlboro man became a pop culture (and gay, *surely?*) icon.²⁴⁷

Such clever segmentation and its usual companion, brand positioning, have become more sophisticated with time. They allow companies to avoid getting into price wars with their competitors and to extract a hefty premium from us. We are prepared to pay extra for perceived uniqueness, even for bananas (Chiquita), Coffee (Starbucks) or a pair of Chinese-manufactured sneakers (Nike) whether or not there

246 Literally all of the Marlboro Men died of lung cancer.

247 Moellinger, T., & Craig, S. (2001) "So Rich, So Mild, So Fresh": A Critical Look at TV Cigarette Commercials: 1948-1971." *Journal of Communication Inquiry*. January 2001 vol. 25 no. 1 55-71.

is genuinely any exclusive intellectual property, innovation, technical expertise or specialness involved.

I will come back to contemporary branding later. Back in the 1950's advertising was still looking for ways to go beyond the capabilities of the basic mind manipulation implements that had been employed thus far. At about the same time as the Marlboro Man burst onto the scene, a controversy erupted. It seemed that marketing had entered the covert realms of deep stealth. In 1957 a market researcher named James Vicary claimed that flashed messages on a movie screen had subconsciously manipulated people to automatically rush out and consume snacks and drinks at a cinema.²⁴⁸ No one became suspicious when he immediately coined the term *subliminal advertising* (subliminal = "below threshold") and started a business called The Subliminal Projection Company.

Five years later (in 1962), Vicary admitted he was an outright fraud. This was unfortunately not before his claims had been published and caused a public outcry and an instant proliferation of conspiracy theories (governments etc were subliminally indoctrinating people). The CIA did in fact produce a report entitled *The Operational Potential of Subliminal Perception* (made public in 1994). The CIA report concluded:

Assuming that one could persuade ... by presenting a cue subliminally, there is no way of effecting the action without awareness and without tripping off defenses and rational resistance. It must be concluded that there are so many elusive variables and so many sources of irregularity in the device of directing subliminal messages to a target individual that its operational feasibility is exceedingly limited.²⁴⁹

Nevertheless, the practice of subliminal advertising was banned in the UK, Australia and by the US's NAB (National Association of Broadcasters). Even a much later UN study (post-dating the fraud admission) concluded that "the cultural implications of subliminal indoctrination are a major threat to human rights throughout the world."²⁵⁰ Not for the first time in human history, credulous lunacy 1; sanity 0.

Anxieties and bogus claims related to subliminal messaging persist to this day, such as the promise that subliminal auditory messages can induce weight loss, smoking cessation, etc., or the fear that reversed speech messages (backward masking) in popular music can corrupt

²⁴⁸ He projected the words "Drink Coca-Cola" and "Hungry? Eat popcorn" for 1/30 of a second at five-second intervals during the screening of the movie *Picnic*. He claimed that during his experiment, sales of popcorn and Coke had increased 57.8% and 18.1% respectively

²⁴⁹ https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/kent-csi/vol2no2/html/v02i2a07p_0001.htm

²⁵⁰ UN, 31st Session, 7 October 1974, E/Cn.4/1142/Add 2., United Nations Human Rights Commission

teenagers and lead them to Satan.²⁵¹ Unfortunately for the absurd fun value, the fears are baseless. No one will subconsciously make you convert to Scientology or join Al Qaeda or give all your money to Jesus R Us Church, even if the marketing videos are very compelling indeed and show men with great hair in alluring soft focus. It has been concluded after careful studies that there is no evidence that subliminal messages can influence motivation or complex behaviour at all.²⁵² Idiocy functions very effectively without subliminal assistance.

The much more effective weapon of the last few decades (the one that should have been banned) is 'lifestyle marketing'. As we feel a strong affinity to brands that are successfully positioned 'for us', the most successful advertisements barely need to suggest actually trying them. We are into the 'post-selling' era now. Strong branding obviates the need for persuasion and facts. These brands seem like a natural extension of our very values and ideals.²⁵³ Just think of Woolworths. One is not buying food, but a lifestyle of convenience, quality, and *almost* stylish normalcy. Possibly also middle class safety? Or is that just me? I have always found the cheese aisle an antidote to sudden onsets of psychosis.

The problem is that these approaches all become orthodox and quickly boring. 'Lifestyle positioning' is already an overdone strategy. It has become the standard wherever product differences are difficult to maintain and everyone has added another 7 blades to their razors. In addition to more obvious 'lifestyle brands', such as Polo or Quicksilver, a number of brands like Dove and Gillette have recently moved their messaging to consumer lifestyles. They now attempt to connect with us on a more personal level: with who we want to be, and to establish a 'relationship' with us.

The problem is also that there are rather few unexplored landscapes of positioning and meaning in identity and lifestyle. Once these brands begin to compete on lifestyle they have to go up against brands from other categories that already occupy those same positionings. I have heard of "share of mind" and "share of throat".²⁵⁴ What do we call this? Share of Being? For fresh, natural youthfulness Dove soap has to compete against brands of clothing, cellular phones, cereal, laxatives and mattresses. Or else brands need to invent new identities. Very clean anti-fascist lesbians? Radically alienated Neo-Nietzscheans who nevertheless like to smell nice?

251 A favourite topic of my high school religious education classes and one we used to enjoy because we got to listen to Ozzy Osborne and Led Zeppelin, even it was backwards

252 Moore, T. E. (1988) *The case against subliminal manipulation*.

253 For those who disavow their inclusion in this statement, there are even specialised niche brands for anti-brand people. Did you know that you can buy 'vegetarian' shoes (i.e. without any animal products). The bestselling brand is Converse, which you should already know is the coolest. What you probably don't know, and not by accident, is that Converse is a wholly owned subsidiary of Nike.

254 Used by beverage marketers

Is there not a finite amount we can express ourselves through our product choices?

Mac users probably say no. Most others would probably agree that consumers at some point must reach satiety with all this product-mediated self-expression. Is there a horizon of liberty in sight?

No chance.



It seems that the science has now found the ultimate way to truly ambush us with our own pre-conscious biology and lure us forever into brand enslavement. The latest way that marketing has found to get behind our conscious choice-making is with something called 'neuromarketing'.

This Frankensteinian newfangledism was coined by Ale Smidts in 2002. It is a new field of marketing and market research that studies consumers' physiological (neuromotor, affective) responses to marketing messaging and sensory stimulation. The toolkit includes fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging), EEGs (electroencephalography), and/or measurements of changes in other physiological states (heart rate, respiratory rate, galvanic skin response) to determine the kinds of brain activity involved in consumption experiences. There are also instruments to track eye movement and responses to imagery. Mindlab International (owned by an evil lord intent on global domination) has pioneered the use of this research and commercial purposes.

The analysis can test consumers' preferences better than verbal responses to questions like "Do you like this product?" These usually yield lies. The non-verbal knowledge of the true responses helps marketers create more appealing products that are shaped to spontaneous pre-cognitive preferences. Interestingly, the same research techniques can be used for social explorations, such as controversial studies (later called into question by other studies) suggesting that inter-racial facial encounters require greater brain activity (and evoke greater emotion) than intra-racial

ones.²⁵⁵ They have also begun to scan people during the political speeches of Barack Obama. He must be taking on their feedback because the speeches seem to be getting steadily soprier.

So the raw, sweating reaction is what we can get at these days, our reptilian response, before the frontal lobe, and what we *should* be doing, kicks in. This of course invites us to ask whether our actual purchasing is driven more strongly by what we physiologically respond to or what we think is appropriate for us to be buying. There may be hope that the reflective bits still have some say, but the news still says worrying things about the power of branding to influence what we think we should like. In a study published in 2004 in *Neuron* magazine,²⁵⁶ 67 people had their brains scanned while being given the famous "Pepsi Challenge," a blind taste test of Coca-Cola and Pepsi. 50% of these subjects preferred Pepsi, since Pepsi tended to produce a stronger response than Coke in their brain's ventromedial prefrontal cortex, a region thought to process feelings of reward. (it is apparently sweeter than Coke). But when the subjects were told what they were drinking, their brain activity actually changed. The lateral prefrontal cortex, an area of the brain that governs high-level cognitive powers, and the hippocampus, an area related to memory, were now being used, possibly indicating that the tasters were now mediating the taste experience through thoughts and memories and payoff lines and images of the happy, popular dancing teenagers in multi-ethnic social settings that they wished they once had been. This time 75% said the Coke tasted better. The brand associations are at least as important as the taste. There is a lot of "cognitive override" going on. What does this mean for who we are, how we buy, and the ethical choices we make as consumers and citizens?

Either way neuromarketing research is a new way for producers to find out what consumers are really reacting to. Is this scary? It is not necessarily malign, is it? It could improve the colour of the packaging, the sound the box makes when shaken. We must admit these little things have the power to make everyday life more beautiful.

I would say there is little to fear, overall. The change to greater subtlety in advertising, over and above its growing psychological insight and segmentation, is probably only partly driven by evil schemes to control us all. As the American sociologist Michael Schudson says, "Most criticism of advertising is written in ignorance of what actually happens inside these agencies." (ahem). He also says that "advertising is much less powerful than advertisers and critics of advertising claim, and advertising agencies are stabbing in the dark much more than they are practicing precision microsurgery on the public consciousness."²⁵⁷

256 For example: The effects of skin tone on race-related amygdala activity: an fMRI investigation. Ronquillo, et al. *Journal of Social Cognitive Affective Neuroscience*. 2007 March; 2(1): 39–44

256 McClure, S., Tomlin, J., et al. (2004). 'Neural Correlates of Behavioral Preference for Culturally Familiar Drinks.' *Neuron* 44 (2): 379–387

257 Schudson, M. (1984) *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society*. p. Xiii and p 45.

The shifts and trends to subtlety I worry about are possibly simply attributable to an explosion in media exposure and visual literacy rather than to malevolent encroaching forces. Advertisers are mostly not studying Manipulation 401 in their pretentiously decorated offices but recovering from hangovers and trying to out-dress each other.

Intergenerational relations help us understand what might be going on. You may have noticed, like me, that older people (over 35) are submitted to relentless irony and are increasingly “lame”. Our attempts at humour are received as patent and eye-roll-worthy. Like old advertisements. Standard communication is becoming more intertextual, faster, more multi-referential and sniper-subtle, depending of course on which channels you are tuned into. Advertising, like popular culture, is simply growing semiotically faster and more complex. It is all not necessarily more insidious.

Nevertheless, what could our strategies for resisting possibly be, just in case I am wrong (already brainwashed) and our last scraps of free agency are profoundly at risk? With anti-consumerist movements has come an increasing awareness of the foul effects of advertising on public health, space, and consciousness and a growing fear of the ‘total control’ contingencies in which a majority of people are reduced to perfect shopping automata. We should allow for the small possibility that the whole system is indeed thoroughly rotten.

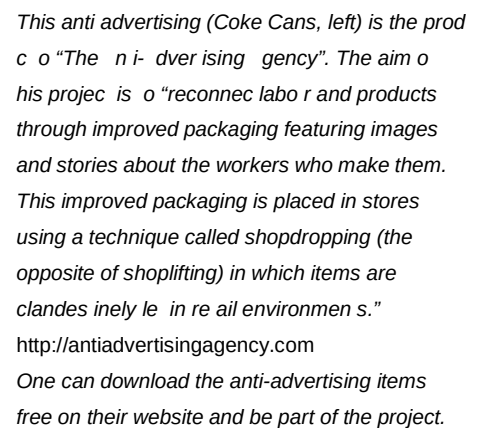
We have just seen that the rational decision-maker has been dead for a long time, but Freud did say, “where id was, ego shall be.”²⁵⁸ He didn’t think unfettered ids were a very pleasant proposal at all. What is the shopping equivalent of a developed ego that can mediate between insatiable drives and the demands of the forward-thinking superego? Is there something sensible that can intercede between the painful credit card statement and the hunger for unnecessary spending on so much superfluous stuff? It would be the same thing that could help me navigate my way down the notorious impulse aisles of doom at my local supermarket. Is there some kind of semiotic shield or inoculation? Can we “trip off our defenses” early and mobilise “rational resistance”, as the CIA put it?

One of the best defenses will probably continue to be the administration of vaccines (Marx, Erik Olin Wright, Frederic Jameson, Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton are most efficacious).²⁵⁹ Many of these are also strongly recommended components of post-exposure prophylaxis. All undergraduate sociology and anthropology can also mitigate against zombiehood but often these have other unpleasant side effects (sexual deviance, anti-establishmentarianism, unemployment).

²⁵⁸ *Wo Es war, soll Ich werden.*

²⁵⁹ A bunch of old Marxists.

If you are not going to follow my advice and get yourself inoculated, at least cultivate a mild bored scepticism. Advertising is actually mostly unconvincing enough to be just an irritation and a mental corrosive. Avoid it to the extent that it is possible. Change your Facebook language to Magyar. Try never to see or hear a full ad. Switch channels. Remind yourself of the production processes and support 'Buy Nothing Day' and other forms of resistance.



114

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The Horror of the Other

In the sci-fi Novel *The Prize of Peril* (1958), by Robert Sheckley, a television show has a volunteer contestant hunted for a week by trained killers, with a large cash prize if he survives. It is fairly remarkable that this programming idea has remained fictional. But there is a real genre of lunacy that comes close, in which everyday human beings volunteer to become subjects in (purportedly unscripted) filmed battles for enormous prizes and instant celebrity, and in the process enjoy physical torment and other hideous punishments. These punishments take forms other than the horror of being forced to spend time with strangers for six weeks, and include constant surveillance, demeaning exposure, unpleasant 'challenges', and nasty privations, all carefully devised. There is intense competition to be selected to be part of all this. We call it all, strangely, "Reality TV".

Some of the greatest moments of reality TV have been captured in VH1's online "40 Greatest Moments". They include: *Survivor*: Boston Rob proposes to Amber in All-Star finale; *Big Brother 2* : Roommate cleans toilet with toothbrush; *Survivor*: Contestants eat rats to survive, and *The Osbournes*: Sharon fights off the neighbors with ham. And we clearly love this stuff. As a Forbes magazine article subtitle reads: "No one ever went broke underestimating the taste of the television audience". In 2010, a single reality programme raked in \$8.1 million in ad sales for each half-hour it was on the air, making it TV's then all time biggest revenue-generator.²⁶⁰

This genre has existed more or less since TV began (see potted history on page 2), but really took off in the 1990s, and then went stellar in the new millennium. If you have an infernal cerebellum-melting DSTV subscription, you will know only too well how various subgenres have spawned...from documentary-style fly-on-the-wall type observation to docusoaps', special living environments, historical re-enactment, psychological tests and celebrities living their excruciatingly boring daily lives (now called "Celebreality"), such as Paris Hilton choosing her BFF in Dubai.

There are now also shows about professional activities like policing, being a muzo on the road, wine-making, cosmetic surgery and artificial insemination (*The Cow Whisperer*).

We will continue with this discussion after a short one-page history break.²⁶¹

²⁶⁰ <http://www.forbes.com>.

²⁶¹ Information courtesy of Wikipedia.

<i>Time</i>	<i>Generic Innovation</i>	<i>Example</i>
1940s and 1950s	Ordinary people reacting to pranks with the effect of timelessly hilarious dramatic irony.	<i>Candid Camera</i> , 1948 debut
	Amateur competitors with audience voting.	<i>Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts</i>
	Silly competitions, stunts and slapstick nonsense with overly congenial presenters.	1950s, game shows <i>Beat the Clock</i> ; <i>Truth or Consequences</i>
	Viewer requests dictating content and the direction of the programming	The series <i>You Asked For It</i> (1950–1959)
1960s and 70s	Sacrificing one's privacy and dignity altogether	<i>The Dating Game</i> , <i>The Newlywed Game</i>
	Recreated life in a past time and eking out a grim existence without cappuccino and the internet	<i>Living in the Past</i> (Iron Age English village recreation)
1980s and 1990s	Camcorder look and <i>cinéma vérité</i> feel to add to the illusion of real-time reality.	<i>COPS</i> , (1989) featuring police officers on duty
	The awful concept of putting strangers together in the same environment for an extended period of time and recording the ensuing drama. Also, a heavy use of soundtrack music and the interspersing of events on screen with after-the-fact "confessionals."	The Dutch series <i>Nummer 28</i> (created by Erik Latour) which aired in 1991
	The idea of competition and elimination, in which cast members/contestants battle against each other and are removed from the show one by one until one winner remains.	The TV show <i>Expedition Robinson</i> , (1997) in Sweden
	Self-improvement or makeover theme. Began with houses and later was extended to bodily renovations.	<i>Changing Rooms</i> (1996) - couples redecorating each others' houses
2000s	Dedicated channels for reality programming to ensure adequate airtime for masses of cheap programming.	<i>Fox Reality</i> (2005). USA <i>Global Reality Channel</i> Canada (2010); <i>Zone Reality</i> , Europe (2002).
	Seasoned favourites with winning formulae being reproduced over and over and over again.	<i>Cheaters</i> is past its 10th season in the USA and is syndicated in over 100 countries.
	Generic awards to enhance specialisation, encourage competition and innovation and also raise advertising revenues.	In 2001, the Academy of TV Arts and Sciences added the reality genre to the Emmy Awards.
	New formats (Social experiment genre and inclusion of new technology and gaming.)	2003- <i>Wifewrap</i> . In 2010, <i>the Tester</i> became the first show aired over a videogame console.
	Global syndication of the big hits.	<i>Big Brother</i> ; <i>Survivor</i> ; <i>Idol</i> , <i>The Amazing Race</i> , <i>America's Next Top Model</i> , <i>The Apprentice</i> , <i>Fear Factor</i>

Why is there suddenly so much of it around? It all has to do with broadcasting market dynamics. Established broadcasters have needed to invent new ways of keeping a mass audience and holding onto key market segments due to intensifying competition from cable and satellite TV. With the big shift to subscriber television the incentive for broadcast networks, with their shrinking market share, has moved to cost-cutting.

The best ways of doing this have been through programming formats that are cheap and very low risk. The previous successes of the syndicated programmes in other markets eliminate a lot of the uncertainty around audience ratings and the related profitability from advertising revenues. Reality TV also cuts out many of the costs of paid writers of actors, rehearsals, and sophisticated sets. 'Ordinary' people and waning celebrities are cheap to cast and they are not unionised. Typically, an hour-long drama can cost approximately \$1.5m (£875,000) per hour, whereas reality programmes can cost as little as \$200,000 (£114,000) per hour.²⁶² With the cable and satellite channels having seized upon the no-brainer (in so many senses) formula, we can expect even more ubiquitous reality programming going forward.

There are some exceptions to the 'reality TV = cheap production' rule. The exceptional success of *Big Brother* means that Endemol, the Netherlands company that originated it, is now able to negotiate lucrative deals with broadcasters wishing to produce it locally. There are also large expenses associated with continuous surveillance (about a 200 person team). Celebrity *Big Brother* has to pay hefty fees to those appearing in the show. *Survivor* is also costly. The justification for these expenses is that these programmes deliver a massive return on investment in terms of very valuable audiences and large advertising fees.

Big Brother 3 generated over 10 million text messages, and attracted 10 million viewers for its finale. A 30 second advertising spot during Big Brother 3 cost £40,000, over three times more than for any other show on Channel 4 in 2003 (for example, *Frasier*'s cash value was £14,000 for a 30 second spot).²⁶³

The relationship to commercial reality is extremely clear. It is simple market logic that has resulted in this remarkable proliferation of shite. But Reality TV has a much more complicated relationship to the rest of reality, as most of us suspected.

The creator of *Survivor* avoids the word 'reality' altogether, preferring "unscripted drama". Fundamentally, it must attract viewers and advertising revenue, and to do this, it needs to be highly sensationalised and very stimulating, which reality more often than not, is not at all, unless you are supplementing it heavily. Žižek recounts a version of reality drama in which things really were left to reality to tell the tale. This genuinely unscripted narrative was predictably, a completely soporific flop. The characters followed the boring rules of normal social interaction,

262 Hill, A. (2005) *Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual Television*, p.6

263 Ibid., p.4

washed the dishes, chatted about trivia, and nothing even minimally erratic happened.

Reality TV is therefore as real as democracy in Zimbabwe. There is much misleading editing going on, with anachronous information combined to create artificial chronologies, and participant behaviours reconstructed and mis-portayed. Theatrical lighting and camera techniques guide us to begin to despise certain participants more than we might naturally. Certain sequences are re-shot under circumstances in which things didn't go as planned. There is scripting and storylining and sometimes even paid actors are involved to keep things on track. Apart from all this, even the promises are often bogus and innocent participants are swindled out of their full prizes.

For Žižek 'the charm of it all is a certain hidden reflexivity. It is not that we are voyeurs looking at what people are really doing. The point is that we know that they know that they are being filmed. The true reality TV would be to plant cameras and really shoot people unaware of their being watched.'²⁶⁴ The identities in reality TV are portrayed 'real selves'. Žižek compares Reality TV with porn.

... although [hard core pornography] did show "everything," real sex, the narrative which provided the frame for repeated sexual encounters was as a rule ridiculously non-realistic, stereotypical, stupidly comical, staging a kind of return to the 18th century *commedia del'arte* in which actors do not play "real" individuals, but one-dimensional types - the Miser, the Cuckold Husband, the Promiscuous Wife. Is not this strange compulsion to make the narrative ridiculous a kind of negative gesture of respect: yes, we do show everything, but precisely for that reason we want to make it clear that it's all a big joke, that the actors are not really engaged?²⁶⁵

Many academics read irony where there is none, and in this characteristic dialectical reversal of common sense I say he gives the porn director way too much credit. But the clue is useful - Reality TV is working the same kind of nowhere space as porn, playing with that devilishly confounding line that separates fiction from reality, and where there is clearly such a thrill to be had.

We should ask ourselves what is partially 'real' about it, though, or what elements of the social real it foregrounds. The voyeuristic surveillance? Privation? The ruthless competition? The nasty strategising? The processes by which certain people are eliminated? The inescapable other? Sounds a lot like my corporate day job. What is actually going in reality TV and its consumption?

Voyeurism is an obvious diagnosis of the dynamic and one that is a bit dull, because as Freud shows us, the voyeur also longs to be seen, and in this situation, as we sit flabbily rapt, the excitement of being seen is completely absent, other than when a fictional 'me' is pseudo-

²⁶⁴ Žižek, S. (2004) 'A Cup of Decaf Reality.' at Lacan.com. 2004. (English).

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

addressed directly through the camera. Elements that look voyeuristic are present - theatricality, humiliation - but it is not really the surveillance itself which ignites fascination, but the situation. The only example where this may not be true is in a programme like *Cheaters*, where surveillance is the actual content.

So what is the situation, if not voyeurism? Obviously it differs per programme and comes in endless flavours, but there are some recurring elements. Privation is one of the key elements of many of these programmes, especially the *Big Brother* and *Survivor* types. And why do we love it? What is enjoyable about seeing others denied of what we may consider basic necessities and trivial pleasures? And why would it equally not be at all enjoyable to install webcams in UNICEF refugee camps and see people struggling for survival or escaping despots for real? The 'unreality' and temporary nature of the deprivation is what makes it work on TV. We revel in their longing, knowing it is safe (there are camera people just meters away). We are able to rediscover pleasure with them in Cream Soda, kiwi fruit, or some basic comfort, and imagine these modern pleasures as if for the first time. I recently had the pleasure of camping in a nature reserve in Botswana in an unfenced camp and, apart from having no access to Grapetiser or Niknaks for a week, I had to remain vigilant against the possibility of being eaten alive by a hyena or a lion in the night. RTV is a vicarious form of remembering our ascent to 'civilisation', modernity and consumerism. We are able to approach the wretched fear of a state of nature, the brutal real, and then be lifted from it again into the relative sumptuousness of a safe living room.

By far the worst aspect of the situation for me, and possibly the one that most approximates reality, is the horror of the inescapable other that these programmes create. This is particularly true in *Survivor* and *Big Brother*, where real violence is done to the possibility of retreat. There is no moment other than when they go gathering slugs alone that they can introspect, zone out, and escape the endless politics and insecurity. One needs to stay involved, manoeuvre, and win over (without being too powerful) people one may not like at all, knowing the day will soon come when you need to count on them in some way. No one can ever speak freely, other than in some false form to the nosy camera that delights in scandalous snippets, backstabbing, malice and scheming. This artificial society allows us to encounter our latent fear and loathing of 'the other'. One has, in this micro-society, an intensified look at the thin and subtle veneer of civilisation that covers over dangerous impulses and keeps us from tearing each other to pieces. Ben Elton parodies the situation in *Dead Famous* (2001) where a contestant is murdered while on a *Big Brother*-like show.

Then there is the satisfaction of the vote. It evokes dread and yet we dearly want people thrown out. We have opportunity to fantasise about going over to an irritating co-worker and announcing that "the tribe has spoken." We would love the raw social consensus that would reduce overcrowding and detox our social world. There is also some *schadenfreude* in knowing that it is not 'us' being kicked out. We have the ultimate 'immunity idol' - that of externality. TV would give

us the satisfaction of seeing the weeding-out of the nasty elements that we do not have in our actual lives, if only it were not for the fact that likeable and capable contestants often get eliminated early for strategic reasons.

And 'strategy' is where we notice the biggest differences between reality TV and reality *an sich*, to the extent that we are permitted to utter such a phrase in these times. In these games the genuine potential threat of the other is foregrounded because conditions are created in which identity must be refashioned in a fictitious state of suspended society. Strategy shows us how much more danger and complexity we might live with in daily life if it were not for our fragile social norms, and it gives us a glimpse of the unimaginable world beyond these understandings that smooth things over and allow us to co-exist.

In this sense, the strategy in reality TV offers us angst (by raising terrifying things) and relief from the angst (it is just a game). The ugliness of strategy is that everyone is caught in the stressful (and quite unreal) situation of not wanting to be too popular and/or powerful at the risk of being identified as a threat. The contestants are clever enough to quickly vote off those who impede their chances of winning, not the weak ones. The camera partially establishes a more normal form of social consensus, as contestants reveal their personal preferences and judgments to us and then decide on their (often contradictory) strategies. As Ian Buchanan points out, "this reveals the inner truth of Nietzsche's seemingly paradoxical axiom that it is the strong that must be protected from the weak."²⁶⁶

And what kinds of people volunteer? Are they really anything like the rest of us? Research on applicants to reality programmes shows that they are significantly different to a control group of non-volunteers. They are much more extraverted than the average person for a start, more attention seeking, and more impulsive, and do not tend to think through the consequences of their actions. They react to stress and pressure by dominating and intimidating others. They tend to be people that push limits, and are dramatic and self-promoting. They strongly value public acknowledgement and are driven by being the center of attention.²⁶⁷ They are more lively, flirtatious, and have a strong need for fun. Correspondingly, when the British third series was recruiting, it was reported that a definite theme emerged in the tapes sent in for audition: There was a great deal of nudity: people on the sofa nude, playing football nude, running down the street nude, one man naked except for an accordion in field full of cows, a naked girl smearing mud on her body, lots of women with tassels on their breasts doing stripping routines, a man

²⁶⁶ Buchanan, I., (2001) 'Enjoying 'Reality TV'.

²⁶⁷ Unpublished research report by consulting psychologists at JVRC, (Jopie van Rooyen Consulting) based in Johannesburg.

jumping about on a pogo stick naked.²⁶⁸ Shy and reasonable people probably know they will not make interesting TV subjects. The producers select the best of these people to create a dramatic show. As Peter Bazalgette puts it, "There are three crucial factors in the production of Big Brother: casting, casting and casting."²⁶⁹ A volatile cocktail of these warped personalities is deliberately shaken together in the hope of exciting drama and tension.

An important unanswered question remains, and it is both an aesthetic and a moral question: whether we should watch it or not. Does it have positive socio-political effects? Is there anything worthwhile in it, or it is just cheap mass-produced junk to liquefy any form of intelligence. It may have a positive impact in some respects, contributing to democratisation and liberalisation. In the Arab world, men and women shockingly lived together in *Star Academy Arab World*, 2003. One protester said, "This programme is a threat to Islam - it is entertainment for animals."²⁷⁰ In China the local version of *Pop Idol* – the *Mongolian Cow Sour Yoghurt Super Girl Contest* (for real) - was considered 'a force for democracy'²⁷¹ after drawing an audience of 400 million people who sent approximately 8 million text votes. To reinforce the democratic diagnosis, the Chinese government criticized the show for vulgarity and in 2006 they banned it.

Ethically though, reality TV does seem to legitimise and normalise humiliation and brutalisation. My favourite example is *Bridalplasty*. Even the name is repugnant. If you have not yet had the pleasure, it's a show where brides-to-be compete for extreme surgical procedures. The winner appears completely remodeled and upgraded on her wedding day to be seen again by her astonished groom for the first time.

Research on these types of 'makeover' programmes shows how they have a detrimental effect on women's self esteem. The ridiculous aesthetic ideals do get internalised. Emaciated thighs, stupefying breasts, Barbie doll noses. Amazingly, seeing women incapacitated and in bandages doesn't result in revulsion, but in more favourable attitudes towards cosmetic surgery.²⁷² It also results in perceived pressure to personally have cosmetic surgery, and a decreased fear of surgery, as well as overall body dissatisfaction, and more disordered eating. Can these shows actually be considered entertainment?²⁷³

But the people who watch these programmes are by no means from the lower orders of either intelligence or social status. They have been shown to be relatively affluent. They are also fairly

268 Sparks, C., (2007) 'Reality TV: the Big Brother phenomenon.' *International Socialism*, Issue 114

269 Media expert Bazalgette, quoted in Sparks, C. (2007) *ibid*.

270 *BBC news*, Monday, 1 March, 2004. news.bbc.co.uk

271 'Democracy Idol'. *The Economist*. September 8, 2005.

272 Sperry, S. et al. (2009) 'Cosmetic Surgery Reality TV Viewership: Relations with Cosmetic Surgery Attitudes, Body Image, and Disordered Eating.' *Annals of Plastic Surgery*, 62, 7-11.

273 'Makeover Shows Correspond With Increased Body Anxiety', *ScienceDaily*. (Jan. 22, 2009)

highly educated. Fifty-one percent of students claimed to be regular watchers. They are also not passive and gullible consumers, but have been trained over decades to consume and decode the genre. They watch with a critical eye, judging the degree of factuality in each reality format based on norms and semiotics of the genre and their knowledge of other types of factual programming. They are increasingly savvy consumers of the entire range of factual and reality programming, judging formats relative to one another.²⁷⁴

My most optimistic fantasy is that watching reality television is like peering into a scale model of the social psyche. It gives us something to talk about, and a neutral space in which to reflect on personal everyday ethical dilemmas and norms, and of course on the shoes and the hair. It creates a space in which to reflect on modern living, and at some level is a unifying force that cuts across ethnic and class divisions. It creates secular democratic citizens of humanity. We relate any of the characters to our own experiences and values, and use them to continually and collectively refine our consensual moral judgments, exploring the meaning of authenticity and identity, and making sense of ourselves.

Whatever. Frankly, I retain skepticism towards this cheap programming format and the discomfort at the content overrides. It rattles one to see people eating a raw buffalo penis for money (*Fear Factor*). It provokes and offends to see women competing for liposuction (*Bridalplasty*). It is sordid to see people caught lying to their spouses (*Cheaters*). And the fact that this discomfort is partially the whole, moneymaking point is distasteful. "I like to make a show where people say, 'You can't put that on TV,' says Mike Fleiss, creator of *The Bachelor*, 'Then I put it on TV.'"²⁷⁵ Surely there are better things to do than be suckered into this. Many people agree with me. A google search for "I hate reality TV" yielded 40,400,000 results.

I agree with the author and blogger who says that reality shows allow us to feel a dull, empty version of the actual thrill of pursuing ambitious projects.²⁷⁶ He refers to a friend who "has written what he calls his 'MasterChef' novel. Whenever his girlfriend sat down to watch it, he would work. Two years later the girlfriend is gone, but the novel is finished and he is looking for an agent."

Switch that thing off and use all those hours to do some of your own cooking, renovate your own house, dance with your own partner, read Kafka, learn to play the violin, do some yoga, listen to 1920's opera highlights. Watch an obscure film. Life is too exquisitely short for caring whether, "after winning a luxury challenge, the black team ate a fancy (read: fattening) meal complete with double tequila shots and paid for it big time in the gym and at the weigh-in, where they lost a

274 Hill, A. (2005) *Reality TV- Audiences and Popular Factual Television*.

275 Poniewozik, J. (2004) 'Reality TV Has a Positive Influence on Society' in *Reality TV*, edited by Balkin, K. p.14.

276 Wilson, M. on www.borderchronicle.com.au/blogs/...life...masterchef.../2220387.aspx.

combined total of 18 pounds. That was enough to beat the blue team, which is 'so totally not fair.' And also that it was makeover week, meaning all the girls in America's Next Top Model with short hair got extensions, and all the girls with long hair got pixie cuts. One of the contestants, Fo, was this season's complainer, after a hairstylist cropped her locks and 'stole her femininity.' Hasn't she ever watched this show before? If they chop your hair, it means The Tyra likes your cheekbones. Fo's bad attitude landed her in the bottom two, but Jessica's cocky attitude had her packing." QED.

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What kind of an ego should I get?

It doesn't generally occur to us when we use the word 'ego' that we are wading through a swampy multidimensional vortex that utterly defies disambiguation. When neurotic intellectuals enter therapy, sessions must often begin with a clarification of the glossary: "When you say *ego*, do you mean the Freudian ego, or the Vedantic ego?" By the end of this exploration we might be able to try this question ourselves, and so become more discerning consumers of psychological modification services. Assuming of course that we think the ego exists, and is a something with which we can and should be tinkering in the first place.²⁷⁷ Most people do not have time to worry about such questions, but if one is mildly psychotic and experiences oneself as a primate disoriented by self-consciousness and at dizzy odds with the human condition then these questions become more pressing.

We may start out with in an innocent belief that there is such a *thing* as the ego, a substance, or just think that it is merely a linguistic placeholder for first person consciousness. But pretty soon, as we venture beyond our default views, we fall into a muggy confusion around "individuality and universality, soul and body, consciousness and action, substance and history, the self and the other, the metaphysical and the phenomenological, and experience and the ethical".²⁷⁸ To undertake a thorough foray into this byzantine intellectual zone would require multiple lifetimes and a very healthy sense of reality, neither of which I have. For this little intellectual shopping trip a stiff drink will do. I am just going to try to flip through the concepts, oversimplifying, trying on a few, missing most of them, and getting a superficial sense of some of the thrills on the way to hopefully having a sense of what the ego is all about.

Contemporary laypeople often use the word 'ego' in a negative way, to refer to a (usually over-inflated) self-image. Ego trip. Egotistical. Etc. This is a long way from where our tour of the idea starts – as any tour of almost any idea should – in Greece. 'Ego' after all is a Latin word meaning 'I', equivalent to the Greek 'Εγώ'.

Aristotle's *De Anima* was the first descriptive exploration of personhood, or of the soul, which he broke down into different divisions: the vegetative soul (not referring to some schoolchildren), the sensitive soul (not referring to poets), and the rational soul. All living things have a vegetative soul. All animals have a sensitive soul, and humans alone have a rational soul and spend centuries trying to come to grips with it or drowning it in tequila. *De Anima* describes each human faculty and draws distinctions between imagination, perceiving and thinking for example. Reading

277 cf. Goethe: *Ein neues besseres Ich in uns erzeugen, uns so ewig bilden, in uns fortleben und schaffen*-kind-of-idea.

278 Clarke, M.T. (1998) *Plotinus, Augustine, Aquinas, K.Wojtyla on Person and Ego*. Presented at Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy, August 1998

Aristotle is like visiting a small town in the Free State. Life is very simple and beautiful. But one can't stay there forever.

The word 'ego' became more of a philosophical term in Plotinus (204/5–270 CE), the Neo-Platonist, referring to self and self-ness. To the untrained eye his writing appears to be the free flow of consciousness of someone on hallucinogens. It is mostly about "The One" – a non-sentient transcendental thing. But there are also some interesting bits about us and our nature as humans. He says that the 'I' is the faculty that gives us our individuality; it is the self-governing part of the whole of what makes us human, bringing the human spirit to its fulfillment.²⁷⁹ There is a sense of teleology and magnificence to the 'I' that by the 21st Century is ancient history.

Augustine of Hippo (354- 430) was heavily influenced by Plotinus. Although Augustine was still rather busy with the relationship of the 'I' to 'God', in the process of analysing this relationship he did explore some interesting things about the 'I' itself. He figured out, for example, that the self includes faculties like memory, intellect and will. The ego thus begins to be defined in terms of its many functions. According to Augustine, the 'I' is something every mature human person experiences and it is a knowing and aware piece of the more complete person, which includes spirit, soul and body.²⁸⁰ The Augustinian ego is also that self-conscious part of us that can say, as Augustine did, "I understand that I understand."²⁸¹ Augustine also had the important insights not only that the rational soul unites the different aspects of human being, but also that it knows that it merely represents a whole that exceeds it. In the confessions he says, "My inner self was a house divided against itself".²⁸² Augustine recognised an excess (like the dreaming self) that one cannot control, much to his consternation.²⁸³ The 'I' is not necessarily the only one in the house, even if it is still presumed to be the master. This mastery doesn't last very long either, and each subsequent thinker seems to perceive greater internal division and lack of conscious control than the last. By the 21st Century we have a disintegrated, irrational, socially constructed and largely virtual commotion.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) undertook some further anthropological analysis, emphasising the rationalism and reality-orientation of the human person: According to one analyst, for Aquinas, the ego or self-consciousness "is simply spiritual activity taking itself in hand and measuring its own conformity to the real."²⁸⁴ This is a remarkable prefiguring of Freud's idea of "reality testing", which is the intellectual equivalent of stubbing one's toe very hard. Aquinas also quite radically

279 Ibid. This is almost a 200CE proto-version of the "executive ego" that appears in cognitive psychology, with the CPU analogies that are appropriate to our time.

280 This quirky trinity endures in Christian thinking to this day.

281 Clarke (Op. cit) refers us to Augustine, De Trinitate X.11; Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae I.87,3,c.

282 Augustine, *Confessions* Book VIII.8, quoted in Matthews, G.B. *Thought's ego in Augustine and Descartes*, p. 95

283 The dreaming "I" would of course commit all kinds of unclean acts of which he strongly disapproved.

284 F.D. Wilhelmensen, (1977) "The 'I' and Aquinas" Proceedings ACPA, v. 51, 1977, p. 55. Referenced in Clarke.

anticipated another of the most important concepts in psychoanalysis and in self theory - that the ego becomes itself through an encounter with the other / what is other.²⁸⁵ Who is that very strange person in my lounge with whom I share my daily life? This inter-subjectivity is another form of 'decentering of subjectivity' that is theoretically amplified over time.²⁸⁶ But the existence and nature of the other is beyond the scope of this completely self-absorbed essay.

Let's leap forward a few centuries and touch for a nanosecond on Montaigne (1533 -1592), who secularises all the confessional discourse of Augustine, stripping away what he calls 'the prejudice of custom' and making the whole exploration of selfhood less about penitence than about the examination of "*l'instabilité d'une privée fantaisie*".²⁸⁷ This is probably one of the first modern explorations of selfhood that explicitly allows for what one writer calls an *antinarrative* identity.²⁸⁸ Montaigne says, in rather a favourite postmodern quotation:

We are all patchwork, and so shapeless and diverse in composition that each bit, each moment, plays its own game. And there is as much difference between us and ourselves as between us and others.²⁸⁹

Montaigne described the self in terms that lead to tolerance both of the self and of others.²⁹⁰ It is a great pity his work has never been turned into a little red book of some kind. We are wrong to look for coherence and an integrated sense of selfhood. We are wasting our money on the pursuit of an imaginary wholeness.

Montaigne's near-contemporary, Descartes, (1596 –1650) also worked from first principles, experience, and careful reason, formidably rejecting 'given' versions of what the self is, and asking the monumental "Quaero quis sim ego ille quem novi?"²⁹¹ He didn't come up with very much as an immediate answer to this beautiful question. The "something thinking" (*res cogitans*) he started out with didn't even imply 'thing' in any strong sense.²⁹² All this scepticism and "hyperbolic doubt" was frightfully modern, and he is considered the first modern (non-scholastic) philosopher. Unfortunately he took a turn in his thinking that led him right back to good old God again, and it was a while before any further progress was made on the 'I'.

285 *ibid*, p. 51, referenced in Clarke

286 Cf: Kohut, Stolorow, and later Stern on the idea of the constitution of psychological reality through the interplay of different (and differently organised) experiential worlds. In these models we are trans-subjectively constructed. Also consider Vygotsky's ideas of cultural mediation and internalisation, and Constructivist epistemology.

287 Marchi, D. (1994) *Montaigne Among the Moderns: Receptions of The Essais*, p. 146. Strange grammar not my own. Shouldn't it read "une fantaisie privée"? Anyway, you get the picture : private fancies.

288 Zalloua, Z.(2009) *Montaigne after theory, theory after Montaigne*, p.93

289 Montaigne, (1572)'Of the Inconsistency of Our Actions'. *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*. p. 244

290 Friedrich H.& Desan, P., *Montaigne*, p. 210

291 What may be the I that I know?

292 Coleman, P., Lewis, J. E., & Kowalik, J. A. (2000). *Representations of the self from the Renaissance to Romanticism*. p. 26.

But we are not going to spend any more time on Descartes, or indeed on Hume, Locke, James, Kant, Heidegger and Sartre, Althusser or Foucault, all of whom concerned themselves with questions of being and identity from different perspectives, whether metaphysical, ontological or political.²⁹³ We do need one little taste of Nietzsche (1844-1900) though, who lashed at any form of transcendentalism and set us up for 20th Century social constructivism

Let it be permitted to designate by [the atomism of the soul] the belief which regards the soul as something indestructible, eternal, indivisible, as a monad, as an atomon: this belief ought to be expelled from science!²⁹⁴

He argues in *The Gay Science* that our selves lack transparency, and claims that “every action is unknowable.” Actions are unknown because “nothing...can be more incomplete than [one's] image of the totality of *drives* which constitute [a man's] being”.²⁹⁵ Elsewhere, he says that the self is merely the arena in which the struggle of drives plays itself out, and one's actions are the outcomes of the struggle.²⁹⁶

This leads us directly to that giant of ego definition, starting with a very short eulogy. The *außerordentlicher Professor* Freud (1856-1939) gave us an entirely new vocabulary and way of thinking about ourselves. Whether we are Adlerians or Jungian heretics, we are tainted and /or indebted, whether we acknowledge this consciously or not.²⁹⁷

Psychoanalysis initially involved the study of the unconscious, and did not really undertake a deep investigation of the ego. Originally, Freud used the word ‘ego’ fairly simply, to mean a sense of self, but later, in *The Ego and the Id* (1923) he revised its meaning. Freud spent fifteen years working out the structural theory, so what is about to follow is necessarily an extreme reduction (*ad absurdum*, in fact, let's be plain) likely to infuriate genuine Freudians. Nevertheless.

The Freudian ego helps us to organise our thoughts and make sense of them and the world. The unformed and unconscious id, that selfish, primitive, pleasure-oriented part of the personality, needs this mediator to keep the individual safe. The ego tries to fulfill the insatiable desires of the id in a way that will not end in destruction, venereal disease, arrest, and so on.

²⁹³ Not a line I plagiarised from a Gilbert and Sullivan chorus.

²⁹⁴ Nietzsche, F. (1885) *Beyond Good and Evil* Chapter 1. Section 12.

²⁹⁵ Nietzsche, F. (1881/ 1997) *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, 119

²⁹⁶ See Leiter (2002) *Nietzsche on Morality*, London: Routledge.99-104

²⁹⁷ Whatever our conscious position, our ‘ids’ are committed Freudians.

Fundamentally, the ego separates out what is real from what is not. This capacity is known as *Reality Testing*.²⁹⁸ The ego also represents common sense and 'reasonable' behaviour. Three ego functions are key here: "Impulse Control", "Affect Regulation" and "Judgement."

"Impulse control" is the ability to manage aggressive and/or libidinal wishes without letting loose the harpies. "Affect regulation" is the ability to modulate one's own feelings without swallowing half a bottle of tranquilisers, and "judgment" is the capacity to think of better things to do than one what one would really like to do. When these functions are not developed, people can be quite scary and need to be contained through other more literal mechanisms (straightjackets and prisons).

Two further ego functions are identified. The first is "Object Relations", which seems to be the one that most often goes on the blink (this refers to a capacity for good, *mutually* satisfying relationships). The other is the "Synthetic Function". This last one is the capacity to unify other parts of the psyche. It includes being able to integrate potentially contradictory feelings. I may wish to poison my husband at times, but also have loving feelings towards him. The ability to synthesise these contradictory feelings is thanks to my healthy and mature ego.

Reality, for those who have not come to realise it yet, is quite stubbornly unyielding. But the unconscious, like a toddler having a tantrum in a supermarket, is far more stubborn than reality.²⁹⁹ To mediate between these two impossibly insistent worlds (not to mention the superego, which hasn't been discussed at all and is a truly unpleasant piece of work), the ego needs to be quite sneaky. And no wonder the poor ego readily "breaks out in anxiety — realistic anxiety regarding the external world, moral anxiety regarding the super-ego, and neurotic anxiety regarding the strength of the passions in the id."³⁰⁰ It has to do its best to serve all three, and is constantly aware of the risks of upsetting someone.

Freud explained how the ego conceals the demands of the id in its own rationalisations to obscure any conflicts with reality. The ego actually allows a person to pretend to take notice of reality. We should remember that the ego is a part of the id, infinitely more aligned to the id than to mere reality. It is formed like a skin on the id through the id's inevitable frustration.³⁰¹ One can't help feeling sorry for the id. But probably that is some aspect of my own pathology and deficits on the ego functions outlined above.

Part of the ego's less conscious functioning includes defenses against scary feelings. There is a formidable arsenal required. There are some primitive defenses that develop in infancy that deal

298 You will probably have noticed that reality testing suffers distortion under various conditions. These could include intoxication or stress.

299 This can be observed in the impulse aisle at Woolworths or read about in Freud, New Introductory Lectures p. 110-111.

301 What is sometimes called "the disruption of primary narcissism".

with basic security (e.g. projection, splitting), and then as one matures, there are some more sophisticated defenses that are more oriented towards one's own internal world (examples are repression, regression, displacement). Freud gave us much of our vocabulary for psychological warfare – denial, displacement, projection, and rationalisation. His daughter invented a few more – undoing, suppression, dissociation, and introjections. These can be explored in numerous volumes and make for gruesome reading. Most of us have a default infantile arsenal of defenses, as you have probably found in your intimate relationships. Note: These terms should be used for self-diagnosis only. I find that application of these insights to others' behaviour can elicit very strong language.

Moving away now from what it is to “how does the ego come into being?” Freud apparently didn't spend all that much time articulating the formation of the ego. It was Jacques Lacan's³⁰² theorising of “The Mirror Stage” that added more dimension. Until the person reaches the mirror stage the human being is an *hommelette* (a Lacanian witticism): a little man made of scrambled eggs. Then it sees its image in the mirror and has an identity crisis. The image is so whole and co-ordinated. Lacan calls the child's mis-identification with this “ideal ego” version of itself, *méconnaissance*.³⁰³ The baby longs for a sense of stable identity (that is in fact forever unattainable), and this longing and desire characterises most our being. But this is all another world of ideas and for now that is about as much Lacan as I can take on an empty stomach. It is enough to say that after Freud's death the idea of the ego became the central preoccupation of psychoanalysis and the basis for a burgeoning industry. What follows is a non-comprehensive list of selected psychoanalytic theorists, merely to stagger one.

Alfred Adler	Sandor Ferenczi	Margaret Mahler
Karl Abraham –	J. C. Flugel	Adolf Meyer
Nicholas Abraham –	S. H. Foulkes	Donald Meltzer
Franz Alexander –	Anna Freud	Juliet Mitchell
Lou Andreas-Salomé	Sigmund Freud –	Stephen A. Mitchell
Jacob Arlow	Erich Fromm .	Juan-David Nasio
Michael Balint	Frieda Fromm-Reichmann	Robert Neimeyer
Lee Baxandall	Merton Gill	Erich Neumann
Ernest Becker	Edward Glover	Michael Parsons
Therese Benedek	Andre Green	Rosine Perelberg
John Benjamin	Ralph R. Greenson	Otto Rank
Bruno Bettelheim	G. Stanley Hall	David Rapaport
Edward Bibring	Heinz Hartmann	Theodor Reik
Wilfred Bion	Paula Heimann	Laurence A. Rickels
John Bowlby Charles	James Hollis	Joan Riviere
Brenner Abraham A.	Karen Horney.	Geza Roheim
Brill Ronald Britton	Luce Irigaray	Herbert Rosenfeld
Norman O. Brown	Susan Sutherland Isaacs	Élisabeth Roudinesco
Ruth Mack Brunswick	Edith Jacobson	Benjamin B. Rubinstein
Cornelius Castoriadis	Carl Jung Karl	Jurgen Ruesch
Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel	Kerenyi Otto	Harold F. Searles
Nancy Chodorow	Kernberg	Hanna Segal
David Cooper	Paulina Kernberg	Roy Schafer
	Masud Khan	Melitta Schmideberg

302 Leader, D. and Groves, J. (2000). *Introducing Lacan*.

303 Lacan (1949)

Joan Copjec
Helene Deutsch
Françoise Dolto
Kurt R. Eissler
Max Eitingen
Erik Erikson
Bracha L. Ettinger
Ronald Fairbairn
Franklin Fearing
Pierre Fédida
Otto Fenichel

Melanie Klein
Gregorio Kohon
Heinz Kohut
Julia Kristeva
Jacques Lacan
R.D. Laing
Jean Laplanche
Jonathan Lear
Fred M. Levin
Bertram D. Lewin
Hans Loewald
Rudolf Loewenstein
Alexander Lowen-

Sabina Spielrein
Rene Spitz
Wilhelm Stekel
Daniel N. Stern
Robert J. Stoller
Harry Stack Sullivan
Viktor Tausk
Maria Torok
Frances Tustin
Vamik Volkan
Donald Winnicott
Gregory Zilboorg
Slavoj Žižek

Take your pick. Different ego functions were foregrounded in different schools, which often entered into vicious and protracted disputes. Be sure not to confuse ego psychology and self psychology, for example, or either of these with 'real' psychoanalysis. Just be aware that the choice of which theorist to read is not arbitrary as it has a profound influence on one's conceptualisation of one's own being, just how messed up one is, and in what way.

Overall, the focus has shifted from serious illness (traditional neurotic complaints like rocking in a corner and being unable to brush one's own teeth) to normative development (having relationship issues or behaving badly) and the market size of people with "ego disturbances" is subsequently enormous. Since *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, everyone needs therapy, many Freudian concepts are part of everyday discourse, and a highly articulated post-lapsarian normative ego is deeply socially established.³⁰⁴

What is also striking about this list is that there are almost no African names on it. It represents the very epicentre of mostly central European (and largely Jewish) angst. And we are psychologically squashed by this oppressive list, this list that lays claim to Truth and science. What bred this particular neuroticism and why did it take hold here, and in Vienna particularly? Is it related in any way to the ability of this part of the world to breed a man who built his own subconscious, literally, as a concrete bunker, and locked one of his daughters up in it as a sex slave?³⁰⁵ What kind of peculiar twisted psychic mess have we discovered here?

Here is a little Chaos Psychology exercise.³⁰⁶ Take a random pick from the list and live as a subject of that theory for 1 week. Repeat the exercise using a different theorist. Keep a journal of how your sense of self and your understanding of your inner life take shape in each case.

304 Some of our parents are a study in the pre-therapeutic era, lacking one of these modern selves, and undefined by the psychological terminology so common to people under 50. They are characterised by a freedom to act out their 'pathology' in innocence and simply use terms like "asshole" and "fuckwit" when necessary. Then they forgive one another and get on with it.

305 Josef Fritzl. Case emerged April 2008. He kept his daughter prisoner for 24 years

306 My own school.

Let's abandon the sociology of psychoanalysis now too, before we are in a deeper bog than we can handle, and rather look at some radically alternative ways of thinking about the ego for a minute.

African philosophy is far less obsessed with the minutia of intrapsychic machinations. Collectivism is the prevailing model for assembling selves, and the ethical dimension of the 'I' is far more strongly emphasised. The idea is pervasive all over Sub-Saharan Africa, and has different names in different countries. The theory is known as *Hunhu* (in Shona) or *Ubuntu* (in isiZulu and Xhosa). One wouldn't think it was the predominant theory to see the nouveau post-colonial elite in their Jimmy Choos, celebrating their victories on (rigged) government tenders, but never mind that, the idea prevails, and the idea is that we exist in and through others. As Liberian peace activist Leymah Gbowee put it, "I am what I am because of who we all are."³⁰⁷ In this construction of selfhood, there is a strong emphasis on dignity, compassion, humaneness and respect for the humanity of another. It sounds lovely, but somehow naive. Has this of transcendental essentialism ever prevented people from hacking each other's limbs off with machetes? What else is available?

According to Wikipedia, which is as close as I can get to intense religion, *Nafs* is the Muslim version of the ego. It is an Arabic word which occurs in the Qur'an and means ego, self, etc. *Nafs* can change, but in its raw form "is the lowest dimension of man's inward existence, his animal and satanic nature."³⁰⁸

There are three principal stages of *nafs* on its road to refinement. The basest one is "the inciting *na s*" that leads us to commit evil: "*Verily (my italics) the nafs of man incites to evil.*" (Qur'an 12:53). A more refined *nafs* is "the pleasing *nafs*". This one is kind and tolerant with people and has good manners, like Mary Poppins. The super refined *nafs*, to which all should strive, is pure, and acts in full harmony with the will of Allah.

Thanks but no thanks. Even the neurotic Jewish ego is better than this. Where next?

Hindu and Vedantic traditions refer to the ego as *ahamkara*, which is a Sanskrit term. It refers to a state of identification or attachment. When one's mind is in a state of *ahamkara*, one is in a state of subjective illusion, where the mind has bound the concept of one's self with an external thing or phenomenon. It could be a tangible, concrete (material) thing or an intangible thing, such as a concept or idea (a strong attachment psychoanalytic theory, for example). The Hindu ego is

³⁰⁷ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ubuntu>. Caveat: I could not verify the quotation. As Abraham Lincoln once said, "The trouble with quotations from the internet is they are not always reliably sourced." (www.greatquotes.com)

³⁰⁸ Wikipedia quoted source: Chittick, William (1983). *The Sufi Path of Love*. State University of New York Press. p.12.

involved in constructing and staying attached to the illusion. It seems very real to the person in that state, and objectivity and reality are obscured.

In another vastly different frame of reference of the Freudian model, Buddhist traditions view the Ego as 'aggregates' of conscious energy. These aggregates are referred to as *skandhas*. They are phenomena that become objects of clinging (similar to attachment) for a sense of self. As one might expect, these *skandhas* are essentially empty. Very basically, the Buddha taught that 'you' are not an integral, autonomous entity. The individual self, or what we might call the ego, is more correctly thought of as a by-product of the *skandhas*.³⁰⁹ QED: We shouldn't take Buddhism too seriously or we risk getting ourselves tied up in a paradox.

Eastern models of the psyche are extremely complex and confusing to someone educated within a tradition of Judeo-Christian humanism. There are innumerable bits of strange types of psyche and unfamiliar states of being arranged in complicated relationships to one another, and many of them are defined as not even real in the first place. How does one begin to bring psychoanalysis into dialogue with all this? Could Freud, in his wildest dreams, have been a Buddhist?

Then there is the science, which is telling me that creative engineering may help us unravel some of the brain mechanisms associated with one of our most fundamental questions.³¹⁰ Research published in the journal *Neuron* identifies a brain region called the temporo-parietal junction (TPJ) as being critical in controlling the feeling we have of being an entity localised at a particular position in space and for perceiving the world from this position and perspective. Could the location of the 'I' be not far away? Studies of neurological patients reporting out-of-body experiences have provided some evidence that brain damage interfering with the integration of multisensory body information may lead to "pathological changes of the first-person perspective". Anyone who has eaten too many dope cookies has probably experienced something of this nature.³¹¹ This region may be an exciting clue to figuring out subjective self-consciousness as a biological and evolutionary phenomenon.³¹²

"Ego is so last century," says Joseph T. Coyle.³¹³

In a similar spirit, Joseph LeDoux, Ph.D., a neurobiologist at New York University, has argued that psychological constructs such as ego are not compatible with modern neuroscience. For him, it is just a matter of time before scientists are able to come up with much better ways of thinking about the self. He makes a case for an identification of the self with the brain in *The Synaptic*

309 <http://buddhism.about.com/od/whatistheself>

310 *ScienceDaily*, Apr. 27, 2011.

311 Fieldwork. Johannesburg, (1988).

312 *ScienceDaily*, Apr. 27, 2011.

313 M.D., chair of psychiatry and neuroscience at Harvard School of Medicine/McLean Hospital.

Self, where he argues that who we are in totality is represented in the brain as a complex pattern of synaptic connectivity. "We are our synapses," he declares with a hint of reductionistic absolutism.³¹⁴

This doesn't augur well for funding for the humanities, or the social sciences, or the arts, but luckily the self is still far from being completely wired down. I have put myself through a fair deal of therapy and a few different religious models and all I am really sure of is that the paradigm produces its own subjects. If you see a Freudian therapist you will begin to perceive yourself in terms of your ego functions, try to resolve Oedipus, and be riddled with neuroses. If you become a Buddhist you will begin to disentangle yourself from all that is illusory and transient and sell your Ferrari.

After all this wouldn't you advise people to be careful of where to go shopping for conceptual structures of selfhood, and to be discerning about what is passively introjected? Like all things, some can be harmful if consumed in excess. Melanie Klein, for example.³¹⁵ Watch out for her. She is bad, pernicious news. Pretty soon she will have you self-mutilating. Buddhism is a great deal less depressing, if one really needs some kind of off-the shelf container at all. But where can I shop for a new ego when 90% of everything I see is Freud?

I would try an integrative approach, but it doesn't seem possible. The closest tactic would be a polytheistic eclecticism: to use competing models in different contexts. Hinduism is great for being on the beach, whereas in a boring meeting I need to restrain my hostile impulses with my Freudian ego. Going forward I will probably let "ism nonchalance"³¹⁶ be my guide and won't be afraid anymore to trash that worn-out idea that is just making me look and feel frumpy. I will throw out anything too reductive, materialistic, and literal. There is a sea of potential meaning that the 'I' inhabits and from which I can continue to make myself. I should personally rather like to try something fantastical or retro-parodic. Even if one is psychologically pear-shaped one can still go for something fun and balance out the heavy lower half with something bold and bright that gives stylish structure to the top half.

314 'The Unhealthy Ego: What Can Neuroscience Tell Us About Our 'Self'? *ScienceDaily*, Oct. 29, 2010.

315 Founder of a branch of psychoanalysis called Object Relations Theory, which I find utterly bleak.

316 Izzard (2008)

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